SHOULD I AIM FOR MULTIPLE CO-AUTHORSHIPS TO EXTEND MY PUBLICATION LIST?

Young scientists often think that a long publication list is crucial for an academic career and that obtaining multiple co-authorships are a clever strategy to make their publication list longer. Is this true?

A LONGER OR A SHORTER PUBLICATION LIST?

Ambitious young scientists are always confronted with a classical dilemma – should I publish one, two or a few papers in high impact journals or should I focus on a longer publication list with lower impact publications – including multiple co-authorships? There are good arguments to focus on fewer papers with higher impact factors (provided the supervisor, the available funding and infrastructure and the general research environment leave you the choice).

But if the possibilities are more limited multiple co-authorships may appear as a clever strategy to connect with other scientists, to extend your publication list or to avoid gaps in your publication list..

CO-AUTHORSHIPS CAN BE VERY VALUABLE

There are good reasons why you should become a co-author on a publication. One of the best reasons are research collaborations. Research collaborations can be the most rewarding activities in your scientific career. Working together with “masters” in your field or experts from other fields may broaden your horizon dramatically and may give you access to
knowledge, strategies, infrastructure and manpower. I personally love the intellectual stimulation when working together with colleagues who have a different perspective, different experiences and a different approach. Often research collaborations result in two or more publications. In these cases it happens often that one paper is driven by your collaborators and your contribution is rewarded with a co-authorship, with multiple co-authorships or in ideal scenario’s with an asterisk for “equal contribution”. In the next study you may be the driving force and thus the first or last author and your collaborators become co-authors or equally contributing authors.

FIRST RULE: AVOID GAPS IN YOUR PUBLICATION LIST!

There is no doubt that publications in journals with a higher impact factor are better than publications in journals with lower impact factors – at least from a career perspective. (Read more about impact factors here: 10 simple strategies to increase the impact factor of your publication.) This statement is true for all commissions I have participated in which judge grant proposals. This statement is also true for most commissions that select postdocs and professors. However, a great paper 3 years ago in a high impact journal does not protect you from raised eye-brows and critical comments on your scientific productivity if this is the last paper you have published.

Based on this assumption it a safe bet that at least one co-author paper per year is better than no paper at all. If you are publishing a high impact paper once every few years you should fill the gaps at least with a few or maybe multiple co-authorships. If you are publishing papers with lower impact factors a higher number of papers is expected which – in part – may be co-authored publications.

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SECOND RULE: AVOID TO PUBLISH IN PREDATORY JOURNALS AT ALL COSTS!

It may be tempting to publish a number of papers quickly in one of the many open-access journals which send you invitations often several times per week (and may also invite you in the same email to become part of the editorial board). **Never consider such a shortcut.** So-called “predatory” journals are an exploitative open-access academic publishing business model that involves charging high publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services associated with legitimate journals (see Wikipedia article). In most cases this means that there is no peer review and they do not have an impact factor. This is disadvantageous for several reasons:

1. A publication which has not been peer-reviewed is generally seen as being of poor quality. The publication may be excellent, but the absence of the peer-review procedure makes it automatically suspicious. Unfortunately, there are many examples of low-quality or even fraudulent papers published in these journals, which is bad for the reputation of all other papers published in these journals.
2. Papers without impact factor are often ignored by members of commissions which evaluate grant proposals or select postdocs or professors.
3. You may be considered as being an incompetent or fraudulent scientists because you circumvented the peer-review process – even if you did not know about the predatory character of the journal.

Thus, you may pay high publication fees for a publication that is seen as a poor-quality paper and may even make you suspicious of being fraudulent. Thus, before you submit a paper check the white lists of trustworthy journals and publishers which are available on the internet – or at least google the journal name and the term “predatory” to see whether something comes up in order to protect yourself.

**Avoid predatory journals at all costs – there are better alternatives such as multiple co-authorships or high impact reviews (see below).**

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THIRD RULE: A PUBLICATION LIST WITH MOSTLY CO-AUTHORED PAPERS IS A DISADVANTAGE

Your scientific independence will be severely questioned when you have predominantly or even exclusively co-authored papers on your publication list. This is particularly true, when a person is expert in a ‘supporting technique’ such as histology, electron microscopy, imaging or behavioural testing. You will be judged as a person without own ideas, dependent on others who ask you for contributions to their studies. To demonstrate your scientific independence you need a substantial number of first and last author publications – multiple co-authorships are not helping in this context. As a rule of thumb, I would suggest that the number of co-authorships should not be higher than the number of first/last authorships.

To learn more on how to develop a clever publication strategy read more here: What is the best publication strategy in science?

FIRST AUTHOR REVIEWS MAY CLOSE GAPS IN YOUR PUBLICATION LIST

If your personal circumstances do not allow you to obtain co-authorships to close gaps in your publication list it is always an interesting option to write a high class review on your subject – instead of or in combination with a few or multiple co-authorships. This increases your knowledge of the literature and makes you visible in your field. If your review is well-written, interesting or even thought-provoking (and not just an accumulation of references) you may even succeed to publish in the best journal in your field or in a journal with a high impact factor outside of your field. Also here applies a similar rule: Do not publish more reviews than original papers.

SUMMARY

Some or multiple co-authorships may promote scientific cooperation and mutual intellectual stimulation, extend your publication list and may close gaps in your publication history. Avoid to publish too many co-authorship papers (more than first/last authorships) and NEVER publish in predatory journals.

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