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Scientific Life

Plagiarizing Names?

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A new trend in scientific misconduct involves listing fake coauthors on one's publication. I trace some of the incentives behind faking coauthors, using them to highlight important changes in global science publishing like the increasingly important source of credibility provided by institutional affiliations, which may begin to function like 'brands'.

Graduate students and junior scientists often add the name of their advisors or project principal investigators (PIs) to the byline of their articles [1]. Termed ghost or gift authorship, this practice has been routinely criticized, cast as unethical, and formally prohibited when the senior author does not contribute intellectually to the publication. While ghost/gift authorship seemingly continues unabated, a new species of ghost has recently emerged. In March 2012, the Spanish newspaper *El País* reported that:

The Ethics Committee of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas is chasing a ghost. A ghost with a good curriculum vitae . . . It signs itself as Javier Grande, and has appeared as a researcher at two public institutions: the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales and the Instituto de Investigación en Recursos Cinegéticos. In the publications he appears to be an associate of Jesús Ángel Lemus Loarte . . . [2].

Javier Grande is indeed associated with Jesús Lemus, who fabricated Grande out of thin air to make him his coauthor. This is not, however, a case of ghost authorship of the kind discussed earlier in this paper. Javier Grande has not written a word because he is, in fact, a 'real' ghost. So, why has Jesús Lemus invented him? One possible reason is that

scientists who churn out fraudulent articles may add coauthors to make their productivity look unsuspecting. Another possibility is that the primary authors possessed only part of the skills necessary to conduct the research presented in their article, so they confabulated imaginary collaborators with complimentary skills to assemble a 'fantasy dream team'. These may have been the motivation behind Lemus' invention of Javier Grande. But it was also not by accident that he made Grande 'work' at the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales and Instituto de Investigación en Recursos Cinegéticos.

I argue that Lemus (who has several other articles retracted) wanted to enhance the chances of having his articles published in high-impact journals and project an image of quality in the eyes of potential readers, enticing them to read and potentially cite his article. And so Lemus created a collaborator who, while perfectly unknown and unknowable, was associated with well-known Spanish research institutions that are key players in the field he was working in: wildlife biology. He created a ghost to borrow his fabricated affiliations to real institutions. Similarly, in 2012 and 2013 Rodrigo J.G. Lopes from Portugal's University of Coimbra published three articles in *Applied Catalysis B: Environmental* with three imaginary coauthors from Caltech: D. Wilson, W. Wang, and P. L. Richardson [3] (<https://retractionwatch.com/2016/04/07/author-appeared-to-use-phony-caltech-co-authors-up-to-8-retractions/>).

Like Lemus, Lopes sought a connection to a prestigious and fitting brand (i.e., Caltech), but could establish it only by means of ghosts – fake noncorresponding coauthors that would not turn him in, would not compete with him, and with generic enough names not to raise too many inquisitive eyebrows. Aside from the obvious unethical nature of Lemus' and Lopes' schemes, the invention of these

four ghosts points to an intriguing development in scientific authorship: the name of the author's institution has become in some cases as important or more important than the name of the author. In these cases, the name of the author serves primarily as a trait d'union between the work and the name of the institution – not Lemus' and Lopes' real institutions, but those of their invented coauthors. Another related example is from an article on human papillomavirus vaccines by Lars Andersson listing Sweden's prestigious Karolinska Institutet as the author's affiliation. Members of Karolinska do not know who 'Lars' is, but the fake affiliation likely facilitated acceptance of his publications, including some in the high-impact *Journal of Internal Medicine* [4] (<https://retractionwatch.com/2018/05/27/author-who-lied-to-journals-about-his-identity-slated-to-have-four-articles-on-vaccines-retracted/>).

This 'name-borrowing' trend does not affect only well-known institutions, but it also affects well-known authors. An amusingly reckless example from 2016 features several scientists who submitted a paper to a high-impact operations research journal listing the name of a prominent Dutch economist as the corresponding author. The email address associated with the submission was not, however, from the corresponding author's institution. Shortly after sending back the referee reports, the editors received a revised manuscript that now listed a new corresponding author (an Iranian scientist) and three other coauthors (also from Iranian universities). The name of the original prominent Dutch economist had disappeared from the byline. The editors (who were suspicious and had been playing along) inquired about the new authorship arrangement and were told that, after the extensive revisions, the Dutch economist had decided to no longer be listed as an author [5]. When contacted by the

editors, the Dutch economist commented that this was the third time in one year that an author had fraudulently submitted an article under his name.

The Iranian scientists' scheme, while materially different from Lemus' and Lopes', reflects a similar goal: establishing fake collaboration to facilitate an article's publication and visibility. Lemus' and Lopes' schemes involve fake coauthors with generic names produced to borrow credibility from 'their' well-known institutions. Instead, the Iranian scientists used the name of a real and prominent scientist who was falsely presented as a coauthor, only to vanish as a ghost as soon as the scheme gained traction. In both cases, credit-worthy names (of either persons or institutions) are borrowed through a fake multi-authored collaboration.

The recent, but fast-growing emphasis on academic evaluation metrics places a large premium on the work's impact and visibility, which closely correlates with the prestige of the journal, authors, and their affiliations [6]. This trend is likely exacerbated in highly published and citation-intensive fields like chemistry. The names of authors and especially those of their institutions are thus assuming an advertisement function. If adding the names of real or fake coauthors with prestigious affiliations facilitates access to quality publication venues and postpublication visibility, adding coauthors is a small 'fee' to pay to maximize future credit. Even better, if the coauthor is fictional, then there is no cost involved beyond the risk of getting caught. This practice, however, undermines the determination of responsibility that is fundamental to scientific authorship.

While handing out coauthorship credit may appear to be a gift, it is in fact a form of name-borrowing. The semblance of a gift is an optical illusion created by taking

a person's name and attaching it to another work that is falsely represented as a collaboration. This is equivalent to attaching the Prada logo on a cheaply-made bag and saying that it is a 'gift' to Prada. What we are witnessing, I believe, is the emergence of a new form of plagiarism that reflects the new metrics-based economy of scholarly publishing. Traditional academic plagiarism took the work, but the new variety takes the name of either authors or institutions. Content plagiarism was emblematic of the 'publish or perish' period when what mattered most to scientists was maximizing the quantity of their publications. Name plagiarism is emblematic of the new metrics-informed 'have impact or perish' context, where what is prized most is the visibility and reception of publications. Of course, the two forms of appropriation can coexist.

There may be global dynamics at play behind this trend. Older forms of ghost/gift authorship relied on journal editors recognizing the name of the senior advisor or PI and looking kindly on the submission. But with the massive global expansion of the scientific community, there are many scientists in many parts of the world that do not have internationally recognizable advisors or PIs. At the same time, the new impact-based publication requirements expect scientists to publish in Anglophone high-impact international journals. Traditional gift/ghost authorship would not gain these scientists much leverage with such journals because it would add coauthors whose names the editors would not likely recognize.

But if the names of their local advisors/Pis may be unknown to international journal editors, what recognizably authoritative names can they attach to their articles? Those of internationally recognized institutions. Most know Caltech, and one can try to borrow that brand recognition through a fake coauthor 'affiliated' with Caltech – a connection an editor will likely

notice. Alternatively, one can follow the path taken by the four Iranian scientists and add a coauthor of such a stature that his/her name will be recognized by any editor in that field. Of these two varieties of name-borrowing, the institutional one appears to be less risky as detection would require more editorial investigative work, not to mention that imaginary coauthors are unlikely to complain. Furthermore, adding fake coauthors from prestigious foreign institutions (as Lopez did), reduces the chance to be caught by colleagues at home, who are unlikely to spot that foreign collaborators are fabricated.

This new form of name appropriation (akin to 'passing-off' in brand terminology) is specifically enabled by multi-authorship. It is incentivized by the stresses generated from the globalization of science and by the vast multiplication of journals, institutions, and practitioners – a sea of 'generic' populated by many outsiders anxiously trying to confer some distinctiveness to their work so that it can gain access to prestigious networks of publication and dissemination. Having become a dominant force in global commerce, brands and brand appropriation are coming to science – for many of the same reasons.

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