Coauthors and Collaboration in Scientific Publication

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From habit, we scientists tend to count, and nowhere is this more in display than when a curriculum vitae is in hand. I had occasion recently to look over my cumulative publication list, starting with the first entry in 1984. I was startled to see that I have had 117 coauthors during the course of my career to date. This fact prompted me to give some thought to aspects of coauthorship and share them with you.

Collaboration in all aspects of scientific work is increasingly common and of increasing importance to success across the research process, from problem formulation to dissemination and application (Sonnenwald, 2007). Writing for publication creates potential entries to the permanent record of a discipline. The writing-for-publication phase of research is the nub of science, because it exposes and documents ideas, structured observations, interpretations of findings, gaps in knowledge, and avenues for future work. Because writing is a high-stakes endeavor for the individual scientists involved and for the field (Biscaro & Giupponi, 2014), attention to issues involved in collaboration is paramount.

Coauthors work together to create success in communicating their work and advancing their scientific ideas. Writing a manuscript is an extension of the collaborative work that supported the research, but with a marked change in task from carrying out a project protocol to creating expression via the written word—an activity that is unfortunately often thought to be difficult or unsatisfying (Medawar, 1979; Saver, 2014). This negative point of view brings special challenges to the collaborative efforts of coauthors. Deliberate actions should be used to overcome the barriers. Project manuscript plans should be developed. Writing timelines should be set out, just as they are for project management. Authors need to commit to the group effort and be willing to set aside competing demands on their time in the interest of moving each manuscript forward to completion. A plan for the actual composition—getting the words on “paper”—and for review and revision by all coauthors is needed.

The byline lists the authors of the paper. Authors are individuals who have made significant contributions to the research and to the writing of the manuscript and are distinct from others whose support is recognized in the acknowledgments. Practices for ordering authors in the byline vary by discipline. In nursing science, the order of names in the byline generally reflects the relative contributions of coauthors. Thus, it is critical that research collaborators discuss authorship and authorship order before beginning to write a paper and to continue to discuss it as the paper progresses (Roberts, 2017). In the Nursing Research Editorial Office, we track authorship and authorship order carefully across versions of the paper. Any changes require written permission of all coauthors. Occasionally, this practice exposes acrimony among coauthors. It is important for coauthors to know that a decision about final disposition of a paper cannot be made until they successfully resolve their disputes and transmit the signed forms approving any changes in authors or authorship order.

Among coauthors, the corresponding author (CA) holds special responsibility to collaborators. The CA communicates directly with the Editor during the submission, revision, and decision phases of manuscript consideration and with production staff when a paper has been selected for publication. The CA speaks for the group of coauthors as a whole. Prior to submission, the CA obtains required information confirming authorship contributions and documenting compliance with legal, regulatory, and ethical aspects of the work (e.g., copyright, ethics board approval of protocols) and composes the cover letter uploaded with the manuscript. Typically, editors communicate only with the CA. (Some journals now include all authors on all correspondence). The CA is responsible for transmitting decisions to coauthors, for ensuring that all coauthors are prepared to meet deadlines for resubmission, and for resubmitting the revised manuscript and response to comments. On occasion, the CA may correspond with the Editor after a decision to not accept a manuscript has been made. The CA reviews page proofs, ensures accuracy, and returns corrections in time. These various responsibilities require a well-developed sense of commitment to the group, expertise in group dynamics, professional writing skill, and tact. For these reasons, the CA may often be the most experienced author rather than the first author of a paper.

Advances in bibliometric analysis provide evidence about the value of collaboration through coauthorship. Recent work is based on coauthor networks, the social networks based on authorship that are built up over time (Biscaro & Giupponi, 2014). Various aspects of coauthor networks have been associated with article citations (Biscaro & Giupponi, 2014) and faculty promotion and attrition (Warner, Carapinha, Weber, Hill, & Reede, 2016). These early bibliometric studies suggest that coauthorship is valuable for advancing science and for the
personal success of individual members of the investigatory team who serve as coauthors.

Looking back over the years, my experiences as coauthor are emerging as among the most satisfying aspects of my work. I learned the ins and outs of coauthorship practices and standards from my advisor and mentors in psychometrics; their guidance has stood the test of time. My intrinsic interest in measurement methods was linked to many facets of the health–illness experiences of individuals, families, and communities and the nurses who serve them through the research foci of my coauthors in nursing science and related fields. I enjoyed and was privileged to pass on what I have learned about coauthorship to my advisees and mentees. As Editor, I work daily with coauthor groups and have the opportunity as well to speak about the many issues involved in advancing science through coauthorship. It is my hope that all of you will cultivate coauthorship networks that are at once scientifically productive and personally supportive and gratifying.

Susan J. Henly, PhD, RN, FAAN, is Editor of Nursing Research.

Portions of this editorial were included in invited presentations at the Global Korean Nursing Foundation, 2017 International Nursing Conference, June 2017, Glenview, IL, titled “Successful Professional Nursing Career: How to Write Winning Manuscripts” and at the University of North Dakota College of Nursing, PhD Student Intensive, October 2016, Grand Forks, titled “Publication: The Process.”

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Accepted for publication May 24, 2017.

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DOI: 10.1097/NNR.0000000000000232

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