

Science and Engineering Ethics

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Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva
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Dear Dr. Teixeira da Silva,

As you know, your manuscript was double-blind peer reviewed some months ago and I have in-hand the reviews and your responses to the comments and suggestions of knowledgeable and well-respected referees, as well as your revised manuscript. I apologize for the long delay in the decision process regarding your manuscript, the responsibility for which rests entirely with me.

Let me assure you that the delay reflects a workload problem, not any inherent bias or conflict of interest on my part. When the reviews and your responses were received by my colleague, the then handling editor Professor Spier, he asked that I take over responsibility for your manuscript in order to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, given his long-standing relationship with Elsevier as founder and Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Vaccine* for 28 years; Professor Spier is currently serving as Reviews Editor of that journal. I indicated that I would be happy to do so, but that I had a number of on-going projects and would not then, nor in the near future, have the time to give your manuscript the attention that it deserves. (As an independent consultant my primary source of income is through contracts with public and private agencies, institutions and organizations. In addition, editing the journal entails numerous time-intensive tasks.)

Regarding your manuscript, as you rightly point out, authorship in science and engineering is an important issue. It is "the coin of the realm", playing a critical role in career development and professional advancement. Beyond credit, and more importantly, authorship carries a substantial burden of responsibility since all authors, by agreeing to be authors, vouch for, and are accountable for, the integrity of the work presented. We agree that it is a topic entirely appropriate for *Science and Engineering Ethics*.

At the same time, authorship is what the community of authors understands it to be, *not* what publishers or editors suggest that it ought to be, nor even what professional societies say it should be. Although there are models and proposed standards for authorship, there is a lack of consensus on the criteria for authorship. No established and universally agreed upon standards exist except for the prohibition against plagiarism. Still, the criteria for authorship are evolving: for example, fifty years

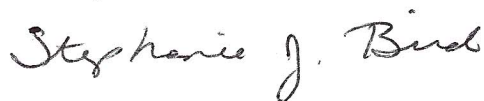
ago honorary or gift authorship was considered a compliment, now it is generally frowned upon (at least in the US although not everywhere), in part because gift authorship denies the right and responsibility of every author to voluntarily take responsibility for the integrity of the content of the paper. The definition of plagiarism has also evolved from "ideas and writings" to primarily writings, at least in part because of the difficulty of establishing the origin and derivation of an idea. The literature shows that researchers are frequently unaware of guidelines and do not consult them. Further, those researchers who are aware of the criteria often disagree with them and are unwilling to comply with guidelines or standards if they do not accommodate their own values.

As it stands now, your manuscript is not acceptable for publication. It is fairly incomprehensible, in part because it demonstrates an apparent lack of understanding of the authorship guidelines and definitions you discuss; it misrepresents recommended standards as rules, and the evolving state of guidelines as an indication of unethical behavior; and it appears to be a vehicle to attack particular entities in order to further your own goals. Your focus on the pronouncements of editors or self appointed groups of editors is misdirected and a bit of a "straw man". Furthermore, it is the long standing policy of *Science and Engineering Ethics* (since its founding in 1995) that it is the role of this journal to be neither a place for personal attacks, nor for investigative journalism.

If you are willing and able to reframe the direction and tone of your manuscript, it could be a valuable contribution to move the discussion of authorship forward. In particular, your insights about cultural differences regarding authorship and the roots of those differences would be valuable to identify and explore, including (but not limited to) their potential implications for international collaborations. Your paper could lay a foundation for a productive examination and discussion of the assumptions and expectations, sources of misunderstanding and confusion about authorship, and in so doing, it would be an important contribution to the discussion. Such an approach to the subject would fit very well with the ethos of *Science and Engineering Ethics*.

I look forward to your response

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephanie J. Bird". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Stephanie J. Bird, PhD
Co-Editor-in-Chief