Cooperation, Coauthorship and Alphabetical Name Ordering

Abstract: Our analysis shows that between 1911 and 1920, 99 per cent of the papers were single-authored, but that number had decreased to only 28 per cent by the 2001–10 period. Today, close to 50 per cent of contributions are the result of cooperation between two authors, and the number of contributions listing two or more authors has increased, suggesting that division of labour has become more important. In an environment in which cooperation is increasing, it might be asked whether the process of deciding author order could raise issues. Looking at published articles in 1984–8 and 2004–8, we observe that 90.6 per cent of the articles have alphabetical name ordering. However, the probability of non–alphabetical name ordering increases substantially for articles with three or more authors.

Keywords: alphabetical name ordering; coauthorship; cooperation

Having found such a superstar market and seeing that so many authors are able to publish only once in *AER*, one might wonder just how much cooperation there is in academia? According to Bruno S. Frey (2010: 3), “modern scientific activity is based on a marked division of labor. The scientific production process has increasingly been divided into neatly separated steps. For instance, in economics, it has become customary that a young scholar, usually a graduate student, collects the data, a second scholar undertakes the econometric analysis, and a third scholar interprets the results and writes the paper. As a consequence, single authorship has become an exception, and an increasing number of papers have three or even four authors.” Besides specialization, other factors may also explain such tendencies as a “greater pressure to publish, and even a decrease in the willingness of economists to assist each other without receiving authorship credit” (Aidan Hollis 2001: 504).

Figure 3.1 uses pie charts to show the development of cooperation over time in authoring *AER* papers. In line with Frey’s observations, we find that single-authored contributions have significantly decreased. Between 1911 and 1920, 99 per cent of the papers were single-authored, a number that had decreased to only 28 per cent by the 2001 to 2010 period. Hence, whereas in the 1980s, over 50 per cent of the papers were single-authored, the picture has changed drastically over the past ten years. Currently, close to 50 per cent of contributions are the result of cooperation between two authors, and the number of contributions listing two or three (or even more) authors has increased. During the 1960s, in contrast, less than 1 per cent of the papers were authored by three or more authors, but by the 2001 to 2010 period, this figure had increased to 22 per cent. Frey (2010: 3) criticizes this situation on the grounds that each author “formally acknowledges full responsibility for the content of the paper. However, realistically none of the individual authors can confidently judge whether the other authors have done their work carefully and sincerely. (...) Each participant in a particular scientific endeavour has to trust that the others do their work carefully. It is generally assumed that reliance on trust is well taken, but there is certainly no guarantee, especially when all the authors are under strong publication pressure.” He also points out that “[t]he division of labor has led to a more efficient and rapid output of scientific results but favors partial views and discourages comprehensive considerations” (2). Such a situation is substantially different from that described by