

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "So You Wanted to be a Co-Author"

Commentary On
So You Wanted to be a Co-Author

This case nicely illustrates how complicated joint research and publication can become. A good ethical rule of thumb, I think, is for collaborators to have open lines of communication with each other on matters related to their research. Dividing things into discrete parts and treating each part as if it has no relation to the others (or the persons responsible for those other parts) does not work well when the various parts also compose a whole (as they do in this case). Since Melissa, Sharon, and Adam are currently working on a project together, the rule of thumb seems to apply in this case.

If Melissa and Sharon were to bear this rule of thumb in mind, Adam would be contacted. Sharon seems to sense that. Melissa's is distracted by something that is, strictly speaking, irrelevant here -- her concern about her upcoming tenure review. It is understandable that she is concerned about the review, but she needs to detach herself from this concern in trying to determine how to proceed in her research with Sharon and Adam. The standards of appropriate research and obligations to fellow researchers do not change simply because of an individual's desire for a good tenure review, fame or money. The integrity of scientific research and accountability come first.

Melissa is setting some bad examples for Sharon. She is prepared to publish the "results" of research before it is completed (because "the book that contains this review paper will take a while to come out"). She is also prepared to publish these "results" without consulting with Adam, another major player involved in the research. If consulted, there is some possibility that Adam would not object. That would not mean that going ahead is all right, however. It would meet only one basic obligation (which follows from the rule of thumb outlined above). If Adam responds appropriately, however, he will object. Consulting with Adam offers two advantages for Sharon. First, not having the same vested interest in rushing things along, Adam can offer a more objective perspective on what it is appropriate to do. Second,

Sharon will obtain the views of someone who, presumably, is equally, if not more, experienced than Melissa. (Adam is an associate professor, probably already tenured.) One would hope that Melissa is sufficiently experienced that she would see how questionable it is to publish "results" prior to the completion of the actual research. Unfortunately, she does not seem to. Sharon is uncomfortable about proceeding. She should be listening carefully to Melissa's attempts to justify publishing prematurely. None of her reasons really appeal to scientific justification. Instead, they refer to her professional ambitions and concerns (e.g., a positive tenure review). Sharon should go with her doubts and insist that Adam be contacted.

One thing that might make it difficult for Sharon to take the course of action I am recommending is that Adam is thousands of miles away, whereas she is face to face with Melissa. However, Sharon and Adam clearly will be working together on the project. Sharon should look ahead to how premature publication might affect that working relationship. Melissa is suggesting that they ignore Adam at this point -- that they say nothing. Will Sharon eventually have to say something (either lie or confess) at a later time? Today's actions have consequences down the road. Sharon would do well to consider the potential outcomes of her actions. What if Sharon and Adam discover later that they need to make an important change in their research, but that the "results" have already been published? Although science aspires to objectivity, it also must acknowledge contingency. Good science goes as the world goes -- not necessarily as scientists think it will when they are engaged in a promising (but by no means certain to be successful) research project. Sharon must ask not only what she may eventually have to say to Adam even if the research goes as she and Melissa think it will, but what she will have to say to Adam and other scientists who may have relied on her prematurely published work, should the research go differently.

Determining authorship can be tricky, especially in the sciences. Should Adam be listed as co-author of the review paper in question? Certainly not without his permission. But, given the complicated relationships among the researchers in this case, it seems to me that the rule of thumb I have suggested is all the more important. What is so difficult about taking a moment to consult with one's collaborators before proceeding? If Melissa is right about Adam's role in their joint research, presumably he will agree that it is Sharon's call (although he still might well object to what Melissa is proposing to Sharon). If he disagrees, that in itself is reason for Sharon to reconsider.

I think this case provides a very good opportunity to discuss scientific integrity and the various temptations that may place it in jeopardy. Especially troubling here the extent to which Melissa is driven by timelines that have no relevance to the research per se, only to her professional ambitions. Sharon is well advised to get the views of others in such circumstances.