Sheffield Hallam University

Publications by proxy: misuse of authorship in doctoral research

JACKSON, Debra, KORNHABER, Rachel, BOND, Carmel <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9945-8577>, WATSON, Adrianna L, LOPEZ, Violeta and CLEARY, Michelle

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/38075/

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

JACKSON, Debra, KORNHABER, Rachel, BOND, Carmel, WATSON, Adrianna L, LOPEZ, Violeta and CLEARY, Michelle (2026). Publications by proxy: misuse of authorship in doctoral research . Nurse Education Today: 107467. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

TITLE PAGE

Title: Publications by Proxy: Misuse of Authorship in Doctoral Research

Running title: Publications by Proxy

Manuscript type: Commentary

Authors:

Debra **JACKSON**, AO, RN, PhD, Susan Wakil School of Nursing, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2006. ORCID: ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5252-5325 E: debra.jackson@sydney.edu.au

Rachel **KORNHABER** RN, PhD, Adelaide University, South Australia. Email: rachel.kornhaber@adelaide.edu.au. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6556-6775

Carmel **BOND,** RN, PhD, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK. ORCID ID 0000-0002-9945-8577 email: cbond1@shu.ac.uk

Adrianna **WATSON,** RN, PhD, Brigham Young University, Utah, USA. ORCID ID 0000-0002-0134-0520 email: Adrianna.watson@byu.edu

Violeta **LOPEZ** RN, PhD, School of Nursing and Midwifery, International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka, ORCID iD 0000-0001-8844-0331 Email. Violeta.lopez@iihsciences.edu.lk

Michelle **CLEARY RN, PhD. Professor, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health, University of Technology Sydney. **E: Michelle.Cleary-1@uts.edu.au ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1453-4850 ***Proofs and corresponding author

Conflicts of interest: None to declare.

Funding support: Nil.

Data Availability: The data underlying this article are available in the article.

Ethics Statement: This paper uses existing published data; no Human Research Ethics approval is required.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): The authors used Microsoft Copilot and Grammarly to assist with language editing, grammatical correction, readability, and the flow and clarity of the manuscript. The intellectual content, concepts, analysis, interpretation, arguments, and original scholarly writing were conceived and developed by the authors. All suggestions generated by Microsoft Copilot were critically reviewed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, incorporated by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript and its conclusions.

Highlights

- Publications by proxy challenges supervisory entitlement
- Power imbalances may enable coercive authorship
- Authorship misuse undermines doctoral scholarship
- Transparent authorship safeguards HDR candidates

Abstract

Background: Authorship plays a central role in academic recognition, accountability, and career progression. In doctoral research, however, authorship practices may be shaped by supervisory hierarchies and unequal power relations. While coercive and honorary authorship have been widely discussed, less attention has been paid to situations in which supervisory status itself is treated as justification for authorship.

Contemporary issue: This commentary introduces the concept of "publications by proxy" to describe the inappropriate claiming of authorship on doctoral students' outputs based primarily on supervisory position, institutional authority, or access to resources rather than substantive intellectual contribution. Such practices may include expectations of automatic authorship, coercive authorship negotiations, misrepresentation of contributions, and the appropriation of doctoral students' work in publications or media engagement. These dynamics are particularly concerning given the dependence of doctoral candidates on supervisors for progression, mentorship and future opportunities.

Discussion: We examine how power asymmetries within doctoral education can create conditions in which authorship becomes a site of control rather than a transparent reflection of intellectual labour. Existing authorship frameworks and contribution statements may be insufficient safeguards when doctoral candidates feel unable to question or contest claims made by senior academics. We argue that supervision, mentorship and institutional oversight do not in themselves justify authorship. Practical strategies are proposed to support authorship integrity, including early written agreements, clarification of data ownership and publication processes, and access to independent institutional advice when disputes arise.

Conclusions: Treating supervision as a proxy for authorship undermines research integrity, distorts scholarly contribution, and risks normalising exploitative practices within doctoral

education. Greater attention to authorship ethics, transparency, and power relations is needed to protect doctoral candidates and preserve trust in academic knowledge production.

Keywords: Authorship**,** Mentors**,** Doctoral nursing students, Research ethics**,** Power relations

Publications by Proxy: Misuse of Authorship in Doctoral Research

1. Introduction

Authorship is the currency of academic life, conferring credit, accountability, and professional legitimacy. While collaborative contributions involving multiple parties are expected, authorship must reflect substantive intellectual input rather than positional authority. However, in practice, this principle is not always upheld. We draw attention to an under-recognised form of authorship misuse that we term "publications by proxy". By this, we refer to the claiming of authorship on doctoral outputs based primarily on supervisory position, institutional affiliation, or access to resources, rather than on the demonstratable intellectual contribution required for authorship. While coercive, honorary and ghost authorship have been discussed previously (Kennedy et al., 2014), the concept of 'publications by proxy' specifically captures situations in which a supervisory position is treated as a surrogate for intellectual contribution.

This commentary does not suggest that supervisors should be excluded from authorship if they meet accepted criteria. Supervisors frequently make substantial intellectual contributions through conceptual development, methodological refinement, interpretation, critical revision, and scholarly mentorship. Rather, our concern is with assumptions of entitlement based solely on supervisory status.

2. Writing, authorship, and doctoral formation

Doctoral education is not only the production of new knowledge, but also the formation of scholarly identity, and writing sits at the centre of this process. Doctoral writing is a complex, iterative, and developmental process through which candidates move from novice to recognised contributors within a scholarly community (Waite et al., 2025). Through writing, doctoral candidates develop their capacity to conceptualise problems, analyse data, construct

arguments, and position themselves within disciplinary conversations (Jackson et al 2021). Authorship, therefore, is not merely a technical or procedural matter; it is a key marker of intellectual ownership, contribution, and scholarly voice. Knowledge production is never neutral, and the recognition of scholarly contribution is shaped by broader systems of institutional and epistemic power (Jackson et al., 2026).

The attribution of authorship carries particular significance. For doctoral candidates, being recognised as an author reflects both the labour and the intellectual work required to generate and communicate their research. It also plays a critical role in establishing credibility, confidence, and academic trajectory. When authorship is misattributed, appropriated, or claimed without substantive contribution, it does more than distort the research record. It undermines the developmental purpose of doctoral training by disrupting the relationship between intellectual work, writing, and recognition. As such, authorship practices in doctoral research cannot be understood solely as matters of compliance with guidelines or policy. They are integral to the ethical formation of scholars and to the integrity of academic knowledge production. It is within this context that practices such as publications by proxy require careful scrutiny.

3. Power asymmetry and the instrumentalisation of doctoral candidates

While mentorship is widely recognised as central to doctoral success, including the development of research capability and scholarly identity (Cleary et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2025), these relationships are also characterised by inherent power asymmetries that may leave students vulnerable when expectations, roles, or boundaries are unclear. Supervisors occupy a position of both formal and expert power; they influence progression, access to resources, authorship decisions, and professional opportunities while also shaping doctoral candidates' development through disciplinary knowledge, methodological expertise, and

scholarly standing. Structurally, doctoral candidates remain dependent on these relationships for completion and career advancement. Although such asymmetry is not inherently problematic and is often necessary for effective mentorship, it can create conditions in which power is applied unevenly and, at times, misused.

These dynamics are further complicated when supervisory relationships are strained or are not healthy. In circumstances of tension, disagreement, or hostility within supervisory teams, doctoral candidates may be inadvertently drawn into conflicts that are not of their making. Rather than being supported as developing scholars, students may be positioned within competing allegiances, expected to align with particular supervisors, or exposed to covert or overt pressure regarding authorship, data use, or publication decisions. In such contexts, the doctoral candidate's work and, at times, the candidate themselves may be instrumentalised within broader interpersonal or institutional disputes. Authorship and publication can become proxy sites through which these tensions are enacted, with decisions about inclusion, exclusion, or order reflecting relational dynamics rather than scholarly contribution. In some academic cultures, expectations of collegiality may discourage doctoral candidates from questioning problematic authorship practices, particularly where critique risks being interpreted as disloyalty or disruption (Jackson et al., 2026)

The individualised and hierarchical nature of doctoral education has been critiqued for reinforcing control, ownership, and competition in knowledge production (Melino & Louie-Poon, 2025), conditions that may enable authorship to function as a site of power rather than a reflection of scholarly contribution. The student, who is least able to contest these dynamics, may experience uncertainty, coercion, or reputational risk, particularly where disagreement among supervisors is unresolved.

Beyond formal hierarchy, these dynamics are also enacted through everyday supervisory practices, such as feedback, recognition, and decisions about authorship, shaping whose voice is heard and whose contribution is recognized (Watson et al., 2025). Power within these relationships is not limited to structural authority; it is also expressed through subtle influences on what counts as legitimate knowledge and intellectual ownership (Melino & Louie-Poon, 2026), as well as through institutional norms that shape whose contributions are recognised and whose authority is amplified (Jackson et al., 2026). Supervisors, often unintentionally, hold sway over a doctoral candidate's confidence in asserting their ideas. When this authority is not exercised reflexively, supervision can shift from guidance to control (Jackson et al., 2021), limiting epistemic agency and normalising unequal benefit. Ethical supervision, therefore, demands transparency, dialogue, and fairness in authorship, data use, and representation (ICMJE, 2026).

4. Appropriation and abuse of authorship practices

The power differential between students and supervisors means that clear safeguards are essential to prevent the misappropriation and abuse of authorship practices. In our experience, and based on anecdotal evidence, a particular concern is the inappropriate claiming of authorship by proxy, in which individuals assert entitlement to publications based on positional authority as supervisors (current or former), affiliation, use of resources, or seniority, including position rather than on substantive scholarly contribution.

A further concern relates to how authorship contributions are subsequently reported in published works. For example, in response to increasing scrutiny, many journals now require statements outlining individual contributions. These statements may include percentage estimates or use of a structured taxonomy such as the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT). While these statements are intended to enhance transparency and accountability, the

mechanisms may be reduced to procedural formalities rather than functioning as ethical checkpoints. In such situations, contribution statements may become subject to negotiations heavily influenced by hierarchy, collegiality, or expediency rather than accurate accounts of intellectual labour. Doctoral candidates, in particular, may feel unable to question, clarify, or contest contribution claims due to dependence for successful completion of doctoral work.

Unfortunately, such practices occur across the spectrum of experience, from early-career researchers to seasoned scholars, either as perpetrators seeking to inflate publication records or lacking training in authorship ethics, or as targets of more senior colleagues exercising positional power. When this occurs, authorship is misrepresented, and scholarly contributions are distorted. As such, this may compromise principles of both veracity and fidelity between the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship and the broader scholarly community. When normalised, transparency mechanisms such as percentage contribution statements or CReDiT roles risk being co-opted as instruments that legitimise, rather than challenge, problematic authorship practices. The sociocultural normalisation of misrepresentation has no place in research, as it undermines scholarly rigour and erodes trust in the scientific process. Authorship is not an entitlement nor is it a matter of seniority, supervision, institutional position, or access to resources. It is a clear declaration of intellectual contribution, responsibility, and accountability for a research output (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2019).

Consistent with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018) (and arguably the ICJME), institutions have a responsibility to ensure that supervisory authority is not misused in ways that compromise the integrity of authorship or exploit power imbalances in higher degree by research (HDR), including doctoral (PhD) training. A transgression of responsible research conduct occurs when supervisors claim authorship of HDR students' publications on the basis of an assumed entitlement arising from their supervisory role,

institutional status, or control over resources, rather than from meeting accepted authorship criteria. The Code notes that authorship must be based on substantial intellectual contribution and that positions of authority do not, of themselves, justify authorship. While supervision, mentoring, and oversight are integral to HDR training, they do not automatically meet authorship requirements. Failure to distinguish supervision from authorship risks misrepresenting contributions and undermining accountability in the research record.

5. Coercive or abusive authorship in the PhD relationship

There are a number of ways in which a PhD student may be bullied, abused, or coerced within a supervisory relationship. One such example involves a supervisor abruptly withdrawing from supervision via email, without prior discussion, warning, or an opportunity for remediation, only to subsequently indicate that they would nevertheless be happy to be included as an author on any publications arising from the student's work. Such actions are particularly troubling. The sudden termination of supervision can place a student in a vulnerable position, compromising academic progress, funding, visa status, and wellbeing. Moreover, when a student is faced with the supervisor's expectation of continued authorship, despite the supervisor having relinquished their supervisory responsibilities while still claiming rights to the project's intellectual outputs, and given the inherent power imbalance in supervisory relationships, such conduct may function as a form of coercion, leaving the student with limited choices to contest authorship claims or to challenge the fairness of the arrangement. This behaviour shows how authorship can be misused and leveraged, and how student work can be misappropriated. One example is a supervisor asserting automatic authorship on all publications arising from a student's PhD, regardless of intellectual contribution and without substantive involvement in the research or writing. This may involve claiming institutional ownership to imply entitlement to authorship rather than stewardship, that is, supervision responsibilities.

When these (and other such) practices occur, the core principles of research integrity, including honesty, transparency, accountability, and fairness, are undermined, and this may also constitute misrepresentation of scholarly contribution. In addition, the HDR student who is dependent on supervisors for academic progression is at particular risk of exploitation and retaliation. Authorship must be based on intellectual contribution, including substantial involvement in the conception or design of the work, data acquisition or analysis, and meaningful participation in drafting or critically revising the manuscript. The supervisory role alone, in which supervisors are allocated a workload as part of their responsibilities, does not constitute an automatic right to authorship or control over student-generated research outputs. In nursing doctoral research, students often study complex, distressing, and highly sensitive themes like patient trauma, illness experiences, and life-limiting conditions; thus, these coercive tactics can further erode candidates' developing scholarly confidence and ethical voice (Bond et al., 2025). Institutions, therefore, bear a responsibility to clearly distinguish supervision from authorship and to provide confidential mechanisms for HDR candidates to raise concerns. Failure to address coercive supervisory authorship risks normalising exploitative practices that sadly occur and compromise both student wellbeing and the integrity of the publishing process.

6. Other associated presentation of work

Issues can arise when a supervisor gives presentations or engages with the media about a PhD student’s work without informing or consulting the student. This includes giving interviews, commentaries, podcasts, blog posts, or press statements without seeking the student’s (or other supervisors') consent or sharing the content in advance. While such actions may be presented as well-intentioned or aimed at promoting the research, they raise significant ethical concerns when undertaken unilaterally by a supervisor. In HDR research, the student is often the owner and intellectual driver of the work and best placed to speak to the data,

analysis, and conclusions (with appropriate training and support). Without an alternative arrangement, the lead or corresponding author, frequently the PhD candidate, should be regarded as the primary spokesperson for the publication deserving any credit for their work.

When a supervisor misappropriates this role, this may distort perceptions of contribution, marginalise the student's scholarship and authorship, and appropriate the student's work for the supervisor's own reputational benefit. Given the inherent power imbalance in supervisory relationships, students may feel unable to challenge such actions, even when their work is misrepresented, or their role marginalised.

This may also compromise trust within the research supervisory team and may expose the student to professional risk, including reputational damage, misattribution of ideas, or inconsistencies with the published work. When supervisors use media exposure to enhance their profiles without regard for authorship boundaries or HDR students' consent, this risks representing misuse of supervisory authority rather than responsible stewardship, mentorship, and supervision.

Importantly, such behaviour is different from similar actions by academic peers. When undertaken by a supervisor, this can amount to appropriation, normalising the idea that seniority or supervisory status confers ownership of a student's work. This undermines authorship integrity, erodes the educational purpose of supervision, and conflicts with principles of fairness, transparency, and respect that underpin responsible research conduct.

7. HDR student and supervisors' movement

With staff moving to other institutions, including abroad, students may relocate with them to pursue their higher-degree research studies. The issues around authorship are further complicated if the supervision team is changed, even when the team are seasoned scholars. Governance arrangements can vary across institutions and geographic regions. Ownership,

access, and rights relating to student data and associated publications may need to be carefully reviewed when staff or students relocate, as ethics approvals, funder or scholarship requirements, and frameworks may change. It is therefore important to consult the relevant policies, agreements, and ethics conditions of the employing institution.

The role of the "chief" or "lead investigator" is, however, important. There may be stipulations on who can analyse or publish the data, and there may be a need for amendments once relocated, as, for example, different requirements may apply (Cleary et al., 2013). For HDR students and staff in Australia, for example, ownership of written work, research data, and publications varies according to institutional intellectual property policies, employment contracts, funding agreements, and ethics approvals. Regardless of moving from one institution to the next, HDR students retain copyright in their theses, research data, and research outputs.

8. Some rules of thumb for PhD candidates to prevent exploitation and protect authorship integrity

To mitigate the risk of authorship integrity issues and coercive supervisory practices, PhD candidates are encouraged to take proactive steps to clarify ownership and publication expectations early and throughout their candidature. This includes documenting the order of authors and agreed specifics relating to authorship criteria in writing, revisiting these agreements at key project milestones to ensure transparency and mutual accountability, and aligning them with established recommendations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors criteria, which require substantial contributions to the work, participation in drafting or revising the manuscript, approval of the final version, and accountability for all aspects of the research (ICMJE, 2026).

At the commencement of the student's candidature, seek written clarification through supervisory agreements, project documentation, or institutional policy regarding who owns, controls, and may access the research data generated in the project. Where relevant, this should include the university, supervisors, employers, funders, and industry partners. Reviewing these arrangements as the project evolves helps ensure they remain consistent with and compliant with the conditions of the approved ethics protocol.

Establish what approvals or permissions (e.g. supervisory sign-off, funder approval, institutional review) are required before research outputs can be disseminated. Clarifying this early helps prevent the retrospective imposition of conditions that may be used to exert pressure over authorship or publication decisions. Ensure these requirements are documented in writing and that timelines for review and approval are clearly defined to avoid unnecessary delays or gatekeeping (ICMJE, 2026).

Aim to complete analyses and submit manuscripts prior to major supervisory changes, project closure, or the end of your candidature. This can reduce vulnerability to later authorship disputes arising from PhD students' work (Albert & Wager, 2003). However, where this is not possible, document contributions and proposed authorship at key milestones and update these requirements accordingly. Importantly, students should not be pressured to gift or grant authorship as a condition of progression, supervision, access to data, or support.

PhD candidates and supervisors should also be aware that supervision does not confer automatic entitlement to authorship, and that institutional policies and governance structures exist to support ethical conduct, not to legitimise coercion or exploitation (Grove, 2026). Seeking independent advice early (e.g. from senior academics, graduate research offices, ombudspersons, or research integrity advisors) is an appropriate and responsible step when concerns arise (Strange, 2008).

9. Conclusion

Inappropriate authorship is a significant problem among scholarly publications. Publications by proxy, with particular emphasis on the misuse of authorship in supervisory relationships, directly conflict with accepted codes and may constitute research misconduct, including falsification of contributions or misuse of authority. We note that this may disproportionately affect HDR candidates, who depend on supervisors for academic progression. For good supervisory relationships, however, a skilled and experienced team (content, methods) that works with integrity is required to safeguard the student, research process, and dissemination activities and to facilitate collegial relationships and provide research mentorship. Treating supervision as a proxy for authorship is inconsistent with responsible research conduct and, if left unaddressed, normalises coercive practices towards students and other team supervisors, eroding trust in both supervision and the institution. The conditions under which knowledge is produced are themselves ethical concerns. Authorship practices that silence, marginalise, or appropriate doctoral scholars' intellectual labour therefore undermine not only research integrity but also the ethical foundations of academic knowledge production.

References

Albert T, & Wager E, on behalf of COPE Council. (2003). How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers. https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2018.1.1

Bond, C., Watson, A., & Jackson, D. (2025). Addressing potential researcher distress in nurse-led research: ethical considerations and practical strategies. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 81(4), 2159-2164. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.16799

Cleary, M., Jackson, D., & Walter, G. (2013), Editorial: Research data ownership and dissemination: is it too simple to suggest that 'possession is nine-tenths of the law'?. Journal of Clinical Nursing, 22, 2087-2089. https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.12140

Cleary, M., Thapa, D. K., West, S., Lopez, V., Williamson, M., Sahay, A., & Kornhaber, R. (2023). Mentoring students in doctoral nursing programs: A scoping review. Journal of Professional Nursing, 45, 71–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2023.01.010

Grove, J. (2026). Supervisors claiming co-authorship of PhD papers 'form of fraud'. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/supervisors-claiming-co-authorship-phd-papers-form-fraud

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (2026). Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. https://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf

Jackson, D., Davidson, P. M., & Usher, K. (2021). Successful doctoral training in nursing and health sciences: A guide for supervisors, students and advisors. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87946-4

Jackson, D., Power, T., Moorley, C., Wilson, D., West, R., Jones, D., & McCormack, B. (2026). Justice-oriented scholarship: Naming and framing a critical imperative in nursing. Journal of Advanced Nursing. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.70585

Kennedy, M.S., Barnsteiner, J., & Daly, J. (2014). Honorary and ghost authorship in nursing publications. Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 46(6),416-422. https://doi.org/10.1111/jnu.12093

Melino, K., & Louie-Poon, S. (2026). Operationalising anti-oppression in doctoral nursing education. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 82(5), 4425-4430. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.17042

National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Universities Australia. (2019). Authorship: A guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. Commonwealth of Australia.

National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Universities Australia. (2018). Australian code for the responsible conduct of research. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-code-responsible-conduct-research-2018#block-views-block-file-attachments-content-block-1

Strange, K. (2008). Authorship: why not just toss a coin? American Journal of Physiology-Cell Physiology, 295(3), C567–C575. https://doi.org/10.1152/ajpcell.00208.2008

Waite, M. A., Deane, M., Callaghan, H., Aveyard, H., & Lascelles, K. (2026). Validating the doctoral and academic writing in nursing, midwifery and allied health profession survey questionnaire for writing group interventions. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 82(5), 4393-4407. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.70290

Watson, A.L., Bond, C., Aveyard, H., Smith, G.D., & Jackson, D. (2025). How does mentorship influence doctoral nursing education? An integrative review. Journal of Advanced Nursing. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.70004