**Conflicts of interest associated with spousal and kinship authorship**

**Abstract**

In this paper, we argue for the importance of declaring, in an academic paper, the status of a co-author who is a spouse, kin or family member, even if no such clause by the Committee on Publication Ethics, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, and/or Council of Science Editors currently exists. This is because such familial relationships can transcend emotional boundaries and encompass legal, intellectual, financial, and other actual or possible conflicts of interest.

**Key words:** accountability; bias; Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE); conflict of interest (COI); editorial responsibility; International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE); inappropriate authorship; opacity versus transparency; peer review; post-publication peer review; predatory publishing; publication ethics; quality control

We believe that the status of spouses (husband, wife, legal partner) or kin (family member or relation), if co-authors, should be clearly indicated in an academic paper, whether they share the same or have separate family names. Spouses who have collaborative efforts or who work in similar or related professional environments can influence each other ideologically, so if there is a possibility that they might influence each other, then their relationship should be declared in an academic paper. There are also risks that financial conflicts of interest (COIs) might exist, especially if the themes of their research projects overlap, even more so if spouses or kin work in different laboratories or research institutes with potentially competing research interests, management and financing. Even if a spouse or kin is not a co-author, if they work in a research environment that could be perceived as a COI (ideological, personal, financial, or other), such a relationship should be declared. Academics who are editors, and whose spouses or kin are editors in other, possibly competing journals, should also declare such competing positions (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019a).

When family relationships, such as spouses or kin, are not declared or are masqueraded, as well as the actual or real (direct or indirect) COIs that are associated with them, then the ethical waters become murky, and the risks of an ethical transgression increase. Thousands of journals and publishers globally ascribe to the COI clauses, and ethical limitations related to them, of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)[[1]](#footnote-1), International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)[[2]](#footnote-2), and/or Council of Science Editors[[3]](#footnote-3), so failure to declare a relevant COI, would constitute a publishing ethical transgression. Currently, the standing of an individual as a spouse or kin and the need to make the respective declaration in a published paper, regardless if they have the same or different family names, are not required by the ICMJE, COPE, CSE or other publishing ethics clauses, as far as we know, but should become so in the future to avoid favoritism, cronyism and nepotism (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019b).

According to Slack (2012), marital collaboration encompasses household management, discussion of research projects, aid in editing and publishing, and other topics. As for the scientific work itself, collaboration ranges from the husband-creator/wife-assistant model to truly egalitarian couples but, even for the latter, it does not necessarily imply joint research and publications. This point is illustrated, among other famous spouses, by the Nobelists Carl and Gerty Cori and Nobel-nominees Walter and Ida Noddack who, in spite of functioning as an *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* or collective work unit for their entire scientific life, preserved their intellectual independence, each of them publishing a sizeable proportion of papers alone or with other co-workers. Analogously, in a sample of nearly 200 couples working during the period 1950-1970 in the same sub-fields, Rossiter (cited by Slack, 2012) found that many of them “did not actually collaborate on their research and publications”. Currently, any help provided by a spouse to the other is often rewarded with a co-authorship rather than an acknowledgement (Rivera, 2018). The latter case, if reciprocal, corresponds to the ethically debatable Hardy-Littlewood axioms of collaboration (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2013).

In brief, spousal nepotism may occur to ensure mutual career progression or intellectual advancement via systematic and reciprocal co-authorship in all or most publications of both spouses (Creamer, 1999; Olesen et al., 2018). The same applies to parents who attempt to advance their children’s academic careers through their inclusion as co-authors (Rivera, 2019).

We thus believe, even though current mainstream ethical guidelines do not stipulate this requirement, that as publishing ethics become increasingly complex and stringent, and as a fail-safe measure, that authors who share authorship with spouses or kin should declare so in the COI section of their paper.

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1. [https://publicationethics.org/competinginterests](about:blank) (last accessed: October 10, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf](about:blank); [http://icmje.org/conflicts-of-interest/](about:blank): “Public trust in the scientific process and the credibility of published articles depend in part on how transparently conflicts of interest are handled during the planning, implementation, writing, peer review, editing, and publication of scientific work.” (December, 2019; last accessed: October 10, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/white-paper-on-publication-ethics/](about:blank): “Conflicts of interest in publishing can be defined as conditions in which an individual holds conflicting or competing interests that could bias editorial decisions. Conflicts of interest may be only potential or perceived, or they may be factual. Personal, political, financial, academic, or religious considerations can affect objectivity in numerous ways.” (May 4, 2018; last updated: July, 2020; last accessed: October 10, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)