

Who Are the “Authors” When Traditional Knowledge is Documented?

Authorship of a scholarly publication entails both credit for the work and responsibility for the contents. The work and responsibility include both the writing of the paper and the data it contains. So who are the authors when traditional knowledge is documented? Some papers include entire communities or community organizations as co-authors. Some include individual community members. Some just include the academic researchers. My publications have used all three approaches, so I can hardly claim consistency. Instead, I raise the question, at the invitation of *Arctic's* editor, Karen McCullough, in hopes of generating some further discussion and reflection on collaboration, partnership, and authorship.

In scientific publications generally, there are no clear-cut guidelines for determining who qualifies as an author of a particular article (e.g., <http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/services/authorship.cfm>). When it comes to credit, for example, senior researchers are more likely to be listed as authors, whereas junior researchers may find themselves in the acknowledgments. Non-scientists who have contributed to a study are less likely to be considered for authorship credit than scientists, not least because of the significance that authorship has for academic careers. When it comes to responsibility, interdisciplinary collaborations provide an example of the difficulty of holding a single person responsible for what is, almost by definition, an exercise beyond the abilities of an individual. Recognizing the significance of these questions, the Council of Science Editors, whose web site is noted above, created a task force to examine authorship in principle and practice.

Several of these matters are relevant in the case of traditional knowledge. Let us first consider credit. Few would question the appropriateness of listing the researcher (who may also be a community member and a source of the knowledge being documented) as an author, both as a matter of academic tradition (researchers almost by definition conduct studies, write papers, get credit as authors) and for his or her contribution to the particular study. But unless the researcher is reporting firsthand information alone, he or she is reporting data gathered by others. Few scientists would be happy seeing their data published under another's name.

The persons being interviewed play a major role in traditional knowledge studies, though that role may vary greatly from project to project. Credit is certainly deserved, but some individuals may be uncomfortable being singled out as authors, especially when the body of knowledge is regarded as largely communal in nature. Cultural proscriptions against bragging or claiming individual expertise may contribute to this reluctance. Yet these are the individuals who provided the information contained in the publication, and who are often asked to review drafts of a publication. Their involvement is certainly closer than most.

As for the larger group of knowledge holders, while they too may be deserving of credit, who exactly are they? To refer to an entire community (as I and others have done in some papers) may give the erroneous impression that everyone there is a holder of the knowledge that has been documented or has been involved in the study in question. To refer to a particular institution (e.g., a tribal government or a hunters' organization, which I and others have also done) may give a similarly erroneous impression that the institution and the knowledge holders are exactly the same group. On one hand, a particular institution does have a specific identity that may include well-defined membership. The institution may also be the one that approved the research on behalf of the community, and thus may already have acted on behalf of the group of knowledge holders. On the other hand, both for approving research and for authorship purposes, the institution *per se* may not have generated information, but served instead as a stand-in for those who did so.

Turning to responsibility, an author is expected to stand behind a publication. This is entirely appropriate, but not without problems. The researcher, for example, may be responsible for his or her role in documentation, but does this role extend to taking responsibility for the accuracy of the knowledge being documented? Or is the researcher's responsibility limited to the process of documentation rather than verifying the actual facts being documented? Sound methods, including community review of drafts, can provide some degree of assurance, but only to the extent of confirming that what is documented is widely shared or trusted in the community. Independent verification is not commonly a part of traditional knowledge studies.

In other words, who stands behind the data? I and others have sometimes acknowledged this limitation by stating in the paper itself that the aim has been to record faithfully what we have been told, rather than to confirm with separate observations that what we have been told is indeed accurate. Including individuals, institutions, or entire communities as co-authors does not remove this distinction, but it may show some degree of commitment by those co-authors. At a minimum, the co-authors are making a public statement that they stand by the paper and its contents.

Individuals and institutions can make such a statement, but how can it be made by a vaguely defined group like an entire community, most of whose members will not have read the manuscript or perhaps did not even know about the study? Even individual contributors and local institutions outside the academic realm may not be aware of the full implications of scholarly authorship. Their inclusion as authors may reflect a desire by researcher and community alike to share credit or to acknowledge a collaborative enterprise. These are commendable aims, but suggest an implicit redefinition of what it means to be an author, shifting the emphasis from responsibility towards credit, from a purely academic statement to one that is also a social statement.

Such a shift does not bother me. I have been, and will continue to be, reluctant to take sole credit for a paper that reports data generated by others. One might distinguish between the relative credit and responsibility assumed by the various authors, and indeed the same is true of most interdisciplinary papers, too. Not all authors, and perhaps none of the authors, can stand behind every part of a complex, collaborative paper. Some are authors because they contributed a certain section or key data, others because they stitched the pieces together, others because they oversaw the whole product.

Papers documenting traditional knowledge share with interdisciplinary research the features of collaboration and reliance on more than one discipline or mode of inquiry. Perhaps in both cases we can recognize that holding each co-author to the same standard is impractical and even inappropriate. So long as the authors' list includes those who deserve credit and those who can take responsibility, then the authors collectively satisfy the criteria for authorship. This approach allows flexibility for each study to determine who should be listed as an author, while retaining academic standards of authorship for the group as a whole. Collaboration in all forms deserves recognition throughout the research process, no less in authorship than elsewhere.

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