Responding to devious demands for co-authorship: A rejoinder to Bülow and Helgesson’s ‘dirty hands’ justification

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Abstract
Bülow and Helgesson discussed the practice of gift/honorary authorships and expounded on a most devious form of these, termed ‘hostage authorship’. The authors drew a parallel of such situations in research and publishing with the problem of ‘dirty hands’. In this case, acceding, albeit with regrets, may well be ‘… what we ought to do, even if it requires us to do something that is intrinsically bad’, especially if ‘this is both practically necessary and proportionate to the end’. Here, I caution against this being a morally cogent, normative course of action. Tangible benefits from research not yet performed or published could not be predicted with any certainty, and as such could not be deemed sufficiently important to override moral constraints of justice and fairness. The utilitarian argument for any measure of beneficence with ‘dirty hands’ could therefore be nothing more than a self-serving act, or a self-exonerating form of moral disengagement. Such actions could have lasting ill effects on junior researchers and perpetuate a dark research culture, which will ultimately undermine the research enterprise and the pursuit of knowledge. One could further argue that what ‘ought to be’ done when coerced or held hostage in an authorship context is to break the cycle by reporting on the perpetrators, and ultimately for the community to devise consensus measures that could deter such predatory free riders.

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Introduction: ‘Hostage authorship’ and a justification for ‘dirty hands’

Authorship practices vary in different fields of research. Despite clear rules on authorship set by organizations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (ICMJE, 2016) and explicitly stated in the ‘information for authors’ section of most journals (Resnik et al., 2016), these may not be strictly followed. In some cases, an individual who has not made a substantial contribution to the research is included as a co-author, largely for sociopolitical reasons. This constitutes some form of gift authorship or honorary authorship (Al-Herz et al., 2014; Bülow and Helgesson, 2018; Moffatt, 2011).

In their article, Bülow and Helgesson (2018) provided a comprehensive list of reasons and circumstances whereby an individual who has not made a substantial contribution to an article may nonetheless be included as an author. They left the most devious forms to the last. As the authors explain, ‘coerced authorship’ arises when an individual ‘X’ with no substantial contribution ‘… is included as an author as a result of having either put pressure on the legitimate author(s) of the article or in other ways coerced the legitimate author(s) to include X’. Furthermore, when ‘X is included as author because there is a hostage-like situation, where the researchers of the article cannot proceed and finish the article unless the conditions raised by X are fulfilled – conditions that include providing an authorship position on the article’, one would be looking at a case of ‘hostage authorship’. It is conceivable that ‘hostage authorship’ would usually constitute some form of coercion, either explicit or silent, by ‘X’. In this case, the legitimate or original author(s) face(s) a dilemma. Inclusion of X as a co-author would violate ethical norms of credit sharing. However, refusal to do so could mean an unsatisfactory or unacceptable downgrading of research scale and depth, or a devastating retardation of research progress that may amount to termination of a particular project or research direction.

Bülow and Helgesson (2018) posited that it might not always be wrong for the author(s) to include X as a co-author. They drew a parallel of such situations in biomedical research publishing with the problem of ‘dirty hands’ – a concept that features more prominently in political philosophy and applied ethics (Gaus, 2007). Citing an exemplifying scenario, the authors wrote, ‘… there may be times when granting authorship … is the ethically required course of action, i.e. what we ought to do, even if it requires us to do something that is intrinsically bad’. Inclusion of X as an author would be morally justifiable, especially if ‘this is both practically
necessary and proportionate to the end’. The authors did insist at length that, although this could be done, it should also carry explicit regrets on the part of the original or legitimate author(s) ‘… for having to accept this means to the good end and having to betray the ethical norms of the scientific community to which he belongs’. They also think that getting one’s hands dirty is not always defensible, as when one’s career rather than a greater moral good is at stake. However, what would constitute ‘greater moral good’ in this case is not clearly defined.

Two wrongs do not make one right

Although invoking ‘dirty hands’ provides an interesting philosophical discourse for how ‘hostage authorship’ might be handled, it is hereby argued that it does not provide sufficient moral justification for a normative course of action. In other words, the action which is unethical on two counts, namely on the part of the predatory ‘X’ as well as the complicit original author(s), shall under most, if not all, cases not lead to an obvious and overwhelmingly good or morally satisfactory end.

The first difficulty lies in reconciliation of a need for ‘dirty hands’ with what the authors termed ‘practical necessity’ and ‘proportional ends’. This is a utilitarian notion, which would require the end to produce a clearly greater good than the means. In politics, ‘dirty hands’ may well be justified when human sufferings could be conceivably alleviated by somewhat unethical means, with the masses benefiting at the expense of a few. How this might be possible, as far as research is concerned, is difficult to envisage in practice. Even research work that represents a significant breakthrough rarely, if at all, provides a direct and immediate impact on the alleviation of human suffering. Moreover, in the scenario provided by Bülow and Helgesson (2018), and for many cases conceivable with a situation that culminates in ‘hostage authorship’, the research in question, or at least the critical part of it, has usually not yet been performed (with X withholding critical resources until a promise of authorship is made). It is therefore premature for even the most wishful to compute, with any confidence, that the good at the end will justify its unethical means. One could, of course, envisage hypothetical scenarios in which research before the engagement of X could have shown such great promise that all it takes is for X to part with their sought-after resources for the research to come to an immediately gratifying fruition. In reality, however, even the most promising drugs or medical devices/processes take years after completion of the initial breakthrough research before any approval for patients is in sight.

If ‘proportional ends’ is in most cases an unreal or intangible notion, what then of a ‘practical necessity’ to accede to X? Conceivably, being able to perform the research as intended and for it to culminate in a good publication would be desirable for the original author(s). A senior author leading a group may further justify
this as being a ‘practical necessity’ by arguing that a good article could prove critical for tenure or in keeping his/her job, or provide the group with means to obtain subsequent funding and the generation of sub-projects for junior members who may be students in need of thesis directions. The creation of a greater degree of individual career well-being and therefore general happiness by the somewhat unethical inclusion of X may superficially seem justified. However, this could be nothing more than one putting in place a self-serving agenda at the expense of justice and fairness. To see it from another angle, would the original authors still include X if were somehow known beforehand that the article would play insignificant roles in their projected career promoting benefits? Acceding to X in this manner would simply mean that the primary motive is self-gratification, which brings the acceding authors to a similar level of ethical dysfunction as the predatory free rider.

The danger of lapsing into moral disengagement and the repercussions of ‘dirty hands’

A real danger in morally weighing ‘practical necessity’ and ‘proportional ends’ on an inclusion of X without a clearly and practically defined ‘end’ in terms of beneficence of the research (for example, in how it might serve patients or the public), is that one could lapse into an undesirable state of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002). In this case, instead of tackling the moral issues head-on, sloppy moral justification, sanitizing language and excuses in attempts of self-exoneration without any real moral weight may be used to explain why X should be included as a co-author. If the ‘dirty hands’ justification is used too often and indiscriminately, lapses into moral disengagement could result. For example, it might become progressively easier, or even habitual, for subsequent Xs to be included as co-authors without real and proper attempts to justify their contributions in each case. This would have undesirable long-term repercussions. Furthermore, what is addressed here is the simplest of circumstances, whereby X is merely not substantially involved in the actual research. If X, despite underwhelming participation in the science, goes beyond, to attempt to influence how, when or where the research should be reported, for whatever hidden agenda, acceding to co-authorship could amount to further ethical issues.

What is the problem with the unjustified inclusion of a non-contributing X as co-author? For one, and as any other forms of honorary or gift authorship, it dilutes (and in some cases completely undermines) the credit due to the genuinely contributing authors, and upsets the merit system that lies at the heart of academic research. If appropriate credit is not given to whom credit is due, research shall become a dark enterprise rigged with injustice and unfairness. This is likely to turn away the brightest of the young apprentices who have any sense of justice or
self-worth. With the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968) catching up with those who are less successful, talented scientists may look for a career away from research. Worse, morally unjustified inclusion of authorship, together with other malpractices in credit sharing, could become a vicious cycle. Each generation of young researchers, learning how the system ‘works’ from their mentors, tends to continue the traditional modus operandi when it comes to their turn to be in charge or in control. It needs no visionary to see that this practice would only retard research progress, undermine how society might eventually draw benefit from publicly funded research, and be inhibitory to the pursuit of knowledge.

What ‘ought to be’ done

The practice of honorary/gift authorships is apparently rampant (Smith and Williams-Jones, 2012; Teixeira da Silva and Dobrănszki, 2016). Although all morally problematic, some are relatively more ‘well-meaning’ in nature than others (Bülow and Helgesson, 2018). In many cases, sharing of credit in the ‘I have you on my article and you have me on yours’ mode is done under the guise of research collaboration and/or strategic development, which is difficult to fault. However, how does one respond to the more blatantly devious but not uncommon situations like ‘hostage authorship’? Bülow and Helgesson (2018) have lamented that although authorities on academic publishing such as ICJME set rules on authorship best practices (ICMJE, 2016), there are no suggestions on how such predatory or free-riding acts should be tackled. This is true to a large degree and is unfortunately inadequate. However, although how these adverse situations could be resolved are not clearly spelled out, the existing rules are clear on what should not be the practice. The newly added fourth criterion for authorship by ICMJE states that an author should enter into an ‘agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved’. A predatory or free-riding X who does not wish to contribute substantially is unlikely to want to, or be able to, be held accountable for the research work in question. Based on this criterion alone, there is every reason for X’s exclusion as an author should the original authors be sufficiently steadfast in acting according to the authorship criteria.

Despite the rampant practice of gift authorships, clearly what cannot be what ought to be. The mandatory inclusion of an authors’ statement on ‘who did what’ (Allen et al., 2014), as is currently practiced by some journals, could be an effective deterrent against undeserved authorship, to a certain degree. However, this practice needs to become more widespread and should need to be mandatory instead of optional. Furthermore, a more detailed description of an author’s involvement would be helpful. In this regard, organizations like ICMJE and other consortiums of journal editors and publishers could play a more authoritative role.
Helgesson and colleagues have made some suggestions on how to counter undeserving authorships (Eriksson et al., 2018). The authors’ strategies include mandating a job applicant to explain the basics of a random selection of his/her co-authored articles, and to divide one’s publications and citations by the number of authors in bibliometric measurements (Eriksson et al., 2018). These strategies, although quantitative and impartial, may not be very effective against senior researchers with an established career, but may work against younger researchers looking for their first independent position. What would really help to diminish undeserved authorship is for the committees that decide on career-path-impacting matters – such as faculty search committees and promotion and tenure committees – to be able to look more closely at a candidate’s co-authored articles, and to appropriately gauge his or her true contribution in each. The candidate should be required to provide detailed descriptions of these contributions, and extra measures should be taken in verifying contribution claims where necessary.

Does one really need to resort to ‘dirty hands’ when one’s research is held at ransom by a predatory free rider? If acceding is deemed necessary simply because there is no better choice, would this not reflect a collective failure on the part of the research community to uphold ethical values in research? Ultimately, it is for the research community to devise consensus measures that shall effectively deter the malpractices of predatory free riders. With this in mind, what ‘ought to be’ done with X is not to get one’s hands dirty by acceding. Rather, the predatory propositions of X should be exposed and reported to the relevant parties. Most, if not all, journals indicate as a rule that, in publishing one’s article, the authors should share the relevant published resources as much as possible with the rest of the community. Any blatant violations of such a rule would be unacceptable, and should come with a consequence of a ban from future submissions to the same journal. Organizations such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) could perhaps be empowered by the community to mandate such ethical rules that need to be enforced by its member journals.

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