

FORUM AGENDA

Meeting to be held on Thursday 14 October 2021
14:00-15:30 (British Summer Time)
By webinar

Agenda

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair
2. Forum discussion: Bias in peer review
3. New cases
 - 21-08 Duplicate submission and request for withdrawal
 - 21-09 Institutions paying authors to be named on papers
 - 21-10 Authorship of a commentary
 - 21-11 Deceased author and author delaying publication
4. Updates
 - 20-03 Allegations related to multiple papers and journals
 - 21-04 Ethics approval and consent
 - 21-05 Unresponsive authors delaying publication
 - 21-07 Manuscript submitted based on retracted paper

2. Forum discussion: Bias in peer review

<https://publicationethics.org/resources/forum-discussions/bias-peer-review>

A recent survey in which we asked COPE members to vote on the diversity, equity and inclusion topics they would like to discuss, bias in peer review was voted the topic of most interest, so we are devoting this COPE Forum discussion to it. While this important topic aligns most closely with [COPE Core Practice: Peer Review Processes](#), its impact is wider reaching. The explicit and implicit biases, or conscious and unconscious biases, of editors and peer reviewers could prejudice which manuscripts are reviewed or ultimately accepted for publication. As COPE member Cambridge University Press explains in their [information for peer reviewers](#): “Reviewers must give unbiased consideration to each manuscript submitted. They should judge each on its merits, without regard to race, religion, nationality, sex, seniority, or institutional affiliation of the author(s). ... Rooting your review in evidence from the paper or proposal is crucial in avoiding bias.”

Diversity and inclusion in peer review survey

Diversity and inclusion initiatives seem to be key to helping reduce bias in peer review. As part of Peer Review Week 2018, COPE conducted a [survey](#) to understand more about how the community views this topic. Recently, we wondered if and how attitudes, policies, and/or practices have evolved over the past few years. To that end, COPE largely reproduced the survey during Peer Review Week 2021, and below are highlights of the responses.

COPE received 267 responses to the new version of the anonymous survey. The overall profile of respondents was similar in both versions, with 60% of the respondents being journal editors and 18% working for publishers in 2021. Perhaps it is, therefore, not surprising that the responses to several of the questions asked were nearly identical to the previous survey; these included how important diversity and inclusion in peer review, to whom diversity and inclusion apply, and definitions of peer review diversity.

COPE received notable responses, however, to the question about the extent to which one’s publication/organisation has achieved diversity. From 2018 to 2021, respondents reported a 69% increase in journals/publishers providing in-house training to promote diversity and inclusion in peer review, as well as a 19% decrease in respondents who thought their journal/publisher had achieved the ideal level of diversity in its peer reviewer pool. Two new reply options to this question also garnered significant responses, with 69% of journals/publishers actively working toward increasing the diversity in its peer reviewer pool and 29% of respondents reporting their journal/publisher had achieved an ideal level of diversity in its peer reviewer pool.

Detailed below are other significant shifts in response to the kinds of diversity seen as being important in peer review. Two of the fifteen new reply options to this question in the 2021 survey also garnered significant responses, with 67% of respondents indicating that Career Level was important and 63% indicating that Geographic Diversity was important.

- The importance of Expertise Areas/Specialities decreased by 27% (from 88% in 2018 to 64% in 2021).
- The importance of Sex/Gender Identity increased by 14% (from 77% in 2018 to 88% in 2021).

It is also worth highlighting some of the free-text responses received. The replies to a question about what changed with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their editorial

policies/practices or organisation over the past 3 years ranged from “nothing” to “unconscious bias training.” Finally, several respondents provided general comments, including:

- “Diversity must be promoted and achieved without compromising the integrity of the process.”
- “Diversity an [sic] inclusion in the process is essential in a global and diverse world.”
- “The key issue in peer review is fair objective evaluation of submitted work.”
- “Only knowledge and qualifications matter”
- “We may never have a fully representative review panel but at least we can understand their biases.”

These survey results indicate an overall positive change over the past 3 years in attitudes, policies, and practices about diversity and inclusion in peer review. Not surprisingly, however, there is still more for publications and organisations to do. Meaningful and lasting change takes time, of course, and we want to thank those who not only participated in this survey but also contribute to ongoing efforts to make the peer review process more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for everyone.

Question for discussion

With the ultimate goal of eliminating bias in peer review, we hope you will share during the COPE Forum some of the practical steps you are taking to reduce bias

- How does your publication/organisation attempt to manage the effects of bias in peer review?
- How is your publication/organisation working to invite a more diverse range of editors and peer reviewers?
- Does your publication/organisation ask peer reviewers to ensure not only that the correct references are cited but also that the references reflect a diverse range of authors?

3. New cases

21-08 Duplicate submission and request for withdrawal

A paper was submitted to journal A and received a 'revision' decision. At some point following this decision, the authors emailed the journal to request withdrawal, citing inconsistencies in their data and subsequent conclusions. A search of the literature showed that the same paper (with the same authors) was published in journal B the day before the withdrawal request. Clearly, the authors waited for the acceptance before withdrawing from journal A. Journal A contacted journal B to explain the duplicate submission, and that the authors requested withdrawal, citing doubts in the validity of their paper's data.

Questions for the Forum

1. Should journal B retract the paper on these grounds?
2. What happens if journal B does not receive a response from the authors or their institution?

21-09 Institutions paying authors to be named on papers

Some academic institutions are paying authors for the name of the institution to be included in the manuscript so that the institution has an increased number of publications in a given year. The institution gives the author payment and the author terms it as 'funding' or 'grant', which is not the case. The author publishes the research article in a journal with two affiliations and explains in the acknowledgment section that the institution gave a partial grant. The terms funding and grant are used to camouflage the purpose.

Questions for the Forum

1. How can such malpractices be reduced?
2. Are there any checks that can be adopted via the submission system or by the editorial team to avoid this issue?

21-10 Authorship of a commentary

An associate editor invited a commentary to be written by one of the peer reviewers. When the commentary was submitted, the associate editor was a co-author. There could be the appearance of a conflict in the decision to accept the article on which the commentary was based if the associate editor is an author on the commentary.

Question for the Forum

1. Is it ethical for the associate editor to author a commentary on a manuscript they handled?

21-11 Deceased author and author delaying publication

The journal accepted a manuscript for publication with two authors. One of the authors passed away before signing the copyright. This manuscript is now ready for galley proof approval from the surviving author.

Proofs were sent to the surviving author and the author that passed away as normal because the production editor assigned to this manuscript did not know that one of the authors had died. After the deadline, over the course of a month, the production editor and production manager sent several reminder emails to both authors enquiring about the galley proofs. The handling editor was also copied in, on this email thread. The surviving author finally responded saying that the other author had passed away and that they would like to move forward with publication.

The surviving author did not acknowledge the email reminders regarding the galley proofs so the production manager sent more emails reminding them that, as the journal policy indicates, approval is needed before publication. It has been almost two months since the production manager or production editor has received a response from the surviving author.

Question for the Forum

1. How should the journal proceed?
2. What issues are there with publishing an article when one of the authors of the accepted manuscript (who has not signed the copyright) has passed away?
3. Can the article be published without sign off from both authors?

4. Updates

20-03 Allegations related to multiple papers and journals

A publisher is responding to allegations about a particular group of authors. The complainants have accused this group of authors of wide scale research fabrication and misconduct, relating to a large number of their papers across many different journals (published by a variety of publishers).

The publisher and the journals that are investigating and responding to these claims have referred the concerns to the institution responsible for the research governance of the authors. The institution said they would investigate and respond by a certain date, but their response is slightly overdue.

Question for the Forum

1. Should an expression of concern be published while waiting for the outcome from the institution?
2. One of the journals has received another submitted paper by the same group of authors. Should the paper undergo normal peer review, or should it be delayed because of the unresolved investigation about the other papers?
3. Should different publishers/journals share information with each other about cases that involve multiple papers and journals? If so, how should the information be shared with others?

Advice

COPE typically advises that cases should be handled and judged individually. A new submission should not automatically be dismissed from being peer reviewed, but the editor may wish to consider additional precautions in its review. One suggestion is to ask the author to provide all of the raw data or any underlying images. The journal may wish to do additional statistical analysis to see whether there are unlikely patterns in the data.

Communication with other editors might be fruitful where there are duplications among different papers in different journals across publications. Otherwise, the editor should try to respect confidentiality. The editor should look at their own journal independently of other journals. It is not appropriate to correct or retract a paper just because there are problems with other papers.

There is existing COPE guidance on Sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct which explains how to share information. It may be appropriate to share some amount of information with other editors perhaps not with the intent of a full investigation but rather for notification and documentation to the institution regarding these claims.

Follow-up

After a delay, the journal heard back from the authors' institution who carried out the investigation. However, the institution's response has not given the journals enough information to fully evaluate the articles. The publisher is reaching out to other publishers who have been affected by this case to see whether the institution has given other publishers any more information that might be useful. The journal is waiting to receive responses.

Follow-up (October 2021)

The publisher reached out to other publishers who have been affected by this case to see whether the institution has given other publishers any more information that might be useful. The group of publishers agreed that the institution had provided insufficient evidence and that publication of expressions of concern was the most appropriate course of action for the affected articles. The journal notified the authors of their intention and subsequently published the expressions of concern. These expressions of concern will remain in place until such time as further information becomes available that would assist the editor in deciding whether or not retractions are appropriate for each affected article.

21-04 Ethics approval and consent

A complainant raised six articles to the attention of the editor-in-chief, with concerns about ethical approval and possible conflicts of interest regarding the way that approval was granted. The studies all involved minority populations.

Ethics approval had been granted by the institutions for all of the manuscripts involved, along with written informed consent and corresponding ethics codes and approval, which all seemed to be in order. Nevertheless, there is some scepticism due to the political context and the nature of the authors' affiliations, some of which are governmental.

Next step being considered are:

1. asking the authors for more information about the conditions under which the consent was provided although it will be difficult to judge any claims
2. publishing an expression of concern although the potential for resolution of an investigation is small and an expression of concern might seem heavy handed
3. updating the complainant and 'closing' the case for now

Questions for the Forum

- To what extent should publishers question statements about ethical approval?
- Are there any alternative actions?

Advice

The case raised the question of how active a role should journals and publishers take in pursuing issues related to ethics approval. The Forum noted that publishers have a moral obligation to question ethics approval, especially if it has been brought to their attention. The editor could request that the ethics statement be expanded to include more about the nature of the voluntary consent that was provided. This is particularly relevant if vulnerable populations were involved. The statement should state how the authors ensured that the participants gave their consent voluntarily. The editor could use the vulnerable populations policy to justify questioning the research. The editor could also request that the documentation and discussions of the institutional review board be made available.

The editor could consider contacting the grant bodies or agencies, if there were any involved in the study. Funders often ensure that the correct ethical procedures have been followed, particularly in situations where there are difficulties gaining ethical approval (eg, if the research is carried out in a different country or the research is not affiliated to a university).

The Forum asked what triggered the complaint? The complainant requested retraction of the papers, but did the complainant supply evidence of problems with the ethics approval or conflicts of interest in the paper? Without specific evidence, the editor cannot assume there is a problem. The Forum advised that the complainant needs to provide evidence before any further action is taken by the journal or publisher. The onus is on the whistleblower to provide sufficient evidence to warrant a retraction.

The editor could have the articles in question reviewed by experts in the field to determine the added value of the papers to the literature before moving forward with any further action.

Follow-up

The journal editors-in-chief with expertise and/or relation to the manuscripts convened to further discuss the case, as there were a variety of opinions. The editors-in-chief and the editorial office have requested further details regarding ethics approval from the authors. No response has been received from the authors at this time, and therefore this has been escalated to related institutions or universities and a final deadline for response communicated. Once the deadline is reached, and if no or insufficient information has been provided, the editors and journal will consider whether retraction is appropriate on the basis that there is not sufficient information evidencing that the protocols complied with our editorial policies and ethical standards.

21-05 Unresponsive authors delaying publication

The journal received a submission which proceeded through peer review and was recommended for publication. The authors responded to the revision letter, providing a detailed itemised list of changes and revised their manuscript accordingly. The revised manuscript was subsequently accepted for publication.

The normal process for articles in this journal is that when papers are accepted and the files are transferred to the production department, the author accepted manuscript is published online as an advance article and simultaneously published in PubMed. This version of the manuscript is still live on the journal website, listed as an advance article, and on PubMed.

Proofs were sent to the corresponding author as normal, and all authors were chased repeatedly by email for several months, and also by telephoning the contact numbers provided by the authors and other phone numbers for their institutions. No answer, busy, or recorded messages and no voicemail options were encountered, even when calling during working hours in the authors' country.

Final reminder type emails with firm deadlines were sent, emailed from different email addresses in case the emails were getting stuck in their spam filters. Journal policy is that authors must sign off the proof version of their manuscript before final publication of the version of record. The paper is in limbo because the advance article has been published on the journal website and in PubMed but the final version cannot be published or put into an issue. The advance article has been cited eight times in leading journals within the field. It does not appear that this article has been published in another journal simultaneously.

Questions for the Forum

1. How should the journal proceed?

2. Can the final version be published without sign off from the authors?
3. Should the advance article be withdrawn?

Advice

The Forum noted that when an article is posted online “early”, it is possible to withdraw it. A withdrawal notice could state that the article has been withdrawn by agreement between the editors and publisher, for example, because the authors are not responding to the editor’s requests to approve the final version of the manuscript.

Journal policy is important. Every journal should have a policy with timelines for accepting a manuscript, and posting it, as well as posting a corrected proof. An accepted manuscript may not be the final version of record. If the authors do not agree to follow the journal’s policy, an accepted manuscript can be withdrawn. If the journal has a policy covering this issue, this might help with the decision making.

The Forum suggested the editor might consider a final attempt to contact the authors, threatening to withdraw the manuscript from the online site of the journal if approval is not received by a specified deadline. The editor should include the journal’s policy on final approval of manuscripts with the request.

The journal may wish to post an editor’s note on the paper because it is part of the public record and it has been cited, especially if there are no grounds for retraction. The note could state that the authors have been unresponsive. The note would also serve as a warning for other readers who wished to cite the article.

The Forum agreed the journal had done due diligence in attempting to contact the authors. There could be a dispute around the paper or the authors that the journal is not aware of. A suggestion was to contact the research dean or research integrity office at the institution and explain the problem. If no satisfactory response is received and the final approved version of the articles is not available, then withdrawal should be considered.

Follow-up

Following the advice from the COPE forum, the journal retracted the article on the grounds that “after exhaustive efforts, it has not been possible to contact the authors for them to approve the final version of the article and take responsibility for its content”. The paper will remain online for anyone who has a link to its URL (eg, from a citation) but it is clearly marked as retracted, and will not appear in any issues.

21-07 Manuscript submitted based on retracted paper

A case was published in a journal. After publication, the author contacted the journal to ask for withdrawal of the article because of some mistakes. After careful and considered review of the content of this paper by a duly constituted expert committee, the paper was found to be incomplete due to the dependent variable used in the analysis and the literature review used.

The paper was retracted. After the retraction was published, the author submitted a new article, which was based on the retracted paper.

Question for the Forum

1. Should the author reference in the new article that the original article was already published?

Advice

The Forum agreed that the author should reference the retracted paper in the new article and explain the mistakes that have been corrected in this new version. The retracted paper is still visible online and marked as retracted; the paper has not been physically removed. Hence the authors must state that the new article is a reworking of the original paper.

The COPE [Retraction Guidelines](#) state: “An author may republish some of the work if not all of the content was found to be unreliable. In order to do so transparently, authors should notify the editors of the new journal of the prior retraction and it is likely appropriate to cite the retraction, indicating why the work was flawed and what has been corrected in the new article. Permission to republish also needs to be agreed with the copyright holder of the retracted work.”

When the author cites the original paper, they must make it clear that the paper has been retracted and cite the DOI of the retraction notice if appropriate. Although the authors might be reluctant to cite a retracted paper, in terms of damage to their reputation, the editor should encourage them to do so, explaining that this is part of the process and the literature needs to be corrected.

Follow-up

The journal retracted the paper. The editor considers the case closed.

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