Multiple authorship: power, performativity and the gift economy (0075)

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Abstract

The allocation of authorship credit in academic publication raises complex ethical issues but is comparatively under-researched, particularly in the social sciences. The paper analyses the results of research into attitudes to multiple authorship based on a survey questionnaire of academics working in education faculties in universities in Hong Kong. The results illustrate the way in which intellectual contribution is often overridden by considerations related to hierarchical power relations, notably in relation to research project leadership and doctoral supervision. These considerations normalize a gift economy which need to be understood by reference to cultural norms associated with Chinese society and, more widely, in connection with performativity in academic life. Belief in the legitimacy of power ordering and gift ordering of academic contributions to multiple authored publications indicate the need for research universities to pay more regard to institutional policies on scholarly authorship.

Introduction

Multiple authorship of research papers is a common practice in HE research, particularly in the biomedical sciences, but it is also evident, and growing, in the social sciences, including education (Endersby, 1996). Ethical issues in authorship include plagiarism, self-plagiarism and salami slicing. Less attention has focused on

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fine-grained areas including authorship order even though it is at the forefront of ethical issues for many academics (Author, 2009). Most literature on authorship ethics relates to the biomedical sciences (eg Cowell, 1998; Rogers, 1999; Berquist, 2009; Shewan & Coats, 2010). There are relatively few empirical studies on authorship ethics particularly in the social sciences (eg Endersby, 1996; Moore and Griffin, 2006; Netting and Nichols-Caseolt; 1997). The rising proportion of multiple authored papers published in leading education journals, such as *Studies in Higher Education*, points to the need for more research in this area (see table 1). Existing studies tend to focus on the perspectives of the powerful (eg journal editors) rather than the less powerful (eg junior academic faculty) or the powerless (eg research assistants).

Table 1: The growth of multiple authorship in education

Educational Studies

	Papers	Multi authored	Authors	Multi-author ratio
1975	22	3	25	1.13
2014	33	24	91	2.76

Studies in Higher Education

	Papers	Multi authored	Authors	Multi-author ratio
1976	24	3	27	1.12
2014	126	83	275	2.18

Methodological considerations

A survey questionnaire was developed to investigate the ethics of multiple authorship in the social sciences incorporating real-to-life case studies designed to elicit the understandings of educational researchers based in Hong Kong universities. 108 responses were collected representing a response rate of 36.1% of the population of 299 education academics employed in four HE institutions in Hong Kong. The sample is closely representative of the population.

Understanding of legitimate authorship

The questionnaire sought to probe the understanding of respondents with respect to legitimate authorship by drawing on the elements identified in the Vancouver protocol (ICMJE, 2009) on common standards in the medical sciences. While this agreement does not cover publication in the social sciences it provides an internationally recognized set of criteria. The agreement identifies three conditions each of which is essential in order to claim legitimate authorship: (1) substantial contribution to study conception and design, collecting, analyzing and interpreting data; (2) writing or revising a paper substantially for intellectual content and; (3) giving approval for the final version of the paper to be published (ICMJE, 2009). The questionnaire made no reference to this international protocol but asked respondents whether each of the conditions were sufficient or insufficient grounds individually to claim legitimate authorship. The 'correct' response, if following the international protocol, is that <u>all</u> of these conditions are necessary to claim legitimate authorship.

Of the four conditions suggested, 'conception and design' (77%) and 'writing the paper' (77%) were both regarded as individual conditions which merited an authorship credit by most respondents (see figure 1). The conception and design of a piece of research was often regarded as the main contribution by the principal investigator, as illustrated in case study 4. Opinions were almost equally divided though in respect to whether collecting and analyzing primary and/or secondary data justifies receipt of an authorship credit. Finally, there was little support for giving an

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authorship credit on the basis of 'giving approval for the final version of the paper to be published' (14%) alone.

The responses to other questions confirm that while those that obtain research funding are often seen as legitimate authors the same is not necessarily true of research supervisors or other members of a research project team (see figure 2). The majority (60%) agreed with the statement that 'the person who obtains funding for a project leading to a publication should always receive an authorship credit'. While differences on the basis of gender and academic rank were negligible in relation to most questions posed, the percentage who agreed with this statement rose steadily on the basis of seniority. A substantial minority (19%) agreed with the statement that doctoral supervisors should always receive an authorship credit when their student publishes a paper.

Power, gift and favour

In open comments a number of respondents shared their disquiet at the prevalence of parasitical behaviour among senior researchers in powerful positions who exploit more junior colleagues or research students in a practice which has been labeled the white bull effect (Kwok, 2005). However, the concern expressed by some academics about the existence of exploitative practices among research supervisors in particular stood in stark contrast with those respondents who felt that research students sometimes did not give them, as research supervisors, sufficient credit for their intellectual contribution to their research when seeking to publish on the basis of their theses. However, a number of mainly female, more junior ranking academics shared

stories about how they felt that they had been exploited by senior academics often when working as a member of a research project team.

Two forms of practice in determining authorship order are commonplace. *Gift ordering* occurs where author order is determined by career and performative considerations rather than intellectual contribution. This is part a behavioral pattern which may be related to the importance of *guanxi* in Chinese society, a term which refers to the building of reciprocal long term social and economic relationships with others (Yang, 1994). Secondly, *power ordering* occurs where author order is decided by considerations of hierarchy and management control within research rather than intellectual contribution, is also widely practiced. There is a widespread belief that the manipulation of authorship credit is a legitimate practice, an assumption also prevalent elsewhere in an East Asian context (Author & Saitoh, 2009).

Conclusion

The research confirms the results of previous studies that there are low levels of understanding as to what constitutes a legitimate claim to authorship Erlen et al, 1997; Pignatelli, Maisonneuve & Chapuis, 2005; Mitcheson, Collings & Siebers, 2011). It also illustrates the way in which intellectual contribution can be overridden by considerations of power and performativity in academic life possibly linked cultural practices associated with the Hong Kong context, such as *guanxi*. The research also points to the need for more professional and policy development in respect to determining authorship order in education schools and faculties.

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