

*Inappropriate Authorship: The Guilty Secret of Authors
and Editors*

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Appropriate authorship is the right way to increase your impact on science, enhance your citations and ultimately your H index. It allows recognition for creativity with possible financial gains. Some authors play around to get these benefits through unethical approaches. Honorary authorship is one way to achieve these targets. Senior researchers may force juniors especially those working under contractual agreements to add their names as co-authors without any significant contributions. Others may seek a second way to increase their scientific impact by repeatedly citing themselves “self citation” without necessity. The result will be a stunning increase in citations with a highly abnormal and really questionable H index values.

The criteria for authorship in biomedical research as designed by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) [1] include the following:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, and
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, and
3. Final approval of the version to be published, and
4. 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. In addition to being accountable for the parts of the work he or she has done, an author should be able to identify which co-authors are responsible for specific other parts of the work.

It should be noted that anyone listed as an author should fulfill all the above 4 criteria. The contribution to one criterion does not qualify for an authorship. Persons who have made substantial contributions (technical help, writing assistance, financial and material support) to the work but do not meet the criteria for authorship should only be acknowledged [2]. It is worthy to mention that every violation of authorship represents either a scientific misconduct, or sadly lack of knowledge [3].

I searched Google scholar for authors with H index higher than 100 and I was able to spot many. Closer look at these authors showed that they publish more than 50 articles per year. Some of them actually exceeded this number. This is extra-ordinary. To get a deserved authorship on 50 or more articles within this short period is definitely impossible. In fact, this extra-ordinary number of publications should throw suspicions about the accuracy and integrity of the research data. Sauermann and Haeussler in 2017 published their analysis for 12,772 articles with 2 to 14 authors published in PLoS ONE in a 4 years period from 2007–2011. The analysis included 79,776 researchers. They found a 47.66% rate of undeserved authorship [4]. According to Sauermann and Haeussler, authors completed the contribution disclosure statements required by the journals only to fulfill the requirements for submission. The disclosure statements do not describe the real authorship [5] and therefore, the assumption that they are true ignores the human desire to a superb self-esteem [6].

Citations increase the visibility of a paper and allows recognition of its author(s) but self-citation is a potential problem in biomedical research. It accounts for a significant proportion of all citations [7]. It is considered ethical if you conducted research in one paper that you would like to build on in a subsequent paper. The Web of Science considers self-citation to be acceptable up to a rate of 20% according to the discipline [8]. Approximately 1 in 15 citations (6.6%) of articles in high-profile general medicine journals are author self-citations [9]. Conversely, it becomes unethical if you managed to fit one or more self-citation per article when a necessity does not exist [7]. Unethical self-citations compromises research integrity and should be considered as a form of scientific misconduct.

Unfortunately, there is no consistent national guidelines to deal with allegations of scientific misconduct. Although some countries move such allegations of research misconduct from academia to courts such as Denmark and Sweden [10], the question whether research misconduct should be criminalized with definite penalties remains without a clear answer.

To conclude, I believe editors of medical literature need to continuously educate authors in academia on the importance of declaring transparent and true authorship in addition to the ethics of self-citations in order to avoid research scientific misconduct. Editors should make every effort to ensure that all authorship criteria are met.

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