Making Publication Ethics Work
Geraldine S. Pearson

In 2008 I took over the editorship of Perspectives in Psychiatric Care (PPC). At the time, I was fortunate to have a structured transition, a supportive publication team at Wiley Blackwell Publishing, and support from academic leaders in my position at the university (UCONN). The first year was a time of consolidating the process, the skills, and the rhythm of editing a peer-reviewed nursing journal. I was aware of publication ethics issues but had not encountered any overt issues (that I knew).

That altered in summer 2010 when I got an urgent call from a manuscript reviewer, who happened to also be an editorial board member for PPC. She had discovered that most of the references in a research manuscript under review for publication had been falsified by systematically changing years of publication and volume numbers. One of the most glaring issues involved adding 10 years to the publication date of the DSM-IV-TR manual, which deals with diagnoses in psychiatry. Upon further review, she found that most of the references had been falsified, making the paper appear to have recent references. I agreed to follow-up.

Upon review of this submitted paper, a paper in the queue for PPC publication in the coming year, and past papers published in other Wiley-Blackwell journals, I found that the majority of references were falsified or could not be found in Pub-Med or CINAHL. It appeared that they had been falsified and fabricated.

The PPC managing editor at the time suggested that I contact the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) to consult and possibly present the case as a publication ethics violation. I learned that I had membership in COPE through Wiley-Blackwell and could make use of their website, flow-sheets, and personalized consultation. I agreed to present the case as part of an international conference call in September 2010. This began my very positive relationship with COPE.

COPE was formed in 1997 in the United Kingdom and has grown to nearly 6500 members. All members are journal editors from all disciplines and countries and large publishers who register their journals. These companies include Wiley-Blackwell, Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Palgrave Macmillan, Wolters Kluwer, and others. Non-members have access to guidelines, sample letters, and a database of cases discussed at past Council meetings.

COPE has produced some very useful information that can be used by all nursing editors who are members. This includes flowcharts covering redundant publication, plagiarism, fabricated data, changes in authorship, ghost authorship, conflicts of interest, suspected ethical concerns, reviewer misconduct, and dealing with complaints. COPE has a Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guide for Journal Editors, a Code of Conduct for Publishers, and sample letters for handling common problems.
Retraction guidelines, presentations, and other guidance are all available on the website at [www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org).

Specific COPE services include the website, an ethics audit (members only), the newsletter (published quarterly), research grant opportunities, and the annual seminar. Seminars occur in Europe, North America and in the past year, Australia. Seminars are free to members of COPE.

Editors that I speak with understand the importance of publication ethics. As editors we hold the public trust in research integrity. In 2010 there were 283 retractions in MEDLINE and many of these retractions continue to be cited in professional and scientific literature. A website that tracks scientific retractions is [http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/](http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/). I urge you all to go to this website and review the wide range of disciplines that are dealing with publication ethics issues.

These ethical violations, detailed in the website, are not limited to any particular field or discipline. As I began talking with COPE in Fall 2010, it became clear that the organization did not have a flow-sheet for dealing with my difficulty involving falsified references. In fact, COPE had not dealt previously with systematically altered references in multiple publications from a single author. It was suggested that this incident be submitted as a “case” and it was presented in September 2010. I participated in a telephone conference call with the COPE Council in London, UK. They recommended that a strong letter be sent to the author, rejecting the manuscript and strongly censoring the falsification of references. Prior to contacting COPE the PPC managing editor and I had a telephone conversation with the author, who blamed the falsified references on graduate students. While there is certainly more detail to this story that I will not detail here, ultimately, the issues expanded to include several more published papers that were retracted. The Office of Research Integrity (ORI) sanctioned the author for three years. This author currently has published manuscripts in other nursing journals that contain falsified references; these articles have not been retracted. The effects of this author’s publication misconduct continue to be far-reaching and have involved academic institutions, colleagues, graduate students, and importantly, nurses who continue to read and quote this research.

Personally, this experience influenced my editor role. It caused me to look much more carefully at all manuscripts submitted for publication to PPC. Soon after this ethical situation unfolded, Wiley-Blackwell began using plagiarism checking software (iThenticate). This is very helpful to editors as they review submissions and try to prevent ethical issues from emerging in accepted manuscripts. I have become more involved COPE, running for a Council position and being elected to this in December 2010. I would like to think that my contributions offer a unique perspective as I am the only nurse on the Council. I participate in quarterly meetings and have been elected for a three year term. In the summer, Charon Pierson and I will be giving a publication ethics workshop at the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) meeting in Montreal, Quebec.

In summary, editors from all disciplines are encountering increased numbers of ethical dilemmas in their work with journals. My story is one of many experienced by editors of all disciplines. COPE can offer an objective, peer-reviewed resource and support around publishing ethical dilemmas. For me, a very painful editorial dilemma resulted in fascinating involvement in publication ethics. I’ve learned that these issues are all too prevalent.

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