Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization 147 (2018) 41–57

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jebo

Collaboration incentives: Endogenous selection into single and coauthorships by surname initial in economics and management

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 July 2017
Received in revised form
20 December 2017
Accepted 1 January 2018

JEL classification:
J00
J30
C72

Keywords:
Alphabetic order effect
Citations
Coauthorships
Matching
Non-transferable utility

ABSTRACT

Many prior studies suggest that default alphabetical ordering of coauthors in economics confers disproportionate professional advantages on those with an early surname initial because of the greater prominence it gives to the first author. However, these studies do not consider that authors select into coauthorships according to the incentives identified. We develop a model of endogenous selection into single and coauthorships around the principle that no one wants to be second author when they expect to provide the larger contribution (i.e., are of higher "quality"). We test it with authorship data from economics, with management (which does not use default alphabetical ordering) as a benchmark. We predict for economics that lower quality authors with an early surname initial would be less desirable coauthors, whereas higher quality authors with a late initial would have a lower desire to coauthor. Most desired are early initial authors of high quality, who are therefore advantaged in forming high-quality collaborations. The combined effect predicts citation rank increases with surname initial for single-authored papers and decreases for coauthored. We find both effects for economics when compared to management and absolutely. Our findings indicate that part of the advantage enjoyed by early surname initial authors in economics could be due to the higher ability among them having more incentive-compatible collaborators, rather than merely to greater prominence.

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1. Introduction

Coauthoring is increasingly prevalent in many of the sciences, including economics (Hudson, 1996; Torgler and Piatti, 2013), marketing (Brown et al., 2006), and finance (Brown et al., 2011). This trend could be due to a number of reasons. Authors could be exploiting the gains from specialization within increasingly specialized fields, hedging against the risks of rejection or delayed review, and/or changing the tradeoff between quantity and quality (Hudson, 1996).[1] Such collaboration

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[1] See Bruno (2014) for a review of theories of coauthorship and Weber (2016) for a review of the empirical work on the alphabetical ordering convention in the social and natural sciences.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.01.001
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is also facilitated by today's decreased communication (transaction) costs resulting from the greater ease of travel and the use of electronic correspondence and research methods.

One important aspect of coauthoring is the order in which contributor names are listed on title pages and elsewhere, which usually follows one of two conventions: alphabetically by surname or by relative contributions. Economics is among the fields that uses alphabetical ordering. 86 percent of coauthored papers in economics journals for five major journals for the last two decades listed authors alphabetically (Engers et al., 1999), as did also 92 percent of the top-three finance journals (Brown et al., 2011). In contrast, only 30 percent of papers published in the major biological journals use alphabetical listings.[2]

This difference in citation convention has important consequences for both researchers and research. In terms of recognition, being first author has tended to increase salience and attributions of credit in the past (Nudelman and Landers, 1972) because it has been until recently long-standing practice for citation indexes to include only the names of the first author, and because papers with three or more authors are often shortened with the first-author et al. rule within papers (Van Praag and Van Praag, 2008). Perhaps as a consequence, papers whose first authors have surnames beginning with a letter coming early in the alphabet (hereafter, early initial authors) receive more citations (Huang, 2015). In economics, for instance, authors whose surname begin with A are significantly more likely to have their abstracts viewed and downloaded than authors whose surname begins with Z (Efthyvoulou, 2008).

Being listed as first author would then also have financial repercussions; there is little disagreement that more citations lead to higher pay (Hamermesh et al., 1982; Hilmer et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2001; Sauer, 1988). More importantly, and perhaps as a result of the advantages mentioned above, early initial authors are promoted more quickly. For example, in the top–10 U.S. departments of economics, early initial authors receive more rapid promotions and have a greater likelihood of tenure, as well as of such honors as fellowship in the Econometric Society, the Clark Medal, and even the Nobel Prize (Einav and Yariv, 2006). Efthyvoulou (2008) confirms this higher rate of promotions in a larger sample of highly ranked research departments in the U.S. and U.K. In psychology, on the other hand, authors are listed by relative contribution; surname initial does not affect promotions (Einav and Yariv, 2006). The evidence for disproportionate advantage to early surname initial authors in economics has motivated the development of policy correctives such as publicly observable randomization of authorship order (Ray and Roberson, 2018).

The literature also offers evidence that authors may react strategically to these incentives. For example, Efthyvoulou (2008) demonstrates that authors manipulate their names to gain precedence, using prefixes like "de" and suppressing prefixes like "van." Likewise, Torgler and Piatti (2013), in their analysis of publications in the *American Economic Review* (a top-3 journal), identify a strong negative relationship between the number of coauthors and the probability of alphabetical name ordering, which may reflect the involved author's concern for visibility. Such awareness may also be indicated by van Praag and van Praag's (2008) finding that higher inequality of author reputations increases the probability of nonalphabetical ordering, while higher coauthor reputations lower that probability. Ordering by surname has been found to affect endogenous selection into coauthorship. For instance, Einav and Yariv (2006) find that although the relative frequency of author surname initials in single-authored, two-authored, and three-authored papers does not differ significantly, late initial authors are significantly less likely to participate in four and five author projects.

In summary, the prior empirical literature seems to have largely established that the alphabetic ordering convention confers disproportionate professional advantages to authors with an early surname initial because they are likely to enjoy greater prominence as first authors. This literature has generally assumed that authors do not endogenously select into coauthorships by the alphabetical incentives identified, and in the case where it has (e.g., Einav and Yariv (2006)), not by author "quality" as measured by citation rank. We address this omission by testing for the possibility that researchers coauthor or single-author based upon the expected or actual contributions of potential coauthors and their own share of the total credit, based upon surname initial position in the alphabet.

We assume the main result of this literature; that in the context of a default alphabetical ordering, second authors lose credit share to first authors for the quality of the paper. However, we also note that apart from the reasonable presumption of competitive outside options to any particular coauthoring opportunity, all authors have a fixed single-author outside option that is only a function of their own quality. Hence, we predict that the second author would only have accepted a lesser share of the credit for the quality of the paper if the first author with the earlier surname initial contributed more to the quality of the paper to compensate the second author for the lost credit.[3] We also assume, in line with the previous literature (Engers et al., 1999), that observers can be more certain that the first author contributed more for nonalphabetically than for alphabetically ordered papers. Combining this inference about asymmetric contributions with the fixed opportunity cost for single-authoring and/or a competitive market for coauthors, we predict a larger gap between the contribution of the first and second author for nonalphabetically than alphabetically ordered papers. We use a simple two-author example to show that this belief in the greater discrepancy in the contributions of the first and the second authors breaks the symmetry that would have existed in the number and quality of incentive-compatible coauthors for alphabetical and nonalphabetically ordered authors with an early or a late surname initial. These considerations lead us to posit the following incentives:

[2] See Waltman (2012) for a ranking by alphabetization of 25 subject categories in the mathematical, social, and hard sciences, as well as the humanities.
[3] Such matches could just be more stable.

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