



Authorship complaints

Case study 1

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A question of authorship

A research assistant alleged that the co-authorship s/he had had with his/her previous employer had cost him/her his/her job, visa, and total loss of rights to authorship. The research assistant gave details of anonymised correspondence between him/her and his/her supervisors.

In a letter to the research assistant's direct supervisor, summarising a meeting about authorship, s/he expressed dissatisfaction about the authorship of two abstracts submitted to a scientific meeting. The research assistant felt that s/he should have been the second author on abstract 1 and an author on abstract 2. The research assistant stated that to his/her knowledge, the authorship on abstracts generally became the authorship on the final publication.

The research assistant based his/her claim on the fact that for abstract 1 s/he had generated all the data for the project over the previous two years and had driven the project forward. The particular project had been in the laboratory for 12 years and the research assistant had brought it to completion, with guidance primarily from another senior researcher in the laboratory, and to a lesser extent, help from his/her supervisor.

The research assistant had to press for details of how the project would move forward and expressed that s/he had at times upset his/her supervisors by being "pushy."

The research assistant stated that s/he had taken the job in the laboratory on the understanding and assurance given by the senior researcher that s/he would be allowed to work on various research projects and would be given due credit on the resulting publications. The research assistant pointed out that s/he has qualifications that allow him/her to contribute substantially to a research project and to be credited as an author. S/he noted that in previous positions heads of departments had not had reservations about putting names of technicians, summer and rotation students, or any other person who contributed to the project on the publications, and s/he provided an example of a previous employer's authorship policy.

The research assistant acknowledged that the senior researcher had written all the relevant protocols, taught the research assistant the necessary techniques to carry out the project, and had answered any questions, for which the research assistant was indebted. The senior researcher had emphasised that the project

belonged to the research assistant and his/her supervisor. He was an author on abstract 1. Once the project completed the research assistant had to chase the supervisor about how to proceed with collecting data for writing a paper. The research assistant noted that the senior researcher had commended the research assistant on his/her good results on the project and gave the impression that s/he would be an author on the final publication.

In regards to abstract 2, the research assistant based his/her claim for authorship on the fact that s/he had been doing all laboratory work and data collection. Additionally, the research assistant stated that s/he was going to be involved in analysing these subjects in the future and deserved appropriate credit on the resulting publication.

The research assistant stated that the supervisor's response to these arguments was that s/he would not be the second author on the first paper because s/he didn't have a doctorate, and should do so if s/he wanted his/her name on the publications. The supervisor also said that the research assistant had been working as a technician and many laboratories don't put technicians' names on the publications; the supervisor and the senior researcher had been directing the research assistant's work and would be the first and second authors on the paper while the research assistant had been given credit as third author on abstract 1; and that the supervisor had managed this project for a decade and had put a great deal of thought into it.

The research assistant felt that "my work and tireless initiatives to make progress in this project do not count because I am just a technician." The supervisor compared the research assistant's efforts with another technician's work without whom no experiment would be possible but who is not credited with authorship on papers. The supervisor stated that s/he had looked at the various results generated by the research assistant but that similar results had been made in the senior researcher's laboratory some time ago and that the abstract was written from previous experience.

The research assistant was "extremely shocked, disheartened," by this and wrote to his/her supervisor: "I cannot describe my agony when I saw that I was not the second author on abstract 1. I never expected to get so little credit for my work after slogging for two years." S/he felt that professors should give credit to the person who did all the work, and those who do not are selfish, unjust, unethical and unprofessional. "I have worked in very good labs until now that don't justify authorship on the papers based on job title, academic degrees and give credit to the people based on the merit of their scientific contributions to the project. This is the basic etiquette in scientific community."

The research assistant then received a disciplinary letter from the head of the group, accusing him/her of characterising the supervisor as "selfish, unjust, unethical and unprofessional". The head stated that authorship is not a right and that the research assistant would be removed from the final paper. The research assistant alleged that s/he was pressurised to leave and his/her employment was finally terminated in January 2003 as a result of false allegations. The university's human resources department overturned the termination and gave the research assistant an opportunity to look for another job in the same university.

The paper is still not published. The research assistant stated that s/he would like to file an official complaint with the university regarding the misconduct of the senior researcher and supervisor. The research assistant was worried that because the senior researcher is very influential in the university, the research

assistant's complaint would be "brushed off " and that s/he would face further retaliation.

Discussion

_ The experience described by the research assistant is, sadly, still common in academic life. Harvard University, for example, has set up an academic dispute unit to deal with such disagreements.

_ When considering such cases it is worth bearing in mind that the complainant might be lying, although this did not appear to be an issue in this instance.

_ Based on the facts set out in the research assistant's letter to his/her supervisors it appeared that his/her claim for authorship was justifiable. All too often claims for authorship are still based on power and influence and not necessarily contributions.

_ Generally generating 100% of the data usually qualifies a person for authorship, as it indicates a high level of involvement in the research project and its goals. If other authors leave out any person significantly involved in data generation any of them could be held responsible should subsequent problems arise.

Advice

_ The research assistant should exhaust the proper processes at his/her institution first before the Editor/publishing house becomes directly involved in the case.

_ The research assistant should first write to the designated dispute officer, copying in the president of the university.