Fall 2011

The Story of Co

by David A. Kenny

As relationship researchers, we study all sorts of relationships. Sophia Jowett and Ben Jackson have each studied coach-athlete dyads, Glenn Adams has studied enemies in Ghana, Sam Gosling has studied human-canine relationships, and Jonathan Cohen has studied para-social relationships a person has with a fictional character. In a Journal of Personality and Social Psychology paper, I even investigated the fictional relationship between Norm and Cliff from the television show Cheers. However, the relationship between coauthors has not been given much study. This is very surprising as this type of relationship is critical for our own success, as well as for scientific progress.

The most common type of co-authorship is dyadic, about 40 percent according to Nemeth and Goncalo (2005), which is greater than the 32 percent for solo authored papers. Also, there is evidence that the trend is toward work becoming increasingly collaborative. If we think of some of the most important work in our field, co-authored papers and books come to mind: Hazan and Shaver, Spitzberg and Cupach, Berscheid and Walster, Baxter and Wilmot, and Thibault and Kelley, to name just a few. Of the most cited papers in the Journal of Personal and Social Relationships, 5 of the top 10 are two- authored papers, the most highly cited being Rusbult and Buunk (1993). I bet if you check your vitae, you will see that most of your co-authored papers are with just one other person. For me, about half of my papers have one co-author.

One thing inherent in co-authorship is that unlike the other "co's" such as: cohabitation, co-conspirator, copilot, and coworker, being a coauthor is not a relationship between equals, no matter what might say be said. Authors are always listed in an order, and despite what any footnote says, one person is the first author and the other is the second. Being first author is a big deal and do not let anyone, especially your major advisor, tell you anything different. Second authors, despite good intentions, often get the short end of the stick. The first author almost always gets more credit and more of the goodies gained from publication. In fact, this has been quantified, and in some systems the first author is given three times more credit than the second author.

Sometimes it can even happen that a second author works harder than the first author. On a paper I wrote with Bella DePaulo, she was second author, but she largely wrote the paper, she gathered the new data for that paper, and she battled the editor, Bob Sternberg, to get the paper into *Psychological Bulletin*, after it had been rejected by

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. How did Bella end up being the second author? We had agreed to co- author two papers and take turns being first author and she was first author on the first paper and second on the second. Although it is important to agree on order of authorship early in the process, sometimes circumstances change and prior commitments make it difficult to change the order of authorship. In retrospect I feel guilty about what happened, but at the time it never crossed my mind that we should reverse the order of authorship. Things do have a way of equaling out. I have many second-authored papers, where I have done the bulk of the work (or at least I feel that way).

Like any relationship, coauthors can have a breakup. I have twice "dumped" a coauthor, and both times it has been most unpleasant for me, and I imagine even worse for my dumped ex-coauthor. Other times, I have bitten the bullet and not ditched a lazy co-author, when perhaps I should have. I remember a few other times, while editing a manuscript I have added a minor thanks to someone in the acknowledgement section of the paper or in a footnote, only to realize later that the person already was a coauthor. They had contributed so little that I had forgotten they were my co-author. Then, there was a case of someone who was my secret coauthor without my knowing. The nameless person, who was up for tenure, sent off a paper to a major journal listing me as a co-author, and I had no knowledge of the paper. Fortunately, my "co-author" sent me a copy of the paper, and when I requested it, took my name off. Perhaps even stranger, is that I once met a fellow who insisted we had written a paper together and we never had.

There are clear benefits to having a coauthor. Best is to find coauthors who actually like to do the stuff you hate to do. One of the reasons I love to write papers with Charles Judd or Deborah Kashy is that they are both very detail oriented and work very hard to get things right. Of course, it does not hurt that they are also both very smart and write a lot better than I do. Also, because I am a lousy data gather, I need to find people who gather their own data (more on this later). For me, one of the key functions of a coauthor is supplying the other desk to get the damn paper off my desk and onto someone else's. Perhaps the most annoying thing a coauthor can do is to return the paper, with his or her changes, in less than a week. You want conscientious coauthors but not too conscientious ones.

There are several things I hate that some co-authors do: 1) Add or delete references in the text, but not update the bibliography, 2) Cite themselves needlessly. 3) Edit the wrong version of the paper, or edit the paper when they should know that I have not finish editing, 4) Says "Rewrite" or "I do not like this part" without making changes or specific suggestions, 5) Adds a proposed citation that reads "xxxx", 6) Keeping the paper for months, saying they are working on it, but

clearly they have not, and 7) They are responsible for an entire section of the paper but write only a few short sentences. I have to admit, I have been guilty of doing all of these things, especially the very last one.

To see an example of authors who were exasperated by a coauthor not finishing an assignment, check out Chapters 8 and 9 of the book *Unobtrusive Measures* by Webb et al (1966). They gave up waiting for Donald Campbell to write those chapters, and they decided to include only the chapter title and an opening quote, but no text!

How do you find a coauthor? It is a little like finding a date. One of my colleagues found a coauthor at a bar during a conference. Of course, people find most collaborators who work with them as students, postdocs, supervisors, or colleagues. People sometimes write papers with a sibling (e.g., the Fiskes) and I have written one with my daughter. People often write papers with their spouse, e.g., the Sarasons and the Arons, a thought that does not appeal much to me. If I wrote a paper with my spouse, then who would I complain to about my indolent, apathetic and obtuse coauthor? Earlier I mentioned that I need others to collect data. Of course, my students have been my major source, but I have often sent "cold" letters to people requesting data. The first dataset that I obtained was from Timothy Curry at Ohio State when I was a graduate student and Timothy was coauthor, actually first author, on the paper. I milked that dataset nicely, using it three more times, once some 25 years later. I once found a coauthor after giving a talk at a conference. Zipora Shechtman heard me speak, after the talk we planned a study, and she did all of the data gathering work in Israel.

You might be tempted to seek out a coauthor to take advantage of the halo effect. If you can coauthor a paper with someone famous, perhaps some of the fame of that person will shine on you. No doubt such a phenomenon occurs. One problem with coauthoring papers with famous people is very often they are too busy and they do little or no to work on your paper. So, you end up doing almost everything. I remember once writing a paper with someone eminent who contributed almost nothing except to suggest adding a few sentences here and there. When the paper came back after review, the reviewers mainly wanted us to take out those sentences. Also the fame of a famous coauthor may shine so brightly, that no one will even notice you. All too often in two-authored papers, the less senior or renowned person gets little or no credit even if the celebrity is the second author.

However, contrast effects can sometimes occur. If you write a good paper with someone who had a less than stellar reputation, you might get even more of the credit. I will never forget a comment made by Tom Pettigrew. After we heard a social psychologist, who had written a well-known coauthored textbook, give a boring and virtually incomprehensible talk, Tom told me

he now had an increased respect for the speaker's coauthor. No doubt after reading this column, your opinion of Reuben Baron will have been greatly enhanced.