

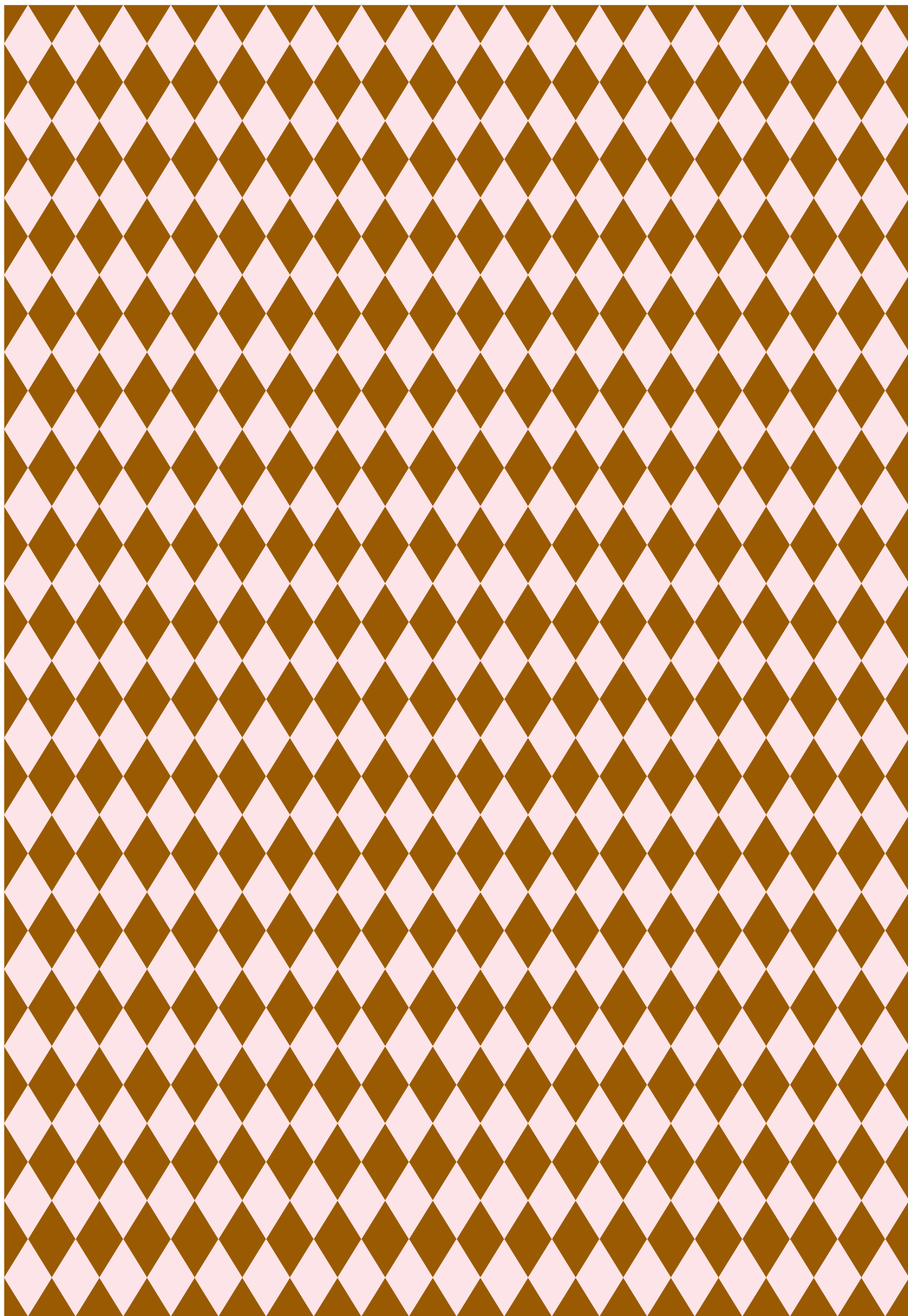
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Ethical aspects relating to co-authorship

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l. vetenskapl
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Ethical aspects relating to co-authorship

Is it always a good idea to be a co-author of an article or other research publication? The issue of co-authorship contains a discrepancy between practice and career development norms on one hand and ethical principles of good research practice on the other. With regard to career development, being involved in many publications is important and sometimes the threshold for what is required to be included on a co-author list is problematically low. Conversely, a person who has made a significant contribution is sometimes excluded from the group of authors. Being a co-author also entails that you can be held accountable for the research and publication meeting the requirements of the research community. So, when is it ethically correct to be a co-author? And what are the potential consequences of unjustified co-authorship?

This pamphlet has been produced by Lund University Ethics Council.

WHEN IS IT ETHICALLY CORRECT TO BE A CO-AUTHOR?

ALLEA (All European Academies) states in its European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2017) that “authorship itself is based on a significant contribution to the design of the research, relevant data collection, or the analysis or interpretation of the results.” (2.7)

The so-called Vancouver rules (Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 2018), nowadays considered to be the research ethics norm also outside the field of medicine, are even more demanding and recommend four criteria for authorship, which are all to be fulfilled:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, and
2. drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, and
3. final approval of the version to be published, and
4. agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work by ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Thus, in addition to your own substantial personal contribution, you are also to have contributed to the writing, approved the version of the publication that is to be published and be prepared to be accountable, and not just for your own contribution. The guidelines add that a co-author is to know which of the other authors are responsible for the various parts of the study and is to be confident that the other authors' contributions are trustworthy.

If you have contributed to the work, but not to the extent that you meet the requirements for co-authorship, you should receive an acknowledgement instead, for example in a note. It is the responsibility of the entire group of authors to ensure that only those who meet the requirements are to be listed as co-authors. It is equally important that all those who do meet these requirements are included as authors; therefore you are not to exclude someone whose contribution corresponds to that of a co-author.

Lund University Ethics Council supports the Vancouver rules for authorship and recommend that all researchers affiliated to Lund University, regardless of the field of research, follow these rules.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUE

The accountability issue can be divided into two parts: accountability for the actual co-authorship and accountability for the content of the research and publication for which you are a co-author.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE ACTUAL CO-AUTHORSHIP:

All those who have contributed to a sufficient extent according to the criteria above, and no others, are therefore to be included as co-authors of a publication. This entails two things (see e.g. Swedish Research Council 2017, p. 56 and ALLEA 3.1):

To be listed as a co-author of a publication to which you have not made a sufficient contribution according to the criteria above – an unjustified claim to authorship – is in itself a deviation from good research practice.

Preventing someone from being the co-author of a publication to which the person has made a sufficient contribution is also a deviation from good research practice.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CONTENT:

Accountability for authorship has a concrete application in cases where suspected research misconduct or other deviations from good research practice arise. The Act on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and the Examination of Research Misconduct defines “research misconduct” as “fabrication, falsification or plagiarism that is committed intentionally or through gross negligence when planning, conducting or reporting research.” (2019:504). Other deviations from good research practice may also lead to disciplinary consequences.

According to ALLEA’s guidelines “All authors are fully responsible for the content of a publication, unless otherwise specified.” (2017, 2.7) The Vancouver rules also emphasise that an author is responsible for their own contribution, as well as for the research integrity of other co-authors’ contributions. The Swedish Research Council states in its book *Good Research Practice* (2017) that as an author, you are not only responsible for the quality of the manuscript and text, but also for “everything related to the actual project – methods, validity and reliability of the results etc.” (p. 55)

This means, therefore, that as a co-author you can be held accountable for research misconduct or other deviations from good research practice in the publication or in the research on which the publication is reporting, even regarding parts that other co-authors have contributed.

If you have good grounds for trusting your co-authors it is not a problem to assume collective responsibility, which is what applies unless otherwise specified. If you do not consider that you have grounds to trust the other participating researchers' research integrity, you should not be a co-author.

Even when you trust the other authors it can be difficult to get an overview of what the others have contributed, for example in large groups of authors, in multidisciplinary collaborations where you do not have the expertise within other authors' specialist areas or where parts of the research are subject to confidentiality. In these cases, there is good reason to clearly state in the publication who is responsible for which parts. Collective responsibility can therefore be broken through explicit division of responsibility. Many journals allow this, or even request it. However, at least one of the authors must assume overall responsibility for the publication as a whole.

Lund University Ethics Council stresses that co-authorship of a research publication carries a responsibility

- that your own research contribution to a publication is sufficient according to the Vancouver rules for authorship, and
- that everyone who satisfies these principles for authorship are given the opportunity to be included as co-author of the publication
- for any research misconduct or other deviations from good research practice in the publication or the research reported in the publication. This responsibility falls on all the authors collectively unless otherwise specified in the publication. At least one of the authors must assume overall responsibility for the publication as a whole.

TAKE THE TEST!

Is it ethically correct for you to be the co-author of publication X?

Take the Lund University Ethics Council's co-author test on the next page!

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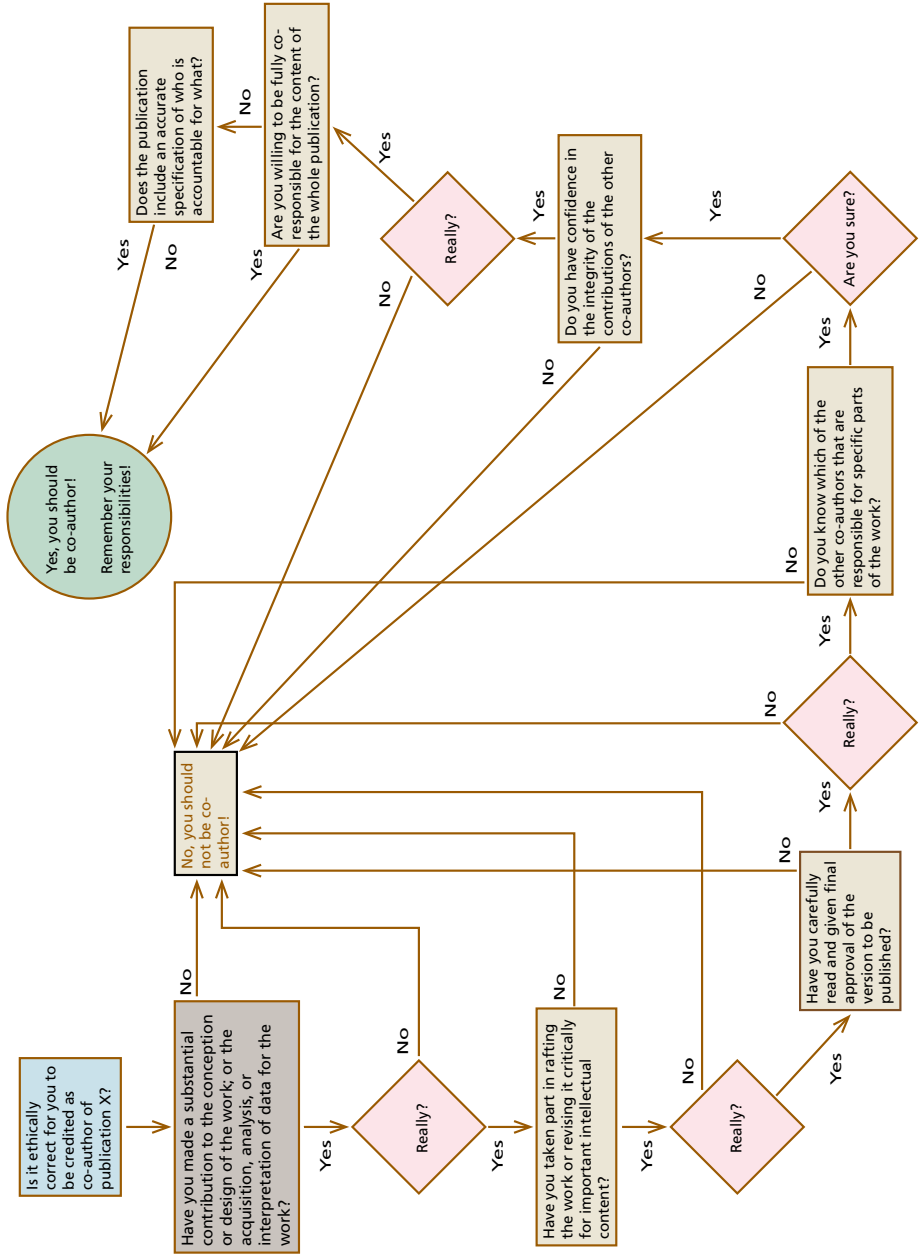
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The co-author quiz



Lund University Ethics Council

The council works to increase understanding of the importance of an ethical approach to the University's activities, stimulate discussion and debate on ethical issues, as well as promote the development of knowledge in the area of ethics.

The Ethics Council acts in an advisory capacity to the Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor's Management Council on ethical issues.

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dean, School of Economics and Management

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director, Pufendorf Institute

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post-retirement professor, Karolinska Institute

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professor, Department of Chemistry

Torun Forslid

senior advisor to the vice-chancellor, University management

Johanna Gustavsson Lundberg

senior lecturer, Centre for Theology and Religious Studies

Lena Halldenius

professor, Department of History

Mats Johansson

associate professor, Department of Clinical Sciences

Titti Mattsson

professor, Department of Law

Anna Meeuwisse

professor, School of Social Work

Björn Petersson

associate professor, Department of Philosophy

Johanna Henriksson

Lund University students unions

Alexander Nymark

Lund University students unions

Contact person:

Magnus Gudmundsson, magnus.gudmundsson@rektor.lu.se

