Ethical issues in publication: An editor's point of view

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Editor *European Accounting Review* (2016-2019)

PhD Forum – EAA Annual congress

Maastricht (May 11, 2016)

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Outline

- ◆ What is the problem?

- ◆ Ethical issues with authors

- ◆ Ethical issues with reviewers

- ◆ Ethical issues with editors

References (1)

- Acknowledgments: Charles Piot, co-Editor, *Comptabilité – Contrôle – Audit*, Presentation at the FNEGE workshop "Meet the Editors", December 2015

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References (2)

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◆ *Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE)* (Founded by a group of medical journal editors) (Doctrine available at http://publicationethics.org/)

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- Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers (2013): http://publicationethics.org/files/Ethical_guidelines_for_peer_reviewers_0.pdf
- What constitutes authorship (2014): http://publicationethics.org/files/Authorship_DiscussionDocument.pdf
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What is the problem?

- We hear more and more about:
  - Plagiarism
  - Redundant publication (overlapping, "salami", "slicing and dicing", self-plagiarism)
  - Data falsification or fabrication
  - Authorship issues
  - Etc.
- Damages created by the Hunton case (Malone, AH, 2015)

Survey of editors (Wager et al., JME, 2009)

- Responses from 231 editors of science journals
- 16 ethical issues
- Results:
  - Low level of concern
  - Editors confident in handling the issue
  - Problems occur less than once a year
  - 12 over 16 issues never happened
  - Editors unfamiliar with guidelines

Ethical issues (Wager et al., 2009)

Table 1 Mean ratings of editors' perceptions of the severity and frequency of various ethical issues at their journals, and their confidence in handling these issues

Issue	Severity†	Confidence‡	Frequency§	Trend¶
Redundant publication	1.19	0.70	1.39	3.43
Plagiarism	0.86	0.70	0.96	3.46
Duplicate submission	0.79	0.79	1.01	3.28
Undisclosed author conflicts of interest	0.73	0.73	0.90	3.28
Undisclosed reviewer conflicts of interest	0.69	0.71	0.94	3.08**
Gift authorship	0.67	0.51	1.08*	3.17
Disputed authorship	0.58*	0.90*	0.81	3.00**
Falsified or fabricated data	0.56	0.62	0.58	3.12**
Reviewer misconduct	0.56*	0.62	0.80	3.00**
Unethical research design or conduct	0.55	0.83*	0.70	2.98
Undisclosed commercial involvement	0.52	0.66	0.62	3.24
Ghost authorship	0.37	0.61	0.48	3.32
Image manipulation	0.30	0.69	0.47	3.34
Concerns over supplements	0.24**	1.08*	0.30**	2.97**
Concerns over advertising	0.13**	1.01*	0.20**	3.00**
Editorial interference by journal owner	0.05	1.51*	0.09	2.95**

Severity: from "Not a problem" to "A very serious problem"

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Ethical issues related to authors

- Publication pressure => "Industrialization" of research activities
  - More "collaborative" projects
  - Need to refer to clear ethical values
    - Loyalty, transparency, honesty
- Low risk of being caught. However,
  - Use of anti-plagiarism software
  - Use of the same reviewers (by two different journals)
- Key issues related to authors:
  - Research misconduct
  - Authorship issues and disputes

Research misconduct

- U.S. Office of Research Integrity (http://ori.hhs.gov/definition-misconduct)

- Research misconduct means fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results

  - (a) <u>Fabrication</u>: making up data or results and recording or reporting them

  - (b) <u>Falsification</u>: manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record

  - (c) <u>Plagiarism</u>: the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit

  - (d) Research misconduct does not include <u>honest error</u> or differences of opinion

Authorship issues

- One of most common issues (see COPE 2014, Wager et al., 2009)

- Main cases:
  - (i) individuals who claim that they deserve to be authors but have been omitted
  - (ii) individuals who have been included as authors but without their consent
  - (iii) individuals who agree to be authors but who back away from responsibility if something goes wrong
  - (iv) confusion over multiple authorship

Main questions

- <u>Who</u> can (and must) be cited as author; and who must not?

- <u>How</u> (in what order) should the list of authors be stated?

- <u>What</u> is the responsibility of coauthors?

- <u>How</u> to handle authorship conflicts and disputes?

Definition of authorship (*International Committee of Medical Journal Editors - ICMJE - 2014*)

- <u>All</u> four of the following criteria:
  - Substantial contributions to the <u>conception</u> or design of the work; or the <u>acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data</u> for the work
  - <u>Drafting</u> the work or <u>revising</u> it critically for important intellectual content
  - <u>Final approval</u> of the version to be published
  - Agreement to be <u>accountable</u> for all aspects of the work (incl. accuracy or integrity)

Acknowledgments (ICMJE 2014)

◆ Individuals who meet some of the criteria, but not all of them, could be listed in an acknowledgment

- Acquisition of funding

- General supervision of a research group or general administrative support

- Writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading

Data collection

- Intellectual contribution or pure execution/technical task?

- Authorship if:
    - Analysis, evaluation, interpretation skills, or
    - Advance methodological expertise

Problems of authorship

- No use of pseudo, ghostwriting, or gift/guest/honorary authorship

- Managerial position within a research institution: not sufficient to justify authorship (SAAS 2013)

- Correspondence sent to all authors to reduce the possibility that some individuals may have been included without their consent => goes against the concept of "corresponding author"

- Changes to authorship after submission
  - Request signed agreement to the changes from all authors

Order of listing of authors

◆ General principle: importance of their contributions (decreasing order)

◆ Other approach: alphabetical order (appropriate if similar contributions)

◆ Difficult to assess the contribution => idea of "contributorship"

◆ No listing of authors on the basis of seniority within the hierarchy (SAAS 2013)

Responsibility of authors (SAAS 2013)

- Principle:
  - Authors assume a <u>joint scientific responsibility</u> for the content of published research

- But in case of misconduct:
  - Responsibility for serious and evident violations lies <u>not only with those who have perpetrated them</u> or benefit from them
  - but <u>also with others</u> who could have prevented them without any risk of adverse personal consequences

How to prevent authorship disputes (COPE 2003)

- Discuss authorship before starting the project
  - Written agreement
  - Choice of the <u>corresponding author</u>
- Discuss authorship during the project
  - A new co-author may enter in course
  - A co-author could leave the team

How to handle authorship disputes (COPE 2003)

- No misconduct ("disputes") => Often a matter of judgment
  - Contribution substantial or nor?
  - Discuss first, then consider appeal to a senior authority
- Misconduct => Don't make yourself complicit
  - Explain the risk of bad consequences
  - Then consider whistle-blowing
- Name unduly included => ask authors and/or the journal to remove it
- Name forgotten => ask authors and/or the journal

Appropriate disclosure at time of submission (1)

- Cover letter to the editor
  - Essential … and often neglected document
- Key points that shall be addressed
  - Submission date (also available in the submission system): important to assess anteriority
  - Manuscript originality:
    - Declaration of compliance: no multiple submission
    - Contribution with regards to previous articles published in the journal
    - Contribution with regards to related papers sharing data or substantially the same research question => appropriate cross reference (while keeping anonymity)
  - Authorship details: sequence, respective contributions
  - Approvals by research ethics committee (if applicable)

Appropriate disclosure at time of submission (2)

- ◆ Any significant conflict of interest (e.g., private funding)
- ◆ Other materials to be communicated
  - Research instruments used to collect data first-hand: questionnaire, experimental case, interview guide…
  - Several elements for quantitative archival research
  - See the JAR data policy revised after the Hunton case (Dec. 2014)
    - Data description sheet
    - Contact information for proprietary/field data
    - Computer programs

Other issues for authors

- No conflict of interest in the recommendation of an associate editor (or a reviewer)
  - Recent or current co-author
  - Colleague
  - Supervisor
- No "forum shopping" (looking for a sympathetic forum) (Eden, 2010)

Retractions (COPE 2009)

- A mechanism for correcting the literature and alerting readers to publications that contain such seriously flawed or erroneous data that their findings and conclusions cannot be relied upon. Unreliable data may result from <u>honest error</u> or from <u>research misconduct</u>

- Retractions are also used to alert readers to cases of <u>redundant publication</u>, plagiarism, and failure to disclose a major competing interest likely to influence interpretations or recommendations

- Main purpose of retractions $\rightarrow$ to correct the literature and ensure its integrity rather than to punish authors who misbehave

Sanctions

- A clear process must be defined by the journal

- Different levels of sanctions:
    - Publication of a notice, corrigendum or erratum.
    - Retraction
    - Banning from submission (limited, unlimited)
        - => applies in principle to all authors
        - => decision taken with care

Ethical issues related to reviewers

- COPE Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers (2013)
- Peer review in all its form plays an important role in ensuring the integrity of the scholarly record
- The process depends to a large extent on trust
- Process requires that everyone involved behaves responsibly and ethically
- Peer reviewers play a central and critical part in the peer-review process
- **Key values**: confidentiality, neutrality, respect

Before accepting the review (1)

- Availability of <u>expertise and time</u> resources
- Declare all potential <u>conflicting interests</u>, seeking advice from the journal if necessary
  - Same institution as any of the authors
  - Will be joining that institution or are applying for a job there
  - Ongoing or recent (< 3 years) collaborations
  - Close personal relationships
- Main reasons to <u>decline</u>:
  - Feel unable to provide a fair, unbiased or timely review
  - Involvement with any of the work in the manuscript
  - Existence of a competing manuscript

Before accepting the review (2)

◆ Not agree to review a manuscript just to <u>gain sight</u> of it with no intention of submitting a review

◆ Suggestions for <u>alternative</u> suitable (and unbiased) reviewers are welcome

During the review (1)

- Respect the <u>confidentiality</u> of peer review
  - Do not reveal any details of a manuscript or its review, during or <u>after</u> the peer-review process
  - Avoid involving others (e.g., <u>assistants</u>!)
  - <u>Not contact the authors</u> directly without the permission of the journal
- Clarify the <u>scope</u> of your review (if necessary)
- Not use information obtained during the peer-review process for their <u>own advantage</u>
- No corrupt practice designed to <u>sabotage</u> academic <u>competitors</u> (Eden, JIBS)

During the review (2)

- Notify the journal immediately if:
  - they come across any irregularities
  - have concerns about ethical aspects of the work
  - are aware of substantial similarity between the manuscript and a concurrent submission to another journal or a published article
  - or suspect that misconduct may have occurred during either the research or the writing and submission of the manuscript
  - => whistleblowing role

After the review

- Underline Confidential comments to the editor should not be a place for denigration or false accusation, done in the knowledge that the authors will not see these comments

- Read the reviews from the other reviewers, if these are provided by the journal, to improve their own understanding of the topic or the decision reached

- Try to accommodate requests from journals to review revisions or resubmissions of manuscripts they have reviewed

What is a "good" review?

- Objective and <u>constructive</u>, refraining from being hostile or inflammatory
- <u>Specific</u> (i.e., substantiated) comments
- <u>Directed to the manuscript</u> and not to the authors
- Evaluation of the manuscript in its <u>present state</u> => do not seek to rewrite it
- Aware of the sensitivities surrounding <u>language issues</u>
- No <u>coercive citations</u>
- Not influenced by <u>characteristics</u> of the authors (nationality, religion, political beliefs, gender, etc.)
- <u>Review afresh</u> any manuscript previously reviewed for another journal

Ethical issues related to editors

- Key responsibilities of editors (COPE 2011)
  - Accountability for the quality of published materials
  - Integrity of academic records (even post publication)
  - Editorial line/Scope, publications standards
  - Guidance to authors, criteria for authorship
  - Confidential, transparent, fair and timely peer-review process
  - Editorial independence from publisher/Owner
- Key decisions
  - Desk review and (possible) desk rejection
  - Associate editor assignment
  - Choice of reviewers
  - Editorial decision

Desk review and desk rejection

- A question of arbitration
    - Is the manuscript consistent with the journal's editorial scope, author guidelines, and "worth the cost" of (two) reviewers?
    - A well-motivated desk rejection => Everyone saves time
- Reasons for desk rejections
    - Plagiarism or redundant publication => Plagiarism detection tools (Urkund used systematically by EAR)
    - Topic our of scope
    - Clearly no publication potential
        - Lack of maturity/focus, contribution not established or very confused
        - Way below publication standards: formal aspects, pervasive weaknesses in the research design

Choice of an associate editor

- The associate editor will handle the manuscript and take all decisions (at EAR)

- Independent from authors / from different institution(s); not likely to know them and to be in conflicts of interest

- Competent on the topic / context / research question or design

- Associate editor recommended by the authors

- But workload constraint

Choice of reviewers

- General principles:
    - At EAR: two reviewers (with exceptions: one or three)
    - Independent from authors / from different institution(s); not likely to know them and to be in conflicts of interest
    - Competent on the topic / context / research question or design
- Practical/pragmatic considerations
    - Search for complementarities/diversity of expertise
    - Consider authors cited in the paper
    - Availability and timeliness of the reviewer
    - Some reviewers are more severe than others
- Other comments:
    - Submitted paper to send to reviewers at the time of solicitation?
    - Rating of reviewers in the Submission System

Editor's decision - Principles

- ◆ Reviewers make <u>recommendations</u>: the editor decides

- ◆ The editor should evaluate reviewers' reports

- ◆ Editorial decision: motivated, transparent, and timely

  - ▪ Communicate all (non-confidential) reviewers' comments to authors

  - ▪ Be transparent on reviewers' recommendation

  - ▪ Allow the sharing of comments among reviewers (immediately after the decision)

Editor's decision – Practical considerations

- ◆ Reviewers' recommendations
  - ▪ Often consistent => Reject
  - ▪ Significant number of diverging cases: (1) Reject, (2) R&R
- ◆ To decide the R&R: Editor's judgment and basis for decision:
  - ▪ Are the revisions implementable without resulting in a fundamentally different manuscript?

Editor's post-publication duties (COPE 2011)

- Duty to act if suspected misconduct … even if appears has already been published
  - Inquire to those suspected of misconduct
  - Report situation to employers/institutions or appropriate body to have the case investigated
- Ensure [promptly] the integrity of academic record
  - Correction of minor (honest) errors → Erratum
  - Doubt, investigation underway → Expression of concern (see EAR 2015, 24(1))
  - Unreliable findings, redundant publication, plagiaism, unethical research → Notice of retraction
- Encourage scientific debate
  - Replication or challenging studies

Solutions for journals

- Become a member of COPE

- Create of <u>Code of ethics</u> (possible based on COPE guidelines)

- Ask all authors to confirm that they read and respected the Code of ethics

- Code of ethics = *Ex ante* dispute resolution mechanism => Reduces the ethical violations to be handled *ex post* (Eden, 2010)

The end

Thank you