

The Research Whisperer

Just like the Thesis Whisperer – but with more money

7 NOVEMBER 2017
TSEEN KHOO

Is the academic lone wolf extinct?

Academic lone wolves get a bad rap.

In today's hyper-collaborative academic world, the idea that researchers might work on something alone, get funding alone, and publish alone, is weird and even abhorrent to many.

Yet, it is the reality for many humanities and social sciences academics, from postgraduates to senior scholars. They have projects where they publish and work on projects alone, as well as collaborative and joint initiatives that involve others in their own discipline and beyond.

It's not a case of either/or, but the general vibe in many academic 'advice' streams is that scholars should not work alone.

Scholars can and do work alone, and they can be excellent colleagues, productive academics, and generous mentors. Sure, there are some researchers who work alone because they don't play well with others, but many work alone because it is an expectation of their disciplines. Some work alone because they enjoy working alone, but it doesn't mean they can't work with others.

Not only is sole-authorship relatively common practice, it is in fact a sought-after signal that the researcher has the ability to create and complete major intellectual work. The opaqueness of who did what can be the source of much contention on work that involves more than one named investigator or author. Humanities scholars are not as often embroiled in these debates because they practice a discipline "where text and author are tightly coupled; where the process of inscription implies intimacy with one's materials" ([Cronin 2003 \[196 Kb PDF\]](https://ar1.secure.nonprofitsoapbox.com/storage/documents/publications/scholarly-tribes-cronin-17oct03.pdf) (<https://ar1.secure.nonprofitsoapbox.com/storage/documents/publications/scholarly-tribes-cronin-17oct03.pdf>)).

We are strongly advised to collaborate to within an inch of our lives. Most of my humanities colleagues co-author and appear as co-investigators on major grants, but I knew that many of our reputations in the humanities stand and fall on the strength of our sole-authored work.



(<https://theresearchwhisperer.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/k408929-500px.jpg>).

Photo by Krishh | unsplash.com

I had cause to canvas my Australian networks recently, to ask whether it was a bad thing for humanities scholars to have very few or no sole-authored works on their CVs.

As always, my network delivered and the responses were great.

Most said that a lack of sole authorship raises a red flag about the researcher's ability to fund and publish great ideas. In other words, *seeing examples of sole-authorship are as necessary as those of co-authorship*.

Nuances across humanities disciplines were fascinating and show just how blunt our metrics and benchmarking processes are. Here's a selection of the answers my colleagues shared with me.

"In **sociology and cultural studies**, it's not a problem if everything is sole-authored," says Professor Deborah Lupton (University of Canberra). "Definitely a problem if the person is just one of a collection of authors and rarely the lead author – alarm bells would ring in that case."

Dr Inger Mewburn, whose focus is **education** (studies in higher education, to be precise) says, "at the time of my promotion I only had one solo publication out of about twelve. The panel remarked on it with a 'please explain'. They wanted to hear what my contributions were exactly. When they realised that most of my multi-authored papers involved mentoring people, they seemed happier. I guess I'd never thought about it before then, so I made an effort to write a solo one last year. It was hard!"

A colleague, who prefers to be unnamed, brought up some interesting assumptions that are made in their field:

*"In **anthropology**, it depends if you are co-authoring as part of a research project team (ARC Discovery, Linkage etc) or not but it is expected you are the sole author of articles that come out of your PhD work and sometimes for postdoc level, too. I've heard assumptions that non-English-speaking background (NESB) academics, not necessarily in anthropology, co-author because of language issues (sometimes with their supervisors). I think the Anthropological Society's annual award for journal articles are usually given to sole-authored articles. In major postdoc applications, they also ask how many out of your journal article publications are sole authored (see it as a positive/mandatory aspect)."*

This comment broaches the issue of co-authorship because of assumed language issues, which is interesting if not somewhat disturbing. In the humanities, the presumed nature of supervisors appearing on their PhD students' publications is rare if not non-existent. Within some areas of the social sciences, however, it's treated as a given and can be the basis of many ethically grey practices.

Dr Stephen Whiteman, an **art history** and **Asian Studies** scholar, shared his perspective on authorship and track-record as someone who's recently applied for an academic promotion:

"Personally, I don't know of any humanities field in which sole-authorship is not the traditional norm. Definitely, I think humanities applications/ reviews/ evaluations can be hurt by too much co-authorship/ too little single authorship. This is a current anxiety for me as response to my promotion application approaches. Much of my more recent work is co-authored. Whether they ought to be is a different question. BUT I think this is changing (perhaps university imperatives to collaborate are still ahead of external evaluators' views of this practice, but I expect they'll catch up). I also think it may be context-dependent, at least to a degree. When I came to Australia from the USA, I immediately noticed a stronger culture of collaboration, at least on grants, and that might be reflected in a greater interest in/acceptance co-authored publications. Top institutions in the States would likely take a pretty dim view of co-authorship in the humanities come tenure review, for instance, whereas I think (hope!) promotion review here accepts it more readily."

Stephen's view also demonstrates the differences between national academic contexts. What 'counts' as a humanities academic in the States may well be different on a fine-grained level to elsewhere but academic track-records are treated in general as universal portfolios.

Professor Kath Albury (Swinburne University) says, "In some disciplines (**English**, for example) sole-authored is the norm. Collaboration means co-editing, or organising a conference together." Kath adds that "many 'pure' humanities scholars perceive co-authorship to be 'less work' – a sign they have never co-

authored”.

For myself, the majority of my track-record in the humanities is sole-authored work (especially my earlier years as an early career researcher), with a high number of collaborative publications (as co-editor of books and special issue journals), and a fair number of co-authored works (and, I think, a good range of colleagues who have been my co-authors). I’m happy working by myself, and am used to generating project ideas that I carry out from creation to finding funding to writing up publications. But I recognise the value and fun to be had in working with others. More importantly, I recognise the value that *others* put on working with others.

Just because someone sole-authors doesn’t mean they are a selfish, anti-social researcher. Similarly, just because someone co-authors doesn’t mean they AREN’T a selfish, anti-social researcher.

📁 BE STRATEGIC

📁 BUILDING YOUR TRACK-RECORD

📁 ACADEMIC CULTURES

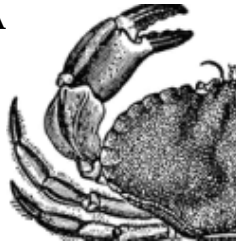
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📁 AUTHORSHIP

📁 DISCIPLINARY PROTOCOLS

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Published by Tseen Khoo

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6 comments

1. **David Stern (@sterndavidi)** says:

7 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 9:54 PM

Economics is a field where there is more and more coauthorship. 50 years ago the vast majority of journal articles were single authored and now most are coauthored. But PhD students are still expected to produce some single authored work in most economics fields (ag/environmental econ is a partial exception) to show “how good they really area’. This seems a bit silly to me as the supervisor really often plays the same role as a coauthor but doesn’t put their name on the article.

REPLY

2. **Deb** says:

7 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 11:28 PM

For comparison, in disciplines where co-authorship is the norm (notably in STEM fields), reviewers would instead look for the proportion of first-author / lead author / corresponding author publications, and perhaps expect detail about the nature and extent of each author’s contribution.

REPLY

◦ **Tseen Khoo** says:

10 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 6:59 PM

Yes, it's such a complicated set of protocols at times. Debra Carr's post (<https://theresearchwhisperer.wordpress.com/2017/05/23/author-order-and-disorder/>) covered some of the tensions in them, but you can imagine the way things can go wrong if any of the more senior investigators decide to be malicious. I've read something recently (and can't remember where – gotta love the internets...) about how some group-authored pieces may be claimed about 200% over by the various researchers at their home institutions (that is, what each person has claimed is their contribution adds up to way more than 100%).

REPLY

3. **Tony Waters** says:

26 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 2:43 PM

In my view, lack of sponsors, sole authorship, etc., is a sign of creativity. Not all good research (and some bad research) is the result of big grants and multiple authorship. In particular, insightful clearly written theoretical writing is often single authored. And because it often challenges the status quo, it is also often unfunded. Fortunately, all you really need for such creativity though is access to good library resources, and a word processing program!

REPLY

◦ **Tseen Khoo** says:

27 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 3:41 PM

Thanks for your take on this, Tony. Yes, I think equating an amount of grant money as indicative of research value/excellence is a big mistake and has become the tail that's wagging our research dog, unfortunately. Various studies have shown that major granting systems skew towards conservative research and 'safe hands' for the work (read: often those who've had grants before, perpetuating the divide).

REPLY

4. **Single use tools – Research Degree Insiders** says:

16 DECEMBER 2021 AT 4:47 PM

[...] probably already know this! But this kind of sharing around of expertise is also common in 'lone wolf' disciplines, though it is more often credited in the acknowledgements than in shared [...]

REPLY

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