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On the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship: The Challenge of Authorship Order and the Risk of "Textploitation"

Stuart Henry
San Diego State University

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With the possible exception of marital conflict and divorce, few relationships create more interpersonal animosity than when co-authors lose trust and respect for one another; power and partnership can be mutually reinforcing or mutually destructive. The problem with authorship is that it is a highly prized academic reward. It is the measure of much of what we do, from securing an appointment, to obtaining grant funding, to obtaining research release time, to being granted sabbaticals, to being recommended for tenure and promotion, and ultimately to academic prestige and reputation. Authorship is a mark of one's contribution to the field and academic legacy. Publications and the academic's role in authoring them, reflected in one's place in the authorship order, are thus highly contested. Ideas and research disseminated through publications are the oil of academia, and they are often fought over tooth and nail. Indeed, like other collaborative partnerships, co-authorship is best approached with what might be seen as the equivalent of a pre-nuptial agreement so that, if there are ever questions about who is to be the first author on an article or book, or who is even an author at all, there is some reference to an existing contract that provides guidelines and clarification. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. The first question to ask is: "What is collaborative authorship?"

The way we consider authorship has, not surprisingly, varied over time and cross-culturally, let alone varying among "academic tribes." The insights from historians of "the book," remind us that the idea of a book being a sole-authored work is a peculiarly Western notion that resonates with the ideology of individual accomplishment and achievement. Unless books are literally written by one person, edited by the same person, and also printed by that person, then multiple hands touch the book, book chapter and, for that matter, the scholarly article. These comprise various uses of others' work and interventions through the book or article editorial and production process that give many of a book's contributors a claim to "authorship" of the final written form. Therefore, being designated "the author" implies that other contributors, including editors, reviewers, and publishers, regardless of how influential they are in shaping a written work, are both less than, and marginal to, "authorship." By authorship we mean the person or persons who write an article, chapter, or book manuscript, and we do not include as co-authors any of the source authors who wrote words that are quoted in this work (unless the book is, for example, on Marx, or on Foucault), or any of the contributing players from editors to colleagues whose subsequent commentary on the work changes it in significant ways.

Collaborative authorship implies that there is more than one author. Just how many authors is an open question depending on the academic discipline. In the humanities it is the norm to see sole authorship, but certainly not to go much beyond two collaborating authors, whereas in science there can be as many as five or six co-

authors and sometimes many more than that. In the social sciences, and criminology and criminal justice in particular, co-authorship can range from the low numbers to the high numbers. An example of the latter is the 2009 JFA Institute publication *Unlocking America* which has no less than 9 authors!

What role multiple authors play can also vary from literally writing separate halves of an article, or separate chapters of a book, to mutually collaborative writing in which a short draft of the article containing its central thesis is written around a discussion among the collaborating authors, and subsequent iterations result from each author, in turn, reworking the whole manuscript before giving it over to the collaborating author(s) who does the same. In other cases, a more industrial division of labor is taken, whereby the concept of a paper is divided into specialized sections and each section is allocated to the co-author who has most expertise in the area. In this case, one co-author might be responsible for framing the overall argument, and perhaps also interpreting the results, with attendant discussion and implications for further research, policy, etc. Another co-author might be sophisticated at placing the core concept and research in the contemporary literature, particularly theory; and another may be adept at methodological and statistical techniques. The research, especially if grant-based, might employ one or more graduate assistants responsible for data gathering and coding and who might also run a program to generate or render data into consolidated interpretable results. Then, if none of the collaborating team is the grant-getter for this project, but the project could not have gone ahead, nor would the authors have data to write about without it, the question arises as to whether the Principal Investigator's (PI) name goes on the article. So, now the collaborating author team is faced with the question of not only who goes on the article as its authors, but in what order they appear.

The first question at this point is one of inclusion or exclusion and on what basis such decisions are made. In writing an article some tasks are considered more important than others and if so, should the authorship order be determined by the importance of tasks the co-authors contributed? Are the initial concept for the paper, and the original ideas of its overall thesis, sufficient to be the most significant, and so the other authors remain secondary and/or tertiary because they were merely implementers of an original idea that was not their own? Do some tasks, such as statistical data entry or coding of data, warrant only a footnote of acknowledgement or are their contributors deserving of full co-authorship? Does the seniority of the author affect this decision? If coding and data entry are done by graduate assistants, would they be more likely to be given a footnote, while similar work done by a major scholar in the field would warrant authorship? There are no fixed views on what criteria are sufficient to co-authoring an article; these priorities for authorship order are social constructions that change over time.

The second question, therefore, is what is the norm in the field or in particular disciplines, such as criminology and criminal justice, for recognizing the role and contribution of the authors to an article, and how does this affect the authorship order? Several principles exist that criminologists might refer to as primary rules by which to determine author order. (Here we assume that being first author is most important, as it is in criminology and criminal justice; in some fields being last author is most important).

1. Significance of contribution (as above, the authors are listed in the order of the importance of their contribution)
2. Volume of contribution (the authors who write the most are listed first)
3. Seniority of faculty (authors are listed in the order of their seniority)
4. Reversal of hierarchy (based on professional need/affirmative action: junior authors, women and racial/ethnic minorities always come first)
5. Alphabetical (by last name first in alpha order)
6. First drafter (the author who writes the first draft is the first author; all others are secondary)
7. Alternating authorship (a series of articles/books planned and the authors switch authorship position with each new publication)
8. Grant writer or PI (the author under whose name the grant is listed and who is the principle investigator is first author)
9. Data owner (the owner of the data on which the analysis was based is the first author).

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive and several might be factored together in determining authorship order.

Apart from being listed alphabetically, each of the other principles requires a set of secondary rules in order to decide authorship order. For example, judgments about the ***significance*** of an author's contribution might seem obvious, but unless there are rules to assess significance, there can be major conflicts of interpretation. If significance is based on ***volume*** of writing, the issue can be decided by a word count; if so, the challenge then is to know how to count statistics and charts, graphs and formulae compared to prose. ***Seniority*** might also seem obvious, but the basis for seniority can vary: age, academic rank, impact on the field, number of publications in peer review journals. Even if this can be determined, how do we take account of the in-built gender and race bias in such

estimation? Finally, the question of seniority ranking can be challenging where the major substance author has a different interpretation of the data or theory than the senior. In some cases the senior may want to move down the author order so that she is not seen as being responsible for a concept or interpretation with which she disagrees.

In dealing with seniority, authorship order can employ the ***reversal of hierarchy*** approach, with the added complication that if a junior author, regardless of basis, is placed first, this may be seen as gratuitous and might offend junior authors since, in giving them first authorship, the senior author is devaluing their genuine contribution to knowledge production. Moreover, because of their seniority or previous knowledge production and reputation, senior second authors may always be seen as "the real author," and the now elevated, but effectively devalued junior first author, is seen as the mere assistant. And this goes for reversal of hierarchy authorship order on gender and race, also. And let's not forget age. When is it appropriate in a reverse hierarchy authorship order to give priority to an elder and higher-ranked author (e.g. administrative professor) who has hardly ever published? The argument that they "need the first-authorship" hardly applies since they are not going anywhere in the academic promotion stakes, so this may make a statement about anti-ageism and respect for elders, but it also comes with the caution that such seniors may feel undeserving and, thereby, undermined by their honorary first authorship position.

While ***alphabetical*** might seem the most neutral, it gives an arbitrary bias as first author to those whose last name is A-L and this is skewed to mean that the last named A-C-ers have an especially superior place in authorship order through inheritance (of a name), and those unfortunate XYZ-ers are the proletariat of the authorship order hierarchy based on this principle alone. Fortunately, in many disciplines, alphabetical ordering has come to be seen to mean equal contribution, whereas non-alphabetical ordering always implies that the lead author is the senior author of the book or article.

The ***first drafter*** as first author seems to solve a lot of problems because it takes into account originality and load contribution, and is independent of rank and other complicating factors. It seems, indeed, to be an equal opportunity leveler for all contributing authors.

Finally, there is the question of whether PIs should be listed authors when they may not have written any of the article or book; this takes us back to the value of an author's contribution. Some would argue that only those who co-*write* the article should actually be co-authors; others would make the case that if the PI had not obtained the grant funding there would be nothing to co-author. This issue becomes particularly problematic when graduate students or junior faculty seeking tenure are the sole authors of the article, which leads to a fundamental underlying issue with each of the primary rules of collaborative authorship order discussed above: the issue of co-authorship is often as much about power and control as it is about collaborative partnership.

The problem with the contested terrain of academic authorship is that rarely are collaborating authors of equal standing. Sometimes the differences are marginal and co-authors are roughly equal. The problems occur when one or more collaborating author feels that the original agreement is being violated, or worse, where there was no original agreement about authorship order. This happens more often than we might like to admit. "You mean you agreed to co-author that book, and now the cover is going into production you are fighting over whose name will appear first?" Seriously, academics often avoid the authorship order question because it is difficult. There is a false hope that it will work out and that everyone will be reasonable, which means do right according to your criteria of what is justice. But given the range of models discussed above, each collaborating author might be on a different page! Where there is a power differential in the author relationship, as in most cases of power differentials, the potential for abuse of the less powerful partner is huge; no more so than where student co-authors are involved with their theses or dissertation advisors. I refer to this abuse of power as textploitation, which I define as the exploitation of collaboratively written texts to the benefit of one partner and to the repression of the collaborating partner. Where gender or race differences are also involved this can be very harmful. There can be huge psychological consequences, let alone loss of future earnings, employment and promotion prospects.

The dilemma is perhaps obvious. The junior faculty or graduate student needs the senior faculty to support their professional growth and development. The senior faculty needs the graduate assistant or junior faculty to help deliver their projects and publications. Because of rising expectations, this means faculty members are under greater pressure each year to commit to more projects and publications and to deliver more output. The alluring solution is the collaborative partnership and co-authorship. However, because of the differential power relationships, the temptation is often to accrue the maximum from the less powerful party.

Such textploitation is facilitated by developing a sequence of rationalizations that justify the harm: "Without my advice/grant/data the junior would not even have the opportunity to publish;" "They need to be the understudy before they can play the lead;" "They have to pay their dues before they can become the lead author;" "Making them first author is futile since everyone knows, or will believe, this is my work;" "They only contributed a part of the project; I oversaw the whole thing and gave it guidance and direction, without which it would never have been completed;" "They are helped, not hurt, by being seen as my collaborative author; they get to publish in prestigious places with me;" "I am exposing them to numerous

opportunities and learning experiences that will stand them in good stead for years to come, so they can replicate this in their own projects;" "They need me. I don't need them. I could replace them in a heartbeat with someone just as good. Researchers are lining up to work with me;" "They have created all kinds of problems on the project that I have had to manage—they don't really deserve authorship, let alone first authorship." With such justifications for textploitation, authors in the more powerful positions are able to neutralize any moral qualms or ethical considerations and feel morally free to take first authorship, regardless of the other criteria that might be used to develop a different authorship order.

For these reasons, at San Diego State University, we strongly advocate that the collaborating authors develop a pre-contract. This is a written agreement that emerges from a discussion between the collaborating authors that specifies the conditions of any publications from the research they are conducting together. It specifies the principles or primary rules governing collaborative authorship for publication and, where possible, it specifies the order of authorship in the case of future publications. We have found this particularly valuable in the case of master's thesis students and those writing doctoral dissertations, where it is part of the initial signed agreement for faculty to serve on the student's committee or serve as their thesis or dissertation chair. The language of this agreement is: "Plans for publication of the results of the thesis should be discussed to include identification of an appropriate outlet, authors and order of authorship, amount of effort expected and timeline for completion." The faculty and students are encouraged to specify author order before they sign the form.

At every stage of the process, the ethics of collaborative authorship depend on making decisions to enhance, rather than undermine, your collaborating partner. These decisions cannot be reduced to a formula, nor can they simply involve a commitment to a certain set of ethical values. They require a continual attention to concern about the effects of your actions on others. Ultimately, as one dimension of this process, author order is deeply dependent upon trust between collaborating authors, who usually exist in a differential power relationship. Some authors in such relationships are generous and caring, as was Gil Geis whose paper inspired these commentary articles; others are less so; they are sometimes controlling, self-interested and self-aggrandizing. In these latter relationships, trust breaks down and time and effort invested by the negatively affected partner may have been wasted. Unfortunately, there are many more academics of the second type than the first, which was one of the reasons that Gil Geis was so well-respected as a collaborator, scholar and mentor.

About the author:

Stuart Henry is Professor and Director of the School of Public Affairs, San Diego State University. He is the author or editor of 29 books, 21 of which have been co-authored or co-edited, and he is the co-editor of the *Western Criminology Review.*

Contact Information: Stuart Henry, Director, School of Public Affairs, San Diego State University, PSFA 105, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-4505; Phone: 619-594-4355; Fax: 619-594-1165; Email: shenry2@mail.sdsu.edu