

# Author's Commentary on "So You Wanted to be a Co-Author"

Commentary On  
So You Wanted to be a Co-Author

This case raises several important issues, including collaboration, authorship and supervisor-trainee relationships. Discussions may focus on one or more of these general areas, depending on the interests of the participants. It might be particularly interesting to talk about this case in a group that included people at different points in their scientific careers, i.e., graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, junior faculty and senior faculty.

The interests of this case's characters include the following:

**Melissa:** She expects Sharon to do the best research she can and to prepare the best possible publications. She is concerned about her own tenure process, and she expects Sharon to do work that supports her advancement.

**Sharon:** She expects Melissa, as her supervisor and a more experienced researcher, to guide their publications and collaborations. She expects Melissa and Adam to keep her career in mind with regard to publications, exposure within the scientific community, etc.

**Adam:** He expects Melissa and Sharon, as collaborators, to maintain open communication regarding the progress and presentation of the work they do as part of their joint project.

Conflicts arise between:

1. Melissa's desire for tenure, and thus her desire to please the conference organizers, which leads her to want to include in the review all the latest research and results from the collaborative experiments
2. Adam's desire for proper credit and acknowledgement and
3. Sharon's desire to please both Melissa and Adam, and to do the right thing in the context of the inherent power inequalities. She needs to learn the proper

procedures for publishing and collaborating, but she also needs publications and letters of recommendation for her future career. She cannot afford to jeopardize either relationship.

Potential actions for Sharon:

1. Since Melissa clearly does not want to bring Adam into this situation, Sharon could refrain from contacting Adam and keep the focus of the paper as it is, on the work that has already been published, and
  1. not mention the new model;
  2. suggest the model in a cartoon, with reference to a manuscript in preparation by Sharon, Adam and Melissa
  3. include the model in detail, in essence using this review to introduce it, with reference to a manuscript in preparation by Sharon, Adam and Melissa.
2. Sharon could call Adam and ask his advice, even though Melissa doesn't want her to.
3. Sharon could ask another faculty member who is an experienced author for advice.

Consequences of these prospective actions:

1a) This strategy will ensure that there will be no problem in publishing the future biochemical paper. However, Melissa will be just as unhappy as when the initial conversation began. If Sharon opts for this action, she will have to explain why she feels it's inappropriate to mention the new model without consulting Adam. This brings up the more general question of how to resolve disagreements between supervisors and trainees, where there are inherent power disparities. Sharon could present her thoughts to Melissa in the context of ethics, proper accepted practice for publication, and/or specific journals' rules of publication. She should have learned some of these ideas earlier in her career. If Melissa insists on including material that Sharon thinks should not be in the paper, Sharon can insist that her name be removed from the list of authors. This course would have negative consequences for her publication list and probably for her future relationship with Melissa.

1b) This option may be the most obvious compromise for Sharon with regard to the actual material contained in the review and biochemical papers, and Melissa may agree to it. However, it still leaves open the question of whether Sharon and Melissa

should contact Adam before referring to their collective unpublished work.

1c) Melissa would probably prefer this option, for the sake of the publication and her tenure process. Before discussing newer, unpublished work in this sort of detail, however, Sharon and Melissa clearly need to contact Adam. Discussion of this option could focus on the conventions about unpublished data and future ability to publish within particular fields of research. It could include the proper acknowledgement of contributions, allocation of credit, and the responsibilities of authors, determined according to journal rules, the field's conventions or conversations between collaborators.

2) Melissa has made it clear that she does not like this option. This scenario also raises the question of how Sharon should present this information to Adam. She could preserve much of the three-way collaborative relationship by mentioning it casually, and asking for his advice on this publication matter with which she is inexperienced. On the other hand, she would probably damage the relationship between Melissa and Adam by saying, "I thought you should know that Melissa is trying to publish without giving you credit." The question also arises of whether Sharon should tell Melissa before, after or at all that she is discussing this question with Adam. Readers of this case would probably wonder about additional information, such as why Melissa doesn't want to contact Adam. What is the past history of their relationship? How does Melissa expect Adam to respond?

3) As in 2), we wonder how Sharon should present the information to the faculty member, with what sort of tone, and whether she should mention to Melissa that she has spoken or is planning to speak to the faculty member. To understand the complexity of Sharon's position, we must consider that post-docs need publications and letters of reference. They also need to make and maintain solid connections and collaborations with more senior researchers. In addition, post-docs often have few institutional advocates or formal channels of support, i.e., there is no postdoctoral correlate to the graduate student thesis committee or council.