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Integrity in Publishing: Some Considerations for Dealing with Complaints about Author Misconduct

Michelle Cleary, Brenda Happell, Garry Walter

Complaints made to editors about an author's unethical behaviour relating to work submitted for publication or work that has already been published must be dealt with in accordance with The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Despite the ramifications of breaches of ethical practice, there is little published information about how complaints relating to author misconduct are managed. This paper provides an overview of the subject and will be of interest to authors and would-be authors.

Typically, complaints relating to author misconduct pertain to plagiarism, attribution of authorship, duplicate publication, concurrent submission of the same manuscript, or the resubmission of a manuscript previously rejected in the hope of securing greater sympathy from the Editor (Neal 2004). Some breaches may be committed in good faith and some of these may be due to author ignorance (Brice et al. 2009), but others may be the result of an author(s) cutting corners to obtain a competitive edge or advantage (Brice & Bligh 2004). Less common are complaints about fabricating and/or falsifying research results, which bias the professional community's knowledge base and undermine research confidence (Brewster & Greisler 2010). The prevention of author misconduct is essential to preserve the sanctity and merit of scientific literature, and fraud – irrespective of whether it is deliberate or unintentional – brings into question the very nature of research, and can damage the credibility and reputation of the author and the profession itself (Yadav & De 2013).

Probably the most common issue relating to author misconduct involves plagiarism at pre-publication stage. As a rule of thumb, we suggest that authors consider screening their work with plagiarism software before submission to avoid unintentional mistakes. Another growing issue is duplicate publication—full disclosure of all related studies and publications needs to be made at the time of submission, and previous papers should be referenced accordingly (for further guidance, see Jackson, Walter, Daly, & Cleary 2014).

COPE has developed flowcharts as guidance for manuscripts and/or published in relation to suspected cases of: redundant (duplicate) publication, plagiarism, fabricated data, attribution of authorship, undisclosed conflict of interest, ethical problems, reviewers' appropriation of an author's idea or data, and complaints against editors (for example,

<http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>). There are a number of publishing resources that also provide guidance on these matters such as the *Elsevier Publication Ethics Resource Kit: decision trees* (http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/editorshome.editors/PERK_trees) and Wiley-Blackwell *Best Practice Guidelines on Publication Ethics* (<http://www.wiley.com/bw/publicationethics/>).

For authors accused of academic fraud or misconduct, the burden to show evidence to the contrary or to demonstrate that it was an honest and/or unintentional error rests with them (Yadav & De 2013). If the author does not respond to the editor's queries, then the editor may decide to contact co-authors for an explanation or go as far as to ask the author's department, institution, or funding agency to further investigate the incident (Yadav & De 2013). Depending on the seriousness of the case, the editor may report the case to a national or an international research integrity organization that deals with issues surrounding author and/or research misconduct.

What happens when complaints are made to the editor by readers after publication? By and large, editors are responsible for their journals, and when issues relating to author misconduct are raised, then a fair and just investigation must be undertaken. At the same time, an editor's resources are not limitless. As a former editor of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* (JCI) quipped, "We are the JCI, not the FBI" (Majerus 1982, Walter & Bloch 2001). Nevertheless, due diligence by the editorial team and editor during the investigation process is necessary as inappropriate or vexatious complaints or allegations can have a significant negative impact on the author(s)' career and on the journal(s) involved. Plagiarism or a duplicate publication, for example, can be easily checked, and where there is significant overlap, a retraction of the paper is warranted. Retraction notices include the reason for the withdrawal of the paper and are publicly available on the journal website.

There are three identified potential scenarios in relation to author misconduct (Yadav & De 2013). The first involves the author providing concrete evidence to disprove the allegation. In the second, the author(s) admit to the mistake, the editor then decides on the penalty depending upon the seriousness of the misconduct, and a correction or retraction notice is issued (Yadav & De 2013). Lastly, if the author's evidence and/or explanation is not convincing, the editor may approach the department or institution to further investigate the matter, and if the evidence is inconclusive or the department is unwilling to investigate, the editor may issue a notice expressing concern directly linked to the printed article (Smith & Godlee 2005, Yadav & De 2013). An expression of concern alerts researchers, especially those undertaking systematic reviews to the suspicions and doubt held about the study (Smith & Godlee 2005).

Retraction can only occur post-publication. Currently, there is limited consensus on reporting misconduct at the pre-publication stage. Essentially, it is the editor's decision whether to notify relevant bodies (e.g., institution/funding agency) (Brewster & Greisler 2010). Clearly, editors are in difficult positions; they hear concerns about the integrity of manuscripts, respond to author(s) or others who claim that they should or should not have been included in the authorship team, and respond to complaints that a conflict of interest has not been declared when it should have been (Godlee 2004). Furthermore, peer-reviewers, editorial board members and editors generally give their time freely on a voluntary basis (Cleary, Walter, Jackson, & Daly 2013) and investigations are time consuming. In the case of an unpublished manuscript, therefore, the path of least resistance may be taken, despite standards requiring that all incidents be properly investigated (Godlee 2004).

Ultimately, author misconduct issues reflect badly on the author, their department, and potentially the journal. No journal editor wants to see a steady flow of retractions in their journal. Editors are required to ensure the quality of materials published in their journal including adherence to ethical

guidelines, publishing corrections and apologies, retracting fraudulent articles, publishing cogent criticism from the readership, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring conflict of interests are declared including their own, and dealing with complaints properly (Godlee 2004). Thankfully, unethical practices related to publication and author misconduct are the exception (Neal 2004), but increasing awareness is important especially among those new to the publishing game. To this end, it is important that we openly discuss publication misconduct within our work settings to ensure transparency, prevent gray-zone misconduct, and ensure that we and our colleagues remain up-to-date and prevent transgressions (Brice et al. 2009).

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Authors

Michelle Cleary, PhD, RN, (Corresponding Author) is an Associate Professor, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Western Sydney, NSW, Australia. Email: M.cleary@uws.edu.au.

Brenda Happell, PhD, RN, is a Professor, Central Queensland University, Institute for Health and Social Science Research, Centre for Mental Health Nursing Innovation and School of Nursing and Midwifery. Email: b.happell@cqu.edu.au.

Garry Walter, PhD, MBBS, BMedSc, FRANZCP, is Chair of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Sydney and Clinical Director, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Northern Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, NSW, Australia. Email: garry.walter@sydney.edu.au.

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