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Against the current: Sole authorship as method in contemplative and conceptual scholarship

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ABSTRACT

In the context of escalating authorship inflation and growing concern about research integrity, this article examines sole authorship as an epistemically and ethically grounded methodological condition within specific forms of contemplative and conceptual scholarship. Focusing on forms of inquiry in which interpretation constitutes the primary analytic process, I argue that sole authorship supports a continuous and traceable interpretive arc, central to epistemic integrity. In such contexts, continuity of interpretation not only enables conceptual coherence but also underpins ethical accountability by ensuring that responsibility for interpretive decisions remains clearly identifiable across the analytic process. Framed as a contemplative method grounded in mindful solitude, understood as an intentional orientation toward inward integration, sole authorship is situated within contemplative psychology and extended to methodologies such as Intuitive Inquiry, heuristic inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology, and autoethnography, where interpretive validity depends on a sustained authorial perspective. While collaborative research remains essential across many domains, this article identifies conditions under which a unified authorial voice provides methodological advantages not fully reproduced through distributed authorship. The argument is therefore not that sole authorship offers a general solution, but that it functions as a context-specific stance aligned with the epistemic and ethical demands of contemplative scholarship.

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Mindful solitude; authorship ethics; sole authorship; epistemic integrity; contemplative scholarship; research integrity

Across many disciplines, the number of authors credited on research articles has risen sharply over recent decades. Psychology now averages ~4.8 authors per article, with sole-authored primary research down to ~2.2% in 2019–2021; sole authors appeared more often in review-type articles (~5.7% in neuroscience, ~11.2% in psychology), but even here, they remain in a clear minority, with collaborative consortia notably rising (4.1% of neuroscience and 0.7% of psychology papers listed a group author, i.e., a named consortia), a phenomenon that now exceeds the rate of sole authorship in neuroscience (Lin and Lu 2025). Biomedicine climbed from 3.99 to 6.25 average authors per publication between 2000 and 2020 (Jakab, Kittl, and Kiesslich 2024), and ecology reports a long-run decline in single-author empirical papers, from 85–87% in the 1920s to 10–16% in the 2000s (Gorham and Kelly 2014). These shifts reflect epistemic, behavioral, and cultural drivers, including the complexity of empirical problems, funding models favoring large teams, and metric incentives that privilege volume and visibility (Lin and Lu 2025; Thelwall and Maflahi 2022).

While authorship inflation reflects structural and cultural forces, this article argues that in contemplative scholarship, sole authorship is not isolationist but a deliberate methodological stance grounded in mindful solitude. Amid this backdrop, I make a limited but important claim: in contemplative and theoretical psychology, sole authorship can be the appropriate method because it parallels mindful solitude: a chosen, intentional withdrawal that fosters clarity and coherence.

Contemplative or conceptual scholarship is defined here as work in which interpretation constitutes the primary analytic process, rather than serving as a secondary procedure applied to preexisting data. This distinction does not exclude forms of qualitative research that engage empirical material; rather, it highlights forms of inquiry in which the development of argument, insight, and conceptual structure unfolds through a sustained and internally continuous line of reasoning. In such work, interpretation operates as the central

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site of analysis, integrating philosophical sources, first-person reflection, or empirical material within an evolving interpretive process in which the argument itself becomes the primary analytic outcome.

For example, unlike a multi-site empirical study in which different contributors generate and analyze discrete datasets, a contemplative or conceptually driven study develops through the progressive integration of interpretive insights within a unified line of thought. While empirical materials may be present, they are not analytically separable from the interpretive process but are taken up within it as part of a continuous epistemic arc.

For scholarship that seeks coherent philosophical integration, first-person reflection, and accountability for interpretive moves, a single, unified voice can preserve epistemic integrity better than negotiated multi-author texts. Moreover, in the case of contemplative-based psychology, sole authorship enables authenticity in both practice and scholarship and encourages a mindful incubation of thought. This article grounds that stance in two ways: (1) by demonstrating that various hermeneutic methods depend on the continuity supported by sole authorship (or coauthored mentorship); and (2) by situating this position within the broader context of authorship inflation and its ethical implications. This argument draws on contemplative theory, particularly the psychology of mindful solitude, to show why a unified voice matters for epistemic integrity.

Although the paper draws on contemplative psychology and qualitative methodology, its claims are not limited to qualitative research. The ethical and epistemic issues examined here, authorship inflation, diluted accountability, and metric-driven distortion, are also present in laboratory-based sciences, biomedical research, and interdisciplinary team science. The argument for sole authorship is therefore framed not as a universal prescription, but as a principled option within a broader ecology of responsible research practice.

This article does not argue that sole authorship is a general solution to the challenges of multi-authorship, nor that collaborative research is inherently deficient. Rather, it advances a precise claim: that in certain forms of contemplative and conceptual scholarship, sole authorship functions as a methodological condition. In such contexts, it enables continuity of thought and accountability that cannot be fully reproduced through collaborative structures, even when those collaborations are well-functioning and ethically sound.

In this respect, the present argument should be understood as orthogonal to policy-based responses to authorship inflation, such as the refinement of authorship criteria or contribution transparency frameworks. While such approaches address important ethical and procedural concerns within collaborative research, the claim advanced here operates on a different level, identifying a form of inquiry for which the methodological conditions themselves favor a unified authorial framework.

Method of review

This article adopts a narrative synthesis methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed studies, professional guidelines, and conceptual frameworks across psychology, contemplative research, and ethics. Literature was located through structured searches in Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar using keywords such as “authorship inflation,” “bibliometrics,” “contemplative research,” and “sole authorship.” Additional sources include policy documents (ICMJE, CSE) and anecdotal accounts from academic forums, used illustratively. Unlike systematic reviews, this approach prioritizes conceptual integration and interpretive depth over exhaustive coverage, aiming to clarify the epistemic and ethical rationale for sole authorship in contemplative scholarship.

Sole authorship as method in contemplative scholarship

Sole authorship should not be read as anti-collaboration; rather, it is a methodological choice appropriate to scholarship that relies on integrative reasoning, reflective analysis, and a stable authorial voice. As defined earlier, contemplative or conceptual scholarship refers to work in which interpretation forms the core analytic work, rather than functioning as a secondary procedure applied to empirical material.

Here I frame solitary writing as a contemplative method: one that resists authorship inflation where it would dilute meaning, and that centers epistemic clarity in domains such as spiritual cognition, humanistic psychology, and Buddhist-informed theory. While such traditions have often been articulated through

single-author scholarship, contemporary bibliometric trends indicate that sole-authored work now represents a clear minority (Lin and Lu 2025).

To place sole authorship and contemplative method in context, I situate it in the history, practice, and psychology of mindful solitude (Kempton and Waila 2025), and in methodology and method that is conducive to independent voices.

Mindful solitude, unity of voice and thought, and epistemic clarity

Sole authorship can be understood as a contemplative method grounded in the value of mindful solitude. At the same time, not all instances of sole authorship instantiate this contemplative orientation. A work may be single-authored without involving the intentional process of inward integration described here. The present argument therefore applies only under specific conditions: namely, where sole authorship is deliberately adopted as a methodological stance to sustain a continuous and reflexively integrated line of inquiry.

A key clarification here is that sole authorship should not be equated with pure isolation. In the contemplative framework developed here and elaborated in recent work on mindful solitude (Kempton and Waila 2025), solitude does not necessarily imply physical or social withdrawal in the sense of a Cartesian form of intellectual seclusion. Rather, solitude is better understood as a chosen and intentional orientation toward inward-directed integration, which may remain fundamentally relational, encompassing engagement with participants, texts, stakeholders, colleagues, conference dialogs, peer review, and editorial processes (see also Averill and Sundararajan 2013; Weinstein, Hansen, and Nguyen 2023; Weinstein, Nguyen, and Hansen 2021, 2023). What distinguishes contemplative solitude is therefore not the absence of relation, but the locus of epistemic integration.

Within this framework, the contemplative process can be understood as a rhythm of withdrawal and return (Kempton and Waila 2025; cf. Petersen et al. 2021), in which withdrawal enables the sustained, internally coherent development of interpretation, while return re-situates that work within scholarly dialogue and collective critique. Sole authorship aligns with the first of these movements by supporting continuity of thought, but it does not preclude the second. For this reason, sole authorship is best understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for contemplative inquiry, preserving the integrity of the interpretive arc without implying isolation from the broader scholarly community.

Consistent with this account, contemplative solitude has been described as presence rather than absence: a chosen and intentional state of aloneness that fosters inner connection, ethical awareness, and contemplative insight (Kempton and Waila 2025, 2–3). Importantly, this framework distinguishes solitude from both isolation and loneliness, highlighting autonomy, inner-directedness, and meaningful solitary activity as enabling conditions (Averill and Sundararajan 2013; Weinstein, Nguyen, and Hansen 2021, 2023, 2023). Transposed into scholarly practice, this reinforces the analogy developed here: in forms of scholarship where interpretation itself constitutes the analytic process, continuity of thought is not merely stylistic but epistemically constitutive of the work. In this sense, mindful solitude provides not only a descriptive analogy but a structural model for understanding how epistemic integration is maintained within a single interpretive trajectory.

This distinction can be further clarified by distinguishing between unity of voice and unity of thought. Unity of voice refers to stylistic and editorial coherence within a text, which can often be achieved through effective collaboration or strong editorial control. Unity of thought, however, refers to the continuity of a single, evolving line of reasoning in which each interpretive move is internally related to prior stages of the inquiry. In forms of scholarship where interpretation itself constitutes the analytic process, this second form of unity becomes central. While collaborative writing can produce a unified voice, it may not preserve the same continuity of epistemic development, as interpretive responsibility is distributed across multiple contributors. Sole authorship, in this context, supports the sustained integration of thought across the arc of inquiry.

A potential counterargument to this position is that well-functioning collaboration can produce coherence, rigor, and intellectual integration comparable to sole authorship. Even when collaboration is well-functioning and ethically sound, it distributes authorship across multiple epistemic agents. While this may enhance breadth or technical precision, it can interrupt the continuous development of a single line of thought. As suggested by the distinction between unity of voice and unity of thought,

collaborative writing may achieve stylistic coherence without preserving the same continuity of epistemic development. Contemplative scholarship, by contrast, requires that interpretive responsibility remain traceable to one agent across the entire arc of reasoning. For this reason, sole authorship functions not as a corrective to failed collaboration, but as a methodological condition enabling a distinct mode of inquiry.

This does not imply that all forms of collaboration lack intellectual coherence. Certain collaborative arrangements preserve identifiable lines of thought or stable authorial contributions. However, these differ from forms of distributed authorship in which interpretive development is jointly constructed and cannot be traced to a single continuous epistemic arc. The present argument concerns this latter form, in which continuity of thought may be structurally more difficult to sustain.

This distinction between distributed and continuous authorship also clarifies the relationship between epistemic and ethical considerations in scholarship. Epistemically, contemplative and conceptual inquiry depends on the continuity of a single line of reasoning in which interpretive developments remain internally coherent across the arc of the work. Ethically, this continuity enables accountability, as the author can be identified as responsible for both the integrity of the argument and the interpretive decisions through which it unfolds. Where authorship is distributed across multiple contributors, responsibility may become diffuse, making it more difficult to trace how particular claims have been developed or to attribute accountability for their coherence or validity.

In this sense, epistemic continuity and ethical responsibility are not separate concerns but mutually reinforcing conditions. The ability to follow a sustained interpretive arc supports transparency, while traceable authorship enables responsibility to be meaningfully assigned. Sole authorship, in contexts where interpretation itself functions as the analysis, therefore, supports not only coherence of thought but also clarity of accountability. This alignment between epistemic structure and ethical responsibility further strengthens the case for understanding sole authorship as a methodological condition rather than a stylistic or preferential choice.

It is important to distinguish this claim from a weaker position according to which the ethical advantages of sole authorship arise simply from the absence of collaborators. While isolation in this minimal sense may reduce the risk of practices such as gift or honorary authorship, it does not in itself generate the continuity of reasoning required for interpretive accountability. The argument advanced here is therefore not that the absence of collaboration is sufficient, but that the sustained integration of thought, characteristic of contemplative solitude, is what enables interpretive decisions to remain both coherent and traceable across the arc of inquiry.

Presence, not absence: The scholarly stance of intentional withdrawal

The reframing of solitude aligns with a defense of sole authorship as deliberate stance rather than anti-collaboration. Intentional solitude creates conditions for deep observation and insight; likewise, choosing a single authorial voice creates conditions for sustained conceptual integration. The intentionality that underwrites mindful solitude, autonomy and volition, maps onto the intentionality of sole authorship, which resists authorship inflation and the fragmentation of voice to protect epistemic clarity (see also Averill and Sundararajan 2013, on authentic vs. pseudo-solitude).

This stance parallels critiques of secular mindfulness's context loss, where practice is reduced to technique and productivity (Grossman 2011; Hyland 2017; Purser 2019), and aligns with Kempton and Waila's (2025) call to reintegrate ethical and contemplative depth into practice. In other words, sole authorship helps keep the work's telos (clarity, insight, ethical coherence) intact, rather than parceling it into modular contributions that risk detaching from the larger contemplative arc.

The analogy between mindful solitude and sole authorship can be further clarified in terms of functional equivalence across three dimensions. First, both establish a distinct locus of integration: in mindful solitude, experiential and reflective processes are integrated within a single subject, while in sole authorship, interpretive developments are integrated within a single epistemic agent. Second, both depend on temporal continuity: contemplative solitude sustains an ongoing inner dialogue, whereas sole authorship enables a continuous and cumulative line of reasoning across the arc of inquiry. Third, both support traceability: in solitude, insights can be traced to an individual's unfolding awareness; in sole-authored work, interpretive decisions remain attributable to a single authorial source. Taken

together, these shared structural features strengthen the claim that sole authorship does not merely resemble solitude metaphorically, but functions in a methodologically analogous way within contemplative scholarship.

Historical–doctrinal parallels: Solitude as condition for insight; unity of thought as scholarly condition

Historically, solitude is portrayed as a condition for insight in Buddhist traditions. Shakyamuni’s 49 days of uninterrupted meditation under the Bodhi tree and Milarepa’s extended mountain retreats epitomize transformative solitude (Chang 1999; Kempton and Waila 2025; Tiso 1989, 1996). Numerous suttas extoll the benefits of solitude including The *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* which articulates gradations of solitude: kāya-viveka (physical seclusion), citta-viveka (mental detachment), upādhī-viveka (liberation from attachments), linking discernment to withdrawal (Kempton and Waila 2025; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005).

By analogy, unity of thought in sole authorship functions like citta-viveka, stabilizing the interpretive arc through a continuous and internally coherent line of reasoning. This continuity enables the integration of doctrinal, empirical, and phenomenological dimensions of the inquiry within a single interpretive frame, rather than requiring negotiation between competing authorial perspectives (Kempton and Waila 2025, 3–6). This does not devalue collaboration; rather, it situates sole authorship as methodologically appropriate when the task is conceptual-integrative and the scholarly orientation contemplative. This position is consistent with Buddhist and contemplative scholarship that emphasizes the disciplined integration of interpretive insight within coherent doctrinal and philosophical frameworks (cf. Bronkhorst 1993, 2009; Sharf 1995, 2014, 2015).

Autonomy and inner-directedness: From positive solitude to unified scholarship

The psychological literature shows that autonomy is pivotal to positive experiences of solitude: chosen solitude reliably yields benefit compared to imposed aloneness (Nguyen, Ryan, and Deci 2018; Tse, Lay, and Nakamura 2022; Weinstein, Hansen, and Nguyen 2023). Inner-directedness, a dominant internal relationship with oneself, distinguishes solitude from mere physical aloneness and from loneliness (Galanaki 2013; Kempton and Waila 2025; Weinstein, Hansen, and Nguyen 2023; Weinstein, Nguyen, and Hansen 2023). These nuances ground a methodological claim: sole authorship, autonomously chosen for coherence and integrative reasoning, mirrors authentic solitude as a creative, self-directed pursuit (Averill and Sundararajan 2013; Kempton and Waila 2025).

Moreover, solitary activities often scaffold positive solitude more effectively than unstructured “pure solitude” (Hipson et al. 2021; Kempton and Waila 2025; McVarnock et al. 2023; Nguyen, Ryan, and Deci 2018). Scholarly composition under sole authorship is analogous to such structured solitary activity: it reduces multi-author coordination costs, stabilizes style, and supports continuous inner-directed focus, akin to a *scholarly monastery* that holds the work in a consistent contemplative line (Chen, Porter, and Tang 2022; Kempton and Waila 2025). Sole authorship, in this sense, supports the sustained integration required for such inquiry by preserving continuity of thought, while remaining embedded in a broader relational and scholarly context.

Relational outcomes: Deepening, not diminishing, connection

A distinctive contribution of Kempton and Waila (2025) is that mindful solitude is relational in its outcomes, fostering clarity, compassion, gratitude, and renewed engagement (Petersen et al. 2021; Weinstein, Nguyen, and Hansen 2021). Reappraisal itself can help individuals experience solitude more positively, countering loneliness (Kempton and Waila 2025; Nguyen et al. 2022; Rodriguez et al. 2023). Environmental solitude, in nature or contemplative spaces, supports the inward journey without devolving into isolation, because practice is held within Dharma, Sangha, and lineage (Chen, Porter, and Tang 2022; Kempton and Waila 2025). Sole authorship shares this relational telos. The unified voice enhances reader intelligibility and scholarly dialogue by offering a clear standpoint that others can critique and build upon. This is akin to the bodhisattva rhythm of withdrawal and return, the Vimalakīrti model of inward solitude paired with worldly engagement (Kempton & Waila, Thurman 1976). Comparable valorizations of solitude as a condition for insight are also present in Western philosophical traditions. For example, Thoreau’s reflections on deliberate solitude, together with broader philosophical treatments of aloneness as a site of self-relation (Koch 1994; Thoreau (1854 2004)), similarly frame solitude as an enabling condition for clarity, reflection, and

authenticity. In peer discourse, the single, coherent frame facilitates productive critique and cumulative knowledge-building, rather than hindering exchange.

Methodological fit: When sole authorship is most appropriate

Critiques of “McMindfulness” (Grossman 2011; Hyland 2017; Purser 2019), together with efforts to reintegrate ethics and soteriology within mindfulness research (Bodhi 2010; Chiesa 2012; Kabat-Zinn 2011), underscore the importance of context and telos, a position further developed in the mindful solitude framework (Kempton and Waila 2025). This follows directly from the nature of contemplative and conceptual scholarship as defined earlier, in which the interpretive process itself constitutes the primary analytic work and must therefore remain continuous across the arc of inquiry.

Sole authorship is methodologically apt when:

- The inquiry braids multiple registers (historical, doctrinal, phenomenological, empirical) requiring a continuous interpretive arc.
- The contribution hinges on the author’s integrative reasoning and stable contemplative stance, precisely the inner-directed engagement supported by mindful solitude.
- The desired outcomes are relational, clear reader engagement and coherent interlocution, best delivered through unified voice and thought, not a collage of divergent styles (Kempton and Waila 2025; Pauly et al. 2018 on the relational dimensions of solitude).

This fit does not exclude collaboration but specifies conditions under which sole authorship best expresses contemplative scholarship’s aims.

Addressing the misconception of anti-collaboration

Kempton and Waila (2025) distinguish solitude from isolation and show that contemplative spaces are embedded in community (see also Averill and Sundararajan 2013; Chen, Porter, and Tang 2022; Weinstein, Nguyen, and Hansen 2021). Similarly, sole authorship coexists with scholarly community: peer review, conferences, seminars, and post-publication dialogue. The contemplative choice to write alone safeguards a unified epistemic stance during composition without precluding robust social exchange. Both solitude and sole authorship exemplify a rhythm of withdrawal and return: withdrawal to clarify; return to relate (cf. Ding, Shang, and Yu 2022 on comparative traditions; see also accounts of Vimalakīrti’s lay solitude; Kempton and Waila (2025).

Epistemic subordination and early-career agency

Beyond methodological considerations, authorship practices are also shaped by structural and relational dynamics within academic environments. In particular, early-career researchers are often positioned within collaborative projects in ways that limit their intellectual autonomy, reflecting broader conditions of apprenticeship, gatekeeping, and dependency within academic hierarchies. This dynamic is further intensified by the increasing prevalence of thesis-by-publication models in doctoral training, in which early-career researchers are often integrated into multi-author outputs from the outset, potentially constraining opportunities for the development of continuous and independently owned lines of interpretive inquiry. Empirical research has documented the prevalence of questionable authorship practices, including gift authorship and unequal recognition of contribution (e.g., Hosseini and Gordijn 2020; Wislar et al. 2011), while qualitative research highlights how researcher positionality and relational context can shape, and at times constrain, the articulation of interpretive voice (e.g., Berger 2015; Finlay 2002).

These conditions raise not only ethical concerns, such as authorship injustice, exploitation, or the invisibility of intellectual labor, but also epistemic ones. Where interpretive direction is strongly shaped by senior collaborators or established research agendas, opportunities for the independent development of thought may be limited. This can give rise to a form of epistemic subordination in which early-career researchers contribute to knowledge production without fully owning the conceptual arc of the work.

From this perspective, opportunities for sole authorship can serve an important developmental and ethical role. They enable researchers to assume responsibility for a line of reasoning, to trace the continuity of their own interpretive process, and to develop an independent scholarly voice. In this sense, sole

authorship does not replace collaboration but complements it by supporting intellectual autonomy within broader collaborative research ecologies.

Summary proposition

Taken together, the argument advanced here is that sole authorship is not a general solution to the challenges of multi-authorship, but a methodological condition for forms of contemplative and conceptual scholarship in which interpretation constitutes the primary analytic process. In such contexts, continuity of thought and a traceable interpretive arc are central to epistemic integrity. This continuity not only supports the coherent development of ideas, but also enables ethical accountability by allowing responsibility for interpretive decisions and conceptual claims to remain clearly identifiable.

At the same time, contemporary research environments characterized by extensive collaboration and increasing authorship complexity may limit opportunities for the development of independent lines of reasoning, particularly for early-career researchers. Within this framework, sole authorship functions not in opposition to collaboration, but as a complementary practice that supports both epistemic coherence and intellectual autonomy. In this sense, sole authorship should be understood not as an individual preference or stylistic choice, but as a context-specific methodological stance aligned with the epistemic and ethical demands of contemplative scholarship. This relationship between continuity of thought, interpretive integration, and authorial responsibility is not merely theoretical, but is reflected in a number of established qualitative and contemplative research methodologies that depend on the sustained interpretive arc of a single inquirer.

Sole authorship and coherent thought methods

In qualitative and contemplative research, certain methodologies rely on a recognizable, continuous authorial stance as part of their evidential logic. In such approaches, interpretation is not secondary to data but constitutes the primary analytic process, requiring continuity across the evolving arc of inquiry. These approaches do not merely use writing as a reporting tool; they treat writing as integral to analysis and transformation. When interpretation is the data, and when the researcher's evolving perspective constitutes the method's validity, unity of thought becomes a methodological requirement rather than a stylistic choice. This section examines why sole authorship is essential for such methods, beginning with Intuitive Inquiry, a paradigmatic case, and then extending the principle to other coherent-voice approaches.

Why intuitive inquiry stands apart

Intuitive Inquiry warrants separate treatment because its five-cycle hermeneutical design explicitly indexes transformation to one inquirer's evolving lenses (Anderson 2019; Anderson and Braud 2011). Unlike other interpretive methods that strongly benefit from a unified line of thought, expressed through a coherent authorial voice, Intuitive Inquiry structurally depends on it: the forward-and-return arc across Cycles 1–5 is not just procedural but evidential: cycles 1–2 clarify the topic and surface pre-understandings ("lenses"), making explicit the initial horizon of meaning, Cycles 3–5 engage texts and participant voices, iteratively testing, refining, and integrating insights until the inquirer arrives at a changed, coherent understanding that completes the arc. Mixing authors across cycles would collapse the epistemic journey that validates the method, flattening distinct interpretive horizons and undermining internal validity. For this reason, the design of Intuitive Inquiry strongly favors sole authorship because the interpretive arc is indexed to one inquirer's evolving lenses. This continuity supports methodological fidelity. However, in practice, co-authorship may be appropriate when another contributor provides substantial intellectual or editorial input that shapes the final manuscript (mentor/supervisor), provided the first-person voice and experiential arc remain transparently attributed to the primary inquirer. By contrast, other coherent-voice methods, such as heuristic inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology, autoethnography, and organic/integral approaches, share the principle of continuity in the interpretive arc but do not formalize it as a multi-cycle structure. In these cases, sole authorship remains a rigorous fit between epistemology and representation, though not an absolute structural requirement.

Coherence and accountability

In interpretive scholarship, where interpretation is the data, sole authorship clarifies who is responsible for the conceptual and ethical trajectory of the work. This aligns with the ICMJE Recommendations (2023), which expect that listed authors can take responsibility for the integrity of the work and identify who did which part. Where collaboration (e.g., mentorship, advisory input) is desirable, the integrity of the interpretive arc, expressed through a coherent authorial voice, can be preserved by documenting non-author contributions using the CRediT taxonomy (Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, etc.), thereby maintaining accountability without diluting the interpretive arc (NISO 2022; ICMJE 2023).

Sole authorship and coherent voice and thought methods

While Intuitive Inquiry's five-cycle design makes the case particularly clear, the principle generalizes to other qualitative and contemplative approaches that depend on the researcher's sustained, reflexive, and integrative voice. While these approaches are often described in terms of coherent authorial voice, their methodological integrity depends more fundamentally on the continuity of thought that underpins a sustained interpretive arc.

Heuristic inquiry. Heuristics is "a passionate and discerning personal involvement ... through the internal pathways of the self," proceeding through phases (immersion, incubation, illumination, explication) that culminate in a creative synthesis authored by the same inquirer (Douglass and Moustakas 1985, 40; Mihalache 2019). Because the researcher's inner dialogue and tacit knowledge are constitutive of the results, sole authorship preserves unity of thought and accountability for the synthesis.

Hermeneutic phenomenology. Doing phenomenology is inseparable from writing and reflecting; analysis proceeds via a continuous movement between parts and whole, the hermeneutic circle, yielding a phenomenological text whose signature voice mediates understanding (van Manen 2023). When the text itself is the vehicle of insight, maintaining a single, coherent authorial stance supports methodological fidelity to the phenomenon.

Autoethnography & narrative inquiry. In autoethnography and narrative inquiry, the researcher's story and reflexive stance are both data and analytic engine. A unified first-person voice sustains narrative form, coherence, and accountability, unless the design explicitly stages dialogic or multi-voiced forms (Clandinin and Connelly 2004; Ellis and Bochner 2000). Where dialogic plurality is not a stated design feature, sole authorship maintains representational clarity.

Organic/Integral transpersonal approaches. Organic Inquiry and allied integral/transpersonal methods invite transformative change and foreground the researcher's story as part of the evidential arc. When transformation is indexed to one inquirer's trajectory, a single voice maintains methodological clarity and traceability (Anderson and Braud 2011; Braud 2004; Clements 2004).

Across these methods, the rationale for sole authorship converges on a single principle: continuity of thought is integral to epistemic integrity. Just as mindful solitude creates conditions for clarity and transformation by sustaining an inward-directed stance (Kempton and Waila 2025), sole authorship creates conditions for interpretive coherence by stabilizing the continuity of thought, expressed through the authorial voice, across the arc of inquiry. Both practices exemplify a contemplative rhythm of withdrawal and return, withdrawal to integrate and clarify, return to share and engage. In this sense, sole authorship is not an assertion of isolation but a methodological choice aligned with the ethics of accountability and the epistemology of depth. It protects the integrity of methods whose evidential logic depends on a unified voice, while remaining relational in its outcomes: clearer scholarship, stronger dialogue, and more trustworthy interpretation.

Mentorship and multi-author ethics in the wider contemplative context

A principled policy for mentor inclusion

Contemplative methods such as those described previously emphasize one inquirer's evolving lenses. Nonetheless, scholarly apprenticeship is integral to graduate training. Co-authorship for mentors is appropriate when each mentor provides substantive editorial and developmental work (e.g., methodological guidance, critical revision, structuring the narrative, publication development) without altering the student's lenses or conclusions (ICMJE 2023; Anderson and Braud 2011).

Transparency via CRediT (NISO 2022):

- *Student (Lead Author)*: Conceptualization, investigation, Intuitive Inquiry cycles, writing, original draft.
- *Mentor A*: Methodology guidance, writing – review & editing.
- *Mentor B*: Structural editing, supervision, project administration.

Mentors limited to proofreading, administration, or access facilitation should be acknowledged, not listed as authors (ICMJE 2023; CSE White Paper). Where projects involve more than one mentor, apply the same rule: include only those meeting authorship criteria, specify roles with CRediT, and maintain voice integrity by preserving the student's interpretive arc (ICMJE 2023).

The rise of authorship inflation

This argument proceeds from the premise that sole authorship is not a general remedy, but a methodological condition tied to specific forms of inquiry.

Scale and spread across fields

Large-scale analyses show exponential growth in authors per paper since the 1950s, with psychology and neuroscience exemplifying the trend (Lin and Lu 2025). Biomedicine similarly increased author counts (Jakab, Kittl, and Kiesslich 2024), while ecology shows a decades-long decline in single-author work (Gorham and Kelly 2014). Across Scopus fields, coauthorship expansion appears continuous and universal, though heterogeneous in magnitude (Nogrady 2023; Thelwall and Maflahi 2022). See Table 1 for authorship inflation and collaboration trends by selected fields.

Drivers beyond journal policy

Growth in team size reflects real epistemic needs (e.g., complex methods, multi-site infrastructure) and behavioral incentives (e.g., grant success, CV optimization, citation networks), not merely editorial preference (Lin and Lu 2025). At the same time, evidence suggests that larger author lists correlate strongly with collective self-citations, raising concerns about inflated visibility rather than proportional external impact (Jaksic, Gayet-Ageron, and Perneger 2023; Thelwall and Maflahi 2022). Lin and Lu (2025) identify four drivers for this growth in authorship per article: 1) Epistemic complexity, 2) Behavioral incentives, 3) Cultural norms, and 4) Funding models and infrastructure,

Epistemic complexity: Problems that require many hands

Modern psychological and neuroscientific questions increasingly demand interdisciplinary methods and specialized skills: advanced statistics and modeling, neuroimaging pipelines, mixed-methods designs, longitudinal cohort management, and robust data governance. As the technical scope widens, teams expand to include methodologists, data managers, clinical collaborators (e.g., radiologists for fMRI studies), and domain experts. This genuine need for diverse expertise is a primary engine of authorship inflation. Hence, we see average authors per article in neuroscience having twice the number as psychology more generally. However, note Tilak, Prasad, and Jena's (2015) analysis of medical articles suggesting that increasing research complexity is an inadequate explanation for authorship growth.

Table 1. Authorship inflation & collaboration trends (selected fields).

Field	Study & Time Window	Corpus	Key finding(s)	Notes
Psychology	Lin & Lu (1950s–2020s; reported up to 2019–2021 slice)	42,580 articles across 32 journals (psych/ neuro subset)	Avg. authors/article $\approx$ 4.8 by 2021; sole-authored primary research $\approx$2.2% (2019–2021)	Team sizes rising; authorship inflation documented across decades
Neuroscience	Lin & Lu (1950s–2020s; reported up to 2019–2021 slice)	Same dataset (discipline split)	Avg. authors/article $\approx$ 10.4 by 2021; group authorship notable	Authorship inflation stronger than psychology; big-team norms
Biomedical Science	Jakab et al. (2000–2020)	17,015,001 PubMed-indexed items	Mean authors/paper 3.99 $\rightarrow$ 6.25 (+57%) ; single-author 17.0% $\rightarrow$ 5.7%	Linear trend ($r^2 \approx 0.99$); strongest rise in clinical trials
Orthopedics / Surgery / Medical Journals	Chau et al. (1960–2019), NEJM, Annals of Surgery, JBJS	73,062 articles	Significant increase in authors per article ; strong correlation between >10 authors and multicenter publications	Multicenter collaborations are a key driver; plateau in NEJM, continued rise in JBJS/AS
Engineering & Interdisciplinary Ethics	Meho & Akl (2019–2023; 14 universities)	Bibliometric case study	Large output growth with declines in first-authorship rates ; signals questionable authorship/affiliation practices	Calls for integrity reforms in rankings, publishers, universities
Computer Science & Engineering	Cunningham, Smyth & Smyth (2000–2025)	17 million papers (Semantic Scholar)	Pervasive authorship inflation ; signs of gift authorship, declining readability , amplified since 2023 with AI usage	Trends observed across CS/ Engineering/Business; cautions re. metric distortion
Ecology / Environmental Science	Gorham & Kelly (1920s–2000s)	Ecology & Journal of Ecology (nine decades)	Single-author empirical papers $\sim$85–87% $\rightarrow$ 10–16% ; median authors $\approx$ 2–3	Clear long-term swing to team research
	Borer et al. (methods & protocol, 2023)	Methods in Ecology & Evolution	Inclusive authorship framework for massively multi-authored papers (≥ 70 authors) to ensure documented, meaningful contributions	Practical template for large collaborations; combats “token” authorship
Physics / Big-team Science	Nogrady (Nature, 2023)	Case synthesis (CERN, ATLAS, etc.)	Hyperauthorship : thousands of authors; records include	Raises challenges in coordination, authorship meaning, metric normalization
Mathematics	Hulek & Teschke (EMS Magazine, 2024)	Field overview (zbMATH Open)	Co-authorship rising , but inflation less pronounced ; strong subfield differences and long citation lifespans	Warns that purely numerical indicators are ill-suited to assess math quality
Sociology / Social Sciences (general)	Henriksen (1980–2013)	4.5 million SSCI articles	Rise in average authors and international co-authorship across most subfields; biggest increases in data-/experiment-heavy areas	Collaboration growth not uniform; methodology influences co-authorship levels
Higher Education / Humanities	Von Bergen and Bressler (2017)	Review/analysis	Author inflation linked to tenure/promotion pressures ; concerns about honorary authorship and diluted accountability	Advocates adhering to authorship criteria (e.g., ICMJE) and clearer contributorship

Research that requires such specialized skills across domains are legitimate examples of multi-authored and consortium authored research. However, sole authorship becomes a deliberate counterpoint where the research questions are conceptual, theoretical, or contemplative; domains where integration and coherence are better served by a singular authorial perspective.

Behavioral incentives: Metrics, citations, and career survival

Academic credit is increasingly quantified through publication counts, h-index, and citation rates. Larger teams, and especially highly collaborative networks, can amplify collective self-citation and visibility, strengthening metric profiles in ways that do not necessarily track scientific utility. A large-scale study of 88,594 health-science articles showed the number of coauthors correlates more strongly with collective self-citations than with citations by others; multi-authored (≥ 50 authors) papers had $\sim 35\%$ self-citation share, versus $\sim 11\%$ for single-author papers (Jaksic, Gayet-Ageron, and Perneger 2023).

For authors choosing sole authorship, forgoing metric advantages linked to team size allows them to make an important transparency and integrity claim: that the work should be evaluated on its conceptual merit rather than on network-amplified indicators.

Cultural norms: Collaboration as the default ethos

In many subfields, research culture has shifted toward the view that science is inherently collective. Large grants and multi-site trials routinely expect multi-institutional teams; funders and institutions often valorize consortia and group authorship, which now appear with notable frequency, outnumbering single-authored articles in neuroscience between 2019–2021, and present (though less common) in psychology (0.7%) during the same period (Lin and Lu 2025). The normalization of group authorship underscores how far the field has moved from the solitary scholar model. However, in contemplative or humanistic scholarship, methodological solitude can be a principled deviation from a dominant culture, preserving a unified voice where the inquiry concerns meaning, ethics, and phenomenology.

Funding models and infrastructures: Scaling projects, scaling author lists

Post-1950s growth in authorship aligns with the expansion of government-funded research, shared infrastructures (data repositories, core facilities), and open-science mandates that encourage collaboration and data sharing, all factors highlighted in the authorship-inflation analysis, which proposes a hybrid epistemic – behavioral – cultural account rather than editorial behavior alone (Lin and Lu 2025). Broader sector analyses also note that psychology's open-access ecosystem (e.g., PsychOpen GOLD) has strengthened collaborative visibility and practices, further reinforcing multi-authorship as standard in empirical work (open-access network 2025). Meeting open-access requirements linked to funding often entails paying article processing charges that can amount to thousands of dollars, which are more easily covered through collaborative grant funding. Sole authorship, by contrast, often indicates resource-light, conceptually heavy scholarship, drawing from first-person methods, textual analysis, and philosophical integration, where the primary "infrastructure" is rigorous contemplative and theoretical labor that might not be funded beyond limited internal funds.

Ethical and epistemic Implications

The inflation of author lists raises concerns about credit dilution, ambiguous contribution statements, and possible inflationary practices (gift or honorary authorship). Lin and Lu (2025) warn of ramifications for reproducibility, innovation, equity/diversity, and ethics, urging policy deliberations to address authorship integrity. Complementary evidence shows that more authors does not equal proportionally more external impact; the correlation with citations by others is weaker than with self-citations, suggesting that network effects may drive visibility more than utility (Jaksic, Gayet-Ageron, and Perneger 2023).

By contrast, sole authorship can clarify accountability and preserve coherence which is critical in theoretical or contemplative work where the argument's integrity depends on a unified conceptual frame and a transparent authorial responsibility. Researchers engaged in extensive multi-authored collaborations should be encouraged to complement such collective endeavors with sole-authored reflective or theoretical contributions that articulate their distinctive scholarly voice, intellectual engagement, and epistemic positioning within the discipline. Even producing a single sole-authored article within a five-year period can serve this purpose. Analogously, the German and Central European tradition of the Habilitation, a rigorous postdoctoral thesis, functions not merely as evidence of research competence but as a demonstration of scholarly independence and readiness for senior academic roles, thereby foregrounding the individual researcher's intellectual strengths. Without opportunities for sole-authored work, there is a concern that researchers may have limited scope to demonstrate independent conceptual contributions beyond the PhD.

Hosseini et al. (2022) identify ten ethical issues exacerbated by increasing author counts: (1) Attribution of credit, (2) Violations, (3) Bias, (4) Responsibility and accountability, (5) Authorship order, (6) Citations and referencing, (7) Definition of authorship, (8) Publication strategy, (9) Originality, and (10) Sanctions.

In the following articulation of these issues, illustrative accounts were drawn from publicly accessible academic forums (e.g., Reddit, 2019–2024), using keyword searches such as "authorship dispute," "gift authorship," and "co-author conflict." Posts were selected based on their relevance to documented ethical themes identified in the literature (Hosseini et al. 2022) and their representativeness of recurring issues, and were paraphrased to preserve anonymity. These accounts are not treated as empirical data but as illustrative examples of lived experience.

Ethical issues exacerbated by authorship inflation

- (1) Attribution of Credit: *"I did all the data analysis and wrote the draft, but my name was pushed to third author."*

As teams grow, contribution clarity and responsibility become harder to ascertain, creating space for gift/honorary authorship and disputes over order (Hosseini et al. 2022). These problems disproportionately affect junior researchers, whose substantive labor can be obscured by senior authorship norms (Jakab, Kittl, and Kiesslich 2024; Lin and Lu 2025).

- (2) Violations: *"Supervisor threatened to block submission unless I added their colleague as co-author"*
Increased risk of misconduct ("bad apples"), conflicts, and strain on oversight due to larger, more complex author groups.
- (3) Bias (Conflict of Interest): *"They insisted on adding a funder's representative as an author even though they didn't contribute."*

Financial and non-financial biases become more prevalent, including influence from funders and obfuscation of writing responsibilities.

- (4) Responsibility and Accountability: *"Journal asked who is accountable for the stats section – none of the senior authors even touched the data."*

Ambiguities arise over which authors are responsible for specific content, weakening accountability structures. The Council of Science Editors underscores that authorship entails responsibility and accountability, stating that identification of authors and contributors is the responsibility of the researchers who performed the work, and all individuals who qualify for authorship should be clearly identified (CSE 2020). An example from one of social psychology's controversies is the American Psychologist article claiming a 3:1 ratio for positive to negative emotions for someone to flourish as opposed to languish (Fredrickson and Losada 2005). The article was cited over 300 times before the mathematical part relating to use of the Losada line was retracted after serious criticism (Fredrickson and Losada 2013; Winerman 2013). Despite only two authors, the first author, Fredrickson, conceded the mathematical ratio was "questionable," but she had "neither the expertise nor the insight" (Fredrickson 2013).

- (5) Authorship Order: *"PI changed the order last minute and made themselves first author without telling me."*

Competition for prominent positions like first or last author intensifies, leading to disputes and opacity.

- (6) Citations and Referencing: *"Senior author demanded extra self-citations to boost their h-index."*
Increased self-citation, citation cartels, text recycling, and compromised originality emerge in large-author works.
- (7) Definition of Authorship: *"We're being told to include someone who only arranged ethics approval – does that count as authorship?"*

Inconsistencies in applying criteria (what qualifies as authorship vs. acknowledgment) heighten gray zones.

- (8) Publication Strategy: *"Lab head split one dataset into three papers just to pad CVs."*

Practices like salami slicing (segmenting data into multiple publications) compromise the integrity of scientific reporting.

- (9) Originality: *"They recycled half the introduction from a previous paper and still claimed novelty."*

The threshold for novelty may be lowered as minimal or recycled contributions are packaged as new authorship outputs.

- (10) Sanctions: *"When I refused to add a gift author, they threatened to remove me from future projects."*

Inconsistent or weak enforcement of authorship misconduct undermines accountability and can erode trust in scientific norms.

Exploitation and power asymmetry

The structural conditions outlined above have implications not only for authorship ethics, but for epistemic agency within research processes. In these public accounts. e.g., academic, graduate and postdoctoral forums, students report unilateral order changes, pressure to add non-contributors, or retaliatory threats around

authorship. While we do not know the full context of these posts, they do show that the concerns are real and at best there are a lot of gray areas, if not ethical breaches. In some cases, these asymmetries are formalized through problematic agreements. For example, a colleague requiring students to sign a “*statement of expectations*” stipulating that if the student had not submitted or published the research within six months of submitting their thesis, they would forfeit their authorship rights. While framed as an incentive for timely publication, such agreements raise profound ethical concerns: they disregard the student’s intellectual contribution, impose arbitrary timelines, and exploit the dependency inherent in supervisory relationships. This illustrates how authorship norms can be manipulated to serve career metrics rather than scholarly integrity.

These practices underscore the need for transparent contribution policies, institutional oversight, and cultural shifts that protect vulnerable researchers. In contrast, sole authorship in conceptual or contemplative work avoids these dynamics entirely: the intellectual responsibility and credit are clearly attributed to one scholar. While not feasible for all research types, in theoretical and contemplative domains, sole authorship can serve as an ethical stance, affirming that the author alone bears responsibility for, and receives credit for, the ideas presented. Hence, authorship inflation is not solely a matter of team science; it has human costs for clarity, fairness, and accountability. Conceptual scholarship, especially contemplative work, can reduce these risks through a single accountable voice.

Reframing authorship ethics and evaluation

Recognize conceptual sole-authored work

Editors and evaluators should recognize contemplative and conceptual work where sole authorship preserves coherence and clarifies accountability. Author-count metrics should be contextualized with fractional counting and contribution statements (UCL Office for Open Science & Scholarship 2020; Waltman and van Eck 2015). While fractional counting treats a sole-authored book as 1.0, many evaluation frameworks weight monographs higher (e.g., double-weighting in REF), underscoring that conceptual and contemplative scholarship often demands sustained, single-author integration (Hicks et al. 2015).

Practical recommendations

- Require CRediT statements and enforce ICMJE criteria (ICMJE 2023; CSE White Paper).
- Report fractional metrics alongside full counts; avoid cross-field comparisons that penalize conceptual work (UCL Office for Open Science & Scholarship 2020; Waltman and van Eck 2015). Traditional “full counting,” where each coauthor receives full credit for a paper, inflates apparent productivity in highly collaborative fields and introduces systematic biases across disciplines. To address this, bibliometricians recommend fractional counting, allocating $1/n$ credit per author for an n -author paper, especially when comparing output across fields or institutions (Waltman and van Eck 2015). For example, if an early career psychologist publishes about 2.43 articles per year (Byrnes 2024) and the average team size is 4.8 authors per article (Lin and Lu 2025), the fractional rate is roughly $2.43 \div 4.8 \approx 0.51$ articles per year. In other words, one “whole paper equivalent” about every two years, a more realistic signal of individual contribution in collaborative environments (Byrnes 2024; Lin and Lu 2025). Institutions such as UCL already advise using fractional counting or CRediT contribution statements to mitigate distortions in multi-authored work (UCL Office for Open Science and Scholarship 2020; Gauffriau 2021).
- Discourage gift/honorary authorship; document agreements at project start. Authorship choices should be considered as method decisions in a similar way to preregistering statistical analyses; revisit author order when contributions change materially (Hosseini et al. 2022; Jakab, Kittl, and Kiesslich 2024).
- Recognize sole-authored conceptual work in tenure/promotion dossiers, especially in contemplative/humanistic scholarship (Lin and Lu 2025; Thelwall and Mafrahi 2022).

Conclusion

Within the broader context of increasing authorship complexity, this position highlights the importance of recognizing forms of scholarship in which coherence and accountability are best preserved within a single authorial framework. This article has argued that sole authorship is not a general solution to the

challenges of multi-authorship, but a methodological condition appropriate to forms of contemplative and conceptual scholarship in which interpretation itself functions as the analysis. In such contexts, continuity of thought and a traceable interpretive arc are central to epistemic integrity, while also enabling ethical accountability by allowing responsibility for interpretive decisions and conceptual claims to remain clearly identifiable. Grounded in the framework of mindful solitude as an interpretive stance, this argument situates continuity of thought within a broader contemplative orientation toward inward integration.

In this framework, mindful solitude and Intuitive Inquiry together illustrate why one author's evolving arc may be integral to this kind of scholarship. A principled mentorship policy allows supervisors to be coauthors when their contributions are substantive and editorial, without altering the student's interpretive lenses. Editors and evaluators can further support such work by recognizing sole-authored contributions in relevant genres and by contextualizing metrics through fractional counting and contribution transparency.

At the same time, contemporary research systems, characterized by extensive collaboration and increasing authorship complexity, may limit opportunities for the development of independent lines of reasoning, particularly for early-career researchers. Within this context, opportunities for sole-authored work can play an important developmental and ethical role, enabling scholars to articulate independent lines of thought and assume full accountability for a scholarly contribution. In this sense, occasional sole authorship contributes not only to epistemic coherence but also to the cultivation of intellectual autonomy within collaborative research environments.

Sole authorship should not be understood as an alternative to collaboration, but as a complementary practice within a broader ecology of scholarly work. Where the task of inquiry requires sustained interpretive integration, a unified line of thought provides conditions for coherence and accountability that may be difficult to reproduce through distributed authorship. The case for sole authorship advanced here is therefore not general but situational, grounded in the specific epistemic and ethical demands of contemplative scholarship.

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