

Co-authorship Policy for Scientific Publications

Prof. John R. Hutchinson, The Royal Veterinary College, Structure & Motion Lab

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In larger teams, especially interactive and cooperative ones like our lab, this can become a source of friction so it's good to clarify!

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I follow RVC Good Research Practice of course, e.g.:

3. Authorship

3.1 Authorship of papers should include those individuals who have made a major contribution to the work and who are familiar with the entire content of the paper.

3.2 Authors should have participated sufficiently in the research to take public responsibility for the content.

3.3 Contributions to the work and financial support from sponsors should be acknowledged formally.

3.4 Authors are responsible for obtaining written permission from persons acknowledged by name.
[this is often loosely done, but important to try to do; some people will not bother responding]

But this is too vague. Normal authorship practice is to require intellectual contributions toward the ideas of the project at a relatively early stage so that a coauthor's contributions are discrete and specific (objectively identifiable in the final paper, and indispensable) if minor, or pervasive and profound if major. In principle, authorship should be discussed early in a project, and made clear to all. If one is not told one is a co-author explicitly, one should ask, or assume they are not. It is not always possible to inform every person peripherally involved in research about their non-coauthor status on every paper, but it is important to make an effort. Responsibility lies with the first/corresponding author(s) and especially any senior author(s).

Criteria include:

1. Practical--- organizing the data collection session (finding animals/sites, planning travel etc), gathering the data (actually this can be a relatively minor component, as the time involved tends to be brief relative to the analysis and writing stages); the stuff a technician would often do.
 - a. This alone is not enough for coauthorship unless it was driven mainly by one person or in one person helped in very discrete, unique and critical ways.
 - b. Raw data collected at RVC do not belong to one individual (IP policy at RVC) but a primary supervisor/investigator would be the ultimate decision-maker on how they would be used.
 - c. Providing rare specimens (e.g. cadavers) is roughly the same as providing raw data.
 - d. Sound performance during practical assistance (i.e. being very helpful and rigorous) should be essential; helping a little even for a long period or helping but causing major problems with the data may reduce the weight for assigning coauthorship in some cases.
 - e. Collecting raw data for one's own usage in a specific project does not necessarily mean that any future usage of those raw data justifies coauthorship, but this should be discussed as early as possible. For example, I worked with a team to collect elephant data and used their experimental gear, but it was clear that there were 2 separate teams and purposes to the work, and not coauthorship between teams on those 2 independent projects even though the other team's gear (and months of setup) was critical to our project. That was all agreed in advance (and thank goodness it was! Things got messy interpersonally, later on), in writing.

Use of data from a prior published study does NOT guarantee coauthorship on future studies using it and this is up to the PI to handle, depending on the nature of usage and the assistance needed from those procuring the original data/writing the paper. But it is nice to invite people to be coauthors in return for using their data, and should be more general practice as it can improve the quality of the science, as the original data collectors may know special nuances of the data/metadata. Not all databases capture all aspects of that, so be careful with others' data.

Researchers need to remain aware of RVC policies on intellectual property; namely that all data collected while RVC staff/students do not belong to any individual but to the RVC, curated by the PI. This is normal policy for most universities and publicly funded science. People leaving the RVC are usually informally allowed to use the data they worked on if communication about its usage is maintained. In more formal situations, a data ownership/IP usage contract could be written up, but this is a lot of work and might not be necessary where sufficient trust exists.

2. Intellectual—generating the ideas that led to the project’s conception, or guided its major themes and conceptual development. This would include obtaining funding but more than just obtaining funding would be needed, although funding is a potential partial criterion. It should be at a fairly profound level especially if this is one of the sole criteria supporting assignment of coauthorship.

3. Analytical—taking the raw data from a study and creating tools (e.g. code) to process them into interpretable results, then interpreting them.

a. To justify coauthorship the analysis involvement should be more than a few hours or even days; weeks of full time effort tends to be expected, depending on the project. This timescale is important because it correlates with effort. The analysis should also produce data that are reliable, not requiring re-analysis for usage in the study (that would mean they were effectively raw data).

b. Usage of processed (analyzed) data prior to the analyzer getting to publish them might however strongly justify coauthorship and should always be discussed.

c. Particularly once data are published, usages of those published data (i.e. analysed, processed data) are fair game normally as that is a purpose of publishing, to disseminate knowledge/data for others to use.

4. Writing the paper. All co-authors are expected to contribute. This generally should be about more than correcting spelling errors etc; intellectual contribution of some depth at the post-analysis (unless prompting re-analysis) stage.

Ordinarily at least 2-3 of these criteria should be met to justify coauthorship. In my view #2 and 4 are essential minimal criteria.

Proportionality of effort is important to consider in all this, but efforts (e.g. digitizing data, vs. coming up with ideas and deeper intellectual input) are not all equal in terms of actual time taken. In some complex papers, a substantial effort (e.g. weeks/months) might be put in by all authors, so that others who did not put in nearly as much effort (e.g. hours) are not included. In contrast, in other simpler papers some coauthors might have only put in some hours of effort.

Authorship will not be given for honorary reasons, e.g. a PhD supervisor who was uninvolved/only slightly involved in the research or someone who appears on some official document such as a grant application. This is wrong and unethical and needs to stop. Bad science! Bad human nature.

Authorship often boils down to a subjective “gut feeling” in some cases, which becomes more refined with time. You know it when you see it, in those cases. The senior author is the final arbiter of this but should discuss it with fellow co-authors (especially 1st/corresponding author) in cases where there might be potential ambiguity. In those cases it is particularly critical to establish this early on, i.e. well before the paper is being written!

Acknowledgement is easy to do and should be done generously in publications to avoid disgruntlement, where those people are not co-authors. Keep a list of people to thank!