



Forum agenda
Meeting to be held on Monday 13 November 2017
BY WEBINAR

At 4pm–5.30pm (GMT)

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair

2. Forum discussion: Self-citation—where’s the line?

3. New cases

17-15 Stolen article (MH)

17-16 Authorship issues from disbanded consortium (GO)

17-17 Service evaluation as research in a controversial area of medicine (AA)

17-18 Pre-'publication' in discussion or working paper series (AZ)

**17-19 Unethical withdrawal after acceptance to maximize the ‘impact factor’?
(GE)**

17-19 Consequence for dual submission (BM)

17-20 Ethics of non-active management of a control group (MR)

4. Updates

17-11 Authorship dispute unsatisfactorily resolved by institution

17-12 Potential figure manipulation with corresponding author uncontactable

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2. FORUM DISCUSSION: Self-citation—where’s the line?

<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-9>

A recent post on [Scholarly Kitchen](#) raised some interesting points about the ethics surrounding citation, and specifically self-citation. Previously, COPE has discussed related issues surrounding [self-citation by journals and editors](#) and [citation of preprints](#). During this forum, we’d like to broaden the discussion to include some of the questions related to self-citation by authors in scholarly publication.

Questions for discussion:

Where is the line between what’s appropriate in terms of self-citation, and what’s not?

If an author did not cite any of their previous works, this could be considered an inappropriate deception, indicating that the present work is novel, and unrelated to past works. But on the other hand, too many citations to previous works by the same authors are also inappropriate, considered to be a potential attempt to manipulate an author’s own h-index. So, where’s the line?

What is a peer reviewer’s responsibility in terms of calling out self-citation?

While journals often expect that reviewers will read a paper inside and out, front to back, how much time does a peer reviewer actually spend looking at the reference list? And even if they do take a look through the reference list, is it biased to call out an author for citing too many of their own works, especially if in their report, the reviewer asks for the author to add references to the reviewer’s work?

Should journals have specific policies about self-citation, and the peer review of reference lists?

Is there a certain number, or percentage, of references in a given work that can or should be a limit in referring back to the authors’ own publications? Is there any guidance journals or publishers can give to authors about what is considered “appropriate” vs. “excessive”? Are there, or should there be rules about changing reference lists during revision, in particular in adding more self-citations if not specifically requested by the editors/reviewers?

This will be discussed at the next COPE Forum on **Monday 13 November 2017**. Please do leave any comments (<https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-9>), whether or not you are planning on joining the meeting

3. NEW CASES

17-15 Stolen article

At acceptance but before publication, we found article A submitted to journal A was highly similar to article B, published 5 months earlier in conference proceedings in journal B by another publisher. The abstracts were nearly identical, but the author lists and affiliations did not overlap. We asked the authors to explain this and they said article A is their own work, but it was inadvertently leaked by an unnamed medical company they work with.

We told the authors of article A that in future they must declare the role of any company in their research and consider if this may be a conflict of interests. They said their article was previously submitted 4 years ago to another publisher of journal C, who rejected it. We confirmed this with the publisher, who added that their reviewers and editor are not the authors of article B.

The authors of article A said they spoke with the first author of article B, who promised to withdraw it. Article B was retracted, with the abstract being removed and a retraction notice posted. However, the stated reason for retraction was errors. The authors of article A said they were surprised by this.

What we know appears to be consistent with the authors of article A being the genuine authors, but the authors of article A told us the company does not want to be involved in this matter and they asked to withdraw article A, which we did. We have not contacted the authors or publisher of article B. We advised the authors of article A to contact the institutions of the authors of article B and the editor and publisher of journal B; we suggested they do not necessarily need to share details of the company because proof they are the original authors and the authors of article B are not, may be enough for an investigation. The authors of article A said they would consider this.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Could we have handled this case differently?
- Should we contact the publisher of article B?
- Should we ask the institution of the authors of article A and/or article B to investigate?

17-16 Authorship issues from disbanded consortium

A manuscript was submitted to one of our journals in a special issue. The initial submission included 15 authors with 9 affiliations. The authors were part of a consortium which has now been disbanded. The manuscript was provisionally accepted for publication.

At this point, three of the authors requested to be removed from the author list, citing irreconcilable differences with the corresponding author. When queried, the authors agreed that they qualified for authorship (as per the ICMJE criteria). One of them informed the publisher that three junior members of his research group also qualified for authorship but had never been included in the author list. When contacted, these junior three researchers requested to be included as authors.

The manuscript's publication was put on hold during these checks. The corresponding author was unhappy at the delay in publication. They denigrated and questioned the integrity of the institution where these researchers were based and claimed that one of three authors was involved in perverting peer review in another, named, journal (not related to the publisher). The corresponding author made it clear that they would refuse to accept any recommendations from the three junior researchers' institution if they were to become involved. The corresponding author also insisted that the three removed authors be included in the acknowledgements. The three removed authors explicitly stated that they did not want their names included anywhere on the paper.

The publisher notified the corresponding author that the ICMJE guidelines recommend receiving explicit written consent from anyone included on acknowledgements. The publisher also continued to clarify the situation with the three junior researchers, informing them that such cases should be taken to their institution. As the publication was still on hold, the corresponding author threatened legal action and full media coverage for alleged censorship and unethical behaviour. A journalist for an international newspaper was copied into these threats.

The publisher took the following actions:

- Removed the three authors from author list, as per their request.
- Asked all 12 remaining authors to sign an authorship form re-attesting to the authorship (the publisher's online submission system notifies all authors of manuscript submission).
- Included the three removed authors' names in the body of the article where a summary of the consortium's meeting and attendees was noted.
- Informed the three junior researchers that the publisher would consider a corrigendum changing authorship if they could prove qualification for authorship, according to ICMJE guidelines.
- Proceeded with publication.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Should the publisher have held publication of the article until the findings of the junior researchers provided a report?
- If this issue did become a media concern, how much of the above summary should the publisher publicly divulge, if anything?

17-17 Service evaluation as research in a controversial area of medicine

We received an email from a reader relating to the ethics statement in a research article published in 2011. The article presented data collected at a clinic relating to a controversial area in medicine. The ethics statement in the article indicates that, in accordance with regional guidelines, the research ethics committee deemed that the study was a service evaluation and formal ethical review was not required.

Using the reference number cited in the article, the reader obtained the relevant documents from the research ethics committee via a freedom of information request. The reader argued that the documents from the ethics committee related to data that predated what was presented in the article. A review of the documents indicated that this appeared to be the case. In addition, the reader argued that service evaluations should not be presented as research articles as these are two separate things.

The editor of the journal wrote to the author of the article and asked for comment on the issues raised. The author replied that there had been regular contact with the ethics committee as the service period of the clinic was extended, and the ethics committee continued to indicate that the data were being collected as part of a service evaluation and further ethical review was not required. In addition, the data were collected anonymously, which would further exempt the study from requiring formal ethical approval. The ethics committee also provided the authors with a letter indicating that “this letter ... may be provided to a journal or other body as evidence that ethical approval is not required under [the regional] research governance arrangements”.

The author indicated that similar requests had been made in the past and that, due to the controversial area of the work, many attempts were being made to retract articles that used the data from the clinic. Attempting to prevent further queries, the author asked the institutional head of research to post a public statement indicating that the work was conducted appropriately and met the highest ethical standards. As requested, the head of research issued a statement on the institutional website in support of the work.

The editor then responded to the reader indicating that the journal was satisfied with the author’s response and the support of the head of research. The reader was not satisfied with the editor’s response and forwarded the details of the case to a high profile blogger who writes extensively on this controversial area of medicine. The blogger then posted a blog criticising both the article and the journal’s handling of the case. The blog was shared widely on social media. From the journal’s perspective, the blog was inaccurate, misrepresentative and damaging to the publisher’s reputation.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Should we allow data collected in service evaluations to be published as research articles? In medical journals, this is often seen as an acceptable exception; however, if research ethics committees are declaring a study "not research", should journals do the same?
- Should the journal have posted a correction on the article to provide a more detailed ethics statement, bearing in mind that anything labelled a "correction" in a controversial area would be misinterpreted as an error in the research by the critics?
- How should journals respond to blog posts that they feel portray them unfairly and are damaging to the publisher's reputation?

17-18 Pre-'publication' in discussion or working paper series

A submission in the economics field to an interdisciplinary social science journal was accepted, following full external review. Subsequently, the publisher wrote to the author stating that during editorial checks, it had come to their attention that a full manuscript of a paper with the same name was available in a discussion paper series and kindly asked that this version be removed from the website so that the publisher has the right of first publication.

The publisher stated that upon acceptance for publication, authors may deposit the abstract of their paper or an executive summary on this website. They said that in accordance with the publisher policy for online deposit of work, preprints or post-prints should only be deposited into institutional repositories or faculty websites following an embargo period effective on official publication of the paper. The publisher said they will not be able to proceed to publication of the paper until this issue has been resolved.

In the economics field, as in many other fields, it is standard practice to deposit in such a series an early version of a paper that is subsequently submitted for journal publication. The present case concerns a prestigious discussion paper series that has approaching 9000 entries. Since a published version would have undergone substantial changes following external review, researchers would inevitably seek out and cite the later journal version; indeed, leading websites in the field provide details of subsequent journal publication, as available. Generally, leading repositories, including this one, are unwilling to remove papers from its series.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Is the publisher's stand justified?
- Can the publisher reasonably insist on "right of first publication", even where research funding may have been secured from university or external sources?
- What should be the response of the journal editor?
- Are there differences in accepted practice across disciplines?

17-19 Unethical withdrawal after acceptance to maximize the ‘impact factor’?

We are a publisher with a portfolio of about 25 journals, with journal X being the flagship journal. Journal X has a high impact factor. We also publish a range of other, newer journals, some of which are ranked highly but most have no impact factor.

An author submitted a manuscript to journal Y where it underwent peer review and was accepted after revisions. After acceptance, the author contacted the editor saying that he had made a mistake and wished to have the paper considered by journal X instead, because it has an impact factor, and stated that if the editor would not publish the article in journal X, the consensus of all authors is to withdraw the paper from journal Y in order to submit it to a journal with an impact factor. The editor informed the author that the paper was not suitable for journal X and that his behaviour was unethical: withdrawal after acceptance violates scientific community norms, as it wastes editorial and peer reviewer resources, in particular if there are no scientific reasons to do so.

The editor wrote to the authors stating that if they insist on a withdrawal at this stage there would be three sanctions: 1) they would be blacklisted (ie, none of the publisher’s journals would consider future submissions from any of the authors, 2) the journal would write a letter to the superiors of the authors outlining the case and 3) they would still be responsible for the Article Processing Charge which is payable on acceptance; ours is an open access journal, with the fee schedule clearly disclosed and agreed upon by the submitting author (the fee schedule specifies that if the paper is withdrawn after acceptance it is still payable and will not be refunded).

The author continues to say that they made a mistake—they thought that journal Y was a section within journal X (in reality the submission form clearly allows the author to pick a journal from a dropdown list and the submission acknowledgement email also contains the name of the journal, as does all subsequent communications). On submission, the author checked a box where he agreed on a possible transfer of the paper within the publisher family.

The author pleads that “The kinds of journals that my PhD student publishes in potentially affects his graduation prospects” and that publication in journal Y “could have terrible repercussions for a very promising PhD student”, as well as “going to negatively affect my prospects [for promotion and tenure]”. The editor is not impressed by these arguments as they illustrate a misuse of the impact factor, and PhD students should be taught to respect the journal submission and peer review/publication process and not taught that it is acceptable to waste editorial resources in order to play impact factor games.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- What does the Forum think about the ethics of withdrawing a paper during or after peer review in order to publish in a higher impact factor journal?
- If the Forum agrees with the assessment that the authors acted in an unethical fashion, are the sanctions proposed by the editor in this case reasonable?
- Is there anything else that should be done?

17-20 Consequence for dual submission

An author submitted work to our journal (journal A) which, after two rounds of peer review, was accepted and published. One week after it was published, the editors of journal B contacted our journal stating that this work, with the exact same title, authors and content, had been submitted to journal B and, after receiving an acceptance letter, the author withdrew the paper, informing them that it had been accepted by a different journal.

When the editor of journal B asked the author for an explanation, the author did not provide a satisfactory response. Journal B, in consultation with their editorial board, banned the author from submitting to the journal in the future.

Editor B contacted us, alerting us to the situation. After verifying the submission records, we concluded that the submission to both journals had been done on the same day. We contacted the authors for an explanation. The author replied that indeed he had submitted to two journals but that the submissions were several weeks apart. He said he forgot to withdraw the article from journal B and apologized for the situation. However, the submission records for both journal A and journal B indicate that this statement is not true.

We have discussed with the editor of journal B what action should be taken in relation to the author. Journal B has already banned the author. The editorial board of journal B would like to make this misconduct known to the author's institution and suggests that it should be us who contact the institution. We are reluctant to contact the institution as the author has apologized, admitted his mistake and withdrew the article from journal B. We believe journal B should contact the institution.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- What is the appropriate action in such a case. Should the institution be informed or is banning the author from both journals for a period of time enough?
- Who should initiate the action—journal A or journal B?
- Both editors agree that something should be done so that the author does not repeat the behaviour at other journals, but are unsure of what to do.

17-21 Ethics of non-active management of a control group

An article was submitted involving over 200 pregnant patients with a systemic illness (from 2010 to 2015) who were recruited and assigned to a control group or an active intervention group (of their systemic illness). The control group received routine antenatal care while the intervention group had active surveillance and management of their systemic illness during the pregnancy.

There was a significant increase in morbidity and mortality in the non-actively managed control group. We (reviewers and editors) are concerned about the ethics of this study design. Specifically, it seems pregnant patients who were assigned to the non-active treatment/control group did not have their systemic condition managed in what would today be regarded as 'standard of care'.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Despite apparent local ethics board approval, and a statement from the authors declaring adherence to the Declaration of Helsinki, is it ethical to include a non-active intervention group for a disease which is known to have negative fetal and maternal outcomes?

UPDATES

17-11 Authorship dispute unsatisfactorily resolved by institution

Case text (anonymised)

The journal was contacted with a claim to first authorship of a paper currently published online ahead of print. Print publication was put on hold pending the result of the investigation. The claim to first authorship was based on the claimant stating that they had obtained most results published in the paper during their PhD studies under the supervision of the corresponding author, and contributed to the writing of the text. The claimant provided evidence of this in the form of screenshots of a submission confirmation email and subsequent rejection email from another journal for a manuscript with a similar title, a Word document labelled as the claimant's PhD thesis and details of overlap with the published paper, and a screenshot of an email reported to have been sent by the claimant to the corresponding author in 2013 containing images used in the published paper.

The corresponding author was contacted and declared on behalf of all authors that the claimant had not contributed to the experiments or writing, and that none of the results shown in the article were performed by the claimant. They explained that the claimant was discharged from the PhD programme before successful completion. The claimant indicated that they wished to dispute this, and the institution was asked to investigate and resolve the dispute.

The institution informed the journal that the knowledge generated during state funded projects was the property of the institution, and only the institution has the ability to agree a copyright transfer in agreement with the corresponding author, and that the corresponding author had full legal and institutional support to determine the author list of papers resulting from the project. They stated that a graduate student may or may not be included as an author on papers deriving from projects to which they have contributed, and according to institutional guidelines, in order to be included as an author, a student must successfully complete their studies within a defined timeframe. The decision to remove the claimant as a co-author was confirmed to have been made because they were dismissed from the graduate programme before successful completion.

The institution did not comment on the extent of the contribution of the claimant to the research results and discussion presented in the published paper. The journal considers that ICMJE/COPE guidelines do not hold non-completion of studies as a valid reason for disqualification from authorship.

Question for the COPE Forum

- Should the journal operate according to ICMJE/COPE guidelines for determining authorship in the face of contradictory institutional authorship criteria and against the wishes of the corresponding author and institution?
- If so, how can the right to authorship of the claimant according to ICMJE/COPE guidelines be now confirmed independently of the institution?
- If a copyright transfer has already been agreed between the publisher and the

institution/corresponding author, is this agreement affected if a separate correction article is published detailing an authorship change?

Advice:

The Forum noted it seems punitive on the part of the university regarding their decision to exclude the student from being an author because they did not complete their studies within a defined timeframe. If the student was in the middle of their training and had submitted a paper, would the institution have handled the case differently? Was the claimant's role acknowledged in the published article? If not, might the claimant and authors agree to a correction to publish an acknowledgment?

Otherwise, a suggestion was to contact a higher authority at the institution—perhaps a committee on research integrity at the institution— or an oversight body and ask them to investigate and try to resolve the authorship issue. The Forum noted that it is up to the journal to set their own guidelines for authorship, and to clearly state that they follow the ICMJE and COPE guidelines, for example. The journal guidelines should take precedence.

Follow-up

Following advice from the COPE Forum, the journal approached the highest authority within the university to specifically confirm that the authorship of the paper was determined according to the criteria set by ICMJE/COPE, which they did. No further action was taken. The editor considers the case closed.

17-12 Potential figure manipulation with corresponding author uncontactable

Case text (anonymised)

A reader contacted the journal to raise concerns about a paper containing a potentially manipulated figure. The editor-in-chief agreed with the assessment that the figure had been manipulated and attempted to contact the corresponding author, without response. Following further contact with the co-authors and institution, it was established that the corresponding author had retired after publication of the paper, and no current contact details could be found.

No co-authors were able to confirm how the figure was constructed, but explained that it was an old image that was made by or for the corresponding author, and that the location of the raw image or original data was not known due to the corresponding author's laboratory being dismantled on retirement. The figure is also present in a previous publication from 2007. The figure manipulation does not appear to affect the scientific results or conclusions of the paper.

Question for the COPE Forum

- Given that the corresponding author cannot be contacted to confirm if the nature of any figure manipulation merits retraction, would it be appropriate to publish an expression of concern which will remain in place if no additional information is forthcoming?

Advice:

The Forum advised that as there is no true confirmation of the evidence that the figure was manipulated, a retraction does not seem to be warranted without further investigation. A

suggestion was to contact the journal of the previous publication, as there may be an issue of duplicate publication or copyright issues related to the figure. The editors can then discuss together how to deal with this issue. The other journal may have the original data. If the copyright resides with the first journal, then the editor may have to have a different type of notice on the paper.

The Forum agreed that the most reasonable solution would be to publish an expression of concern, explaining the issues. An expression of concern provides an opportunity for further information to be made available at a later date, and then any further action, if necessary, may be taken. A different view expressed was to remove the figure and publish a correction—if other researchers have re-done the work on the subject it may be possible to replace the figure with a citation.

Follow-up

Following advice from the COPE Forum, the editor contacted the journal of the previous publication. The journal is proceeding with an expression of concern to explain the issues. The editor considers the case closed.