

Author's Commentary on "A Single Author Paper"

Commentary On
A Single Author Paper

The main issue raised in this case is the conflict between friendship and personal relationship on the one hand and professional responsibility on the other and how that conflict can lead to an uncomfortable situation or even result in unfairness.

Did Mike ask a reasonable favor from Lisa? That question is hard to answer. As we learned from the case, Mike and Lisa are good friends; honestly revealing your thoughts or wishes to a friend should not be a problem in itself. What I find disturbing is Mike's final decision about using Lisa's work without giving her credit. When Lisa tells him to do whatever he thinks is right, I see her as an honest and caring friend, who lets Mike choose, but at the same time suggests that he think about the right decision. Mike is responsible for treating Lisa fairly. I do not approve of Mike's action, because the case does not present any ambiguity about the significance of Lisa's contribution. Moreover, it is clear that Mike knows very well what he is asking for, and he understands that his decision to withhold authorship credit from Lisa is not justified. His decision is based on selfishness, which he hopes will be forgiven by a friend.

Another detail that I find even more disturbing is that Mike tries to deceive Lisa, and somehow make their adviser partly responsible for his decision. His statement that their adviser wants Mike to be the single author on the paper conveys that impression. Even though Mike doesn't lie, he misrepresents the facts. His statement may affect Lisa's relationship with her professor. So, Mike is doubly wrong: First, he makes an unfair decision about Lisa's credit for authorship, and second, he tries to blame this decision on someone else.

It is clear that the professor's advice would not be appropriate if he knew that Mike was not the only one working on the project. However, was he responsible for inquiring about every detail of the work? As a group leader, he should have suspected that Mike was not capable of undertaking the experimental part of the

project alone. But it is also understandable that he trusted his post-do, assuming Mike would not try to mislead him.

Thinking about Lisa's options, an obvious question occurred to me: Why doesn't Lisa talk to her adviser? Why doesn't she explain the situation and ask the reason for his advice to Mike? Is there anything wrong with attempting to clarify the situation, given that the professor participated in a decision that concerns her? At first glance, it seems that talking to the professor is a very reasonable way to solve Lisa's problem. However, I think it would not be appropriate for Lisa to have an open conversation with her professor and to express her disappointment after she has given free rein to Mike. If she had an ongoing dispute with Mike about the authorship issue, then arbitration by the professor would be warranted.

The authorship of scientific papers is one of the primary criteria for evaluating scientists' contributions to their fields. This issue is important and sensitive because people's careers and reputations depend on authorship. In an ideal world, contribution to human knowledge should be the only thing that matters, but that is hard to measure; the most objective way to evaluate scientists is reviewing their publications.

In the scientific community it is understood that contributors to a project are given credit by shared authorship; if their help was not a significant part of a project, it is simply acknowledged. However, personal biases, subjectivity in determining the significance of a contribution, or personal relationships may distort this picture. Hence, it would make things easier and clearer if there were a clear understanding between parties about their level of involvement and responsibilities at the beginning of a project. Of course, these things may change during the project, but initial agreement should be discussed and a consensus reached.

Given this case, Lisa has done nothing wrong. She was open with her suggestions and ideas, willing to share her knowledge and ready to help her friend. However, she could have avoided all this hassle if she made things clear from the beginning, i.e., she told Mike that her work on this project should be recognized by authorship credit on the paper.