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GUIDELINES:

**COOPERATION BETWEEN RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS
AND JOURNALS ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND
PUBLICATION MISCONDUCT CASES**

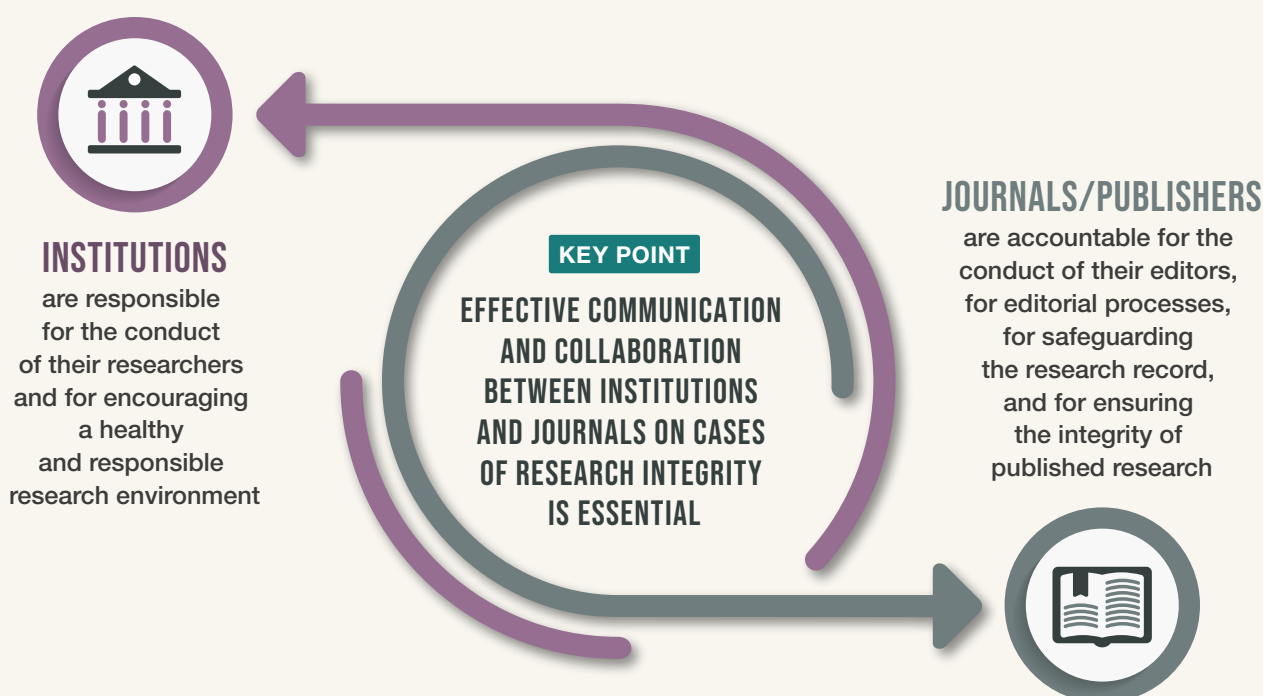
GUIDELINES

COOPERATION BETWEEN RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS AND JOURNALS ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND PUBLICATION MISCONDUCT CASES

COPE guidelines are formal COPE policy and are intended to advise editors and publishers on expected publication ethics practices. If you would like to comment on the content of our guidance then please contact **Natalie Ridgeway, Executive Officer** cope_execofficer@publicationethics.org

Summary

Institutions and journals have important duties in the management of research misconduct and adherence to publication ethics. Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers and for encouraging a healthy and responsible research environment. Journals and publishers are accountable for the conduct of their editors, for editorial processes, for safeguarding the research record, and for ensuring the integrity of published research. Hence effective communication and collaboration between institutions and journals on cases of research integrity is essential. To achieve this, COPE makes a number of recommendations.





INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

- have a point of contact for investigations on research misconduct (research integrity officer or office) and publish their contact details prominently;
- inform journals/publishers about any findings that relate to the reliability or attribution of published work that may arise during a research integrity or misconduct investigation;
- respond to journals if they request information about issues, such as disputed authorship, misleading reporting, competing interests, or other factors, including honest errors, that could affect the reliability of published work;
- initiate inquiries into unacceptable publication practice or allegations of research misconduct, consistent with national and university policies, raised by journals, if the potential violation occurred while the researchers were under the aegis of the institution;
- have policies supporting responsible research conduct, and policies and procedures in place for investigating allegations of unreliability, research integrity issues, or misconduct.



JOURNALS/PUBLISHERS SHOULD:

- ensure that the process for raising queries about research and publication integrity to the journal is clear and available online, including contact details for the point of contact (**publication.ethics@[publisherdomain.ext]** or **research.integrity@[publisherdomain.ext]** is recommended as a standardised form);
- inform institutions if misconduct by their researchers is suspected, and provide evidence to support these concerns;
- cooperate with investigations and respond promptly to institutions' questions about misconduct allegations, with dedicated individuals or teams assigned to investigate and communicate with institutions;
- be ready to publish changes to published articles (corrections, expressions of concerns, addenda, retractions) according to **COPE** guidelines when provided with findings from institutional investigations;
- have policies and procedures for responding to institutions and other organisations that investigate cases of research misconduct;
- promote good publication practices and processes for identifying concerns in submissions early in the publication process.

Introduction

Research institutions (such as universities and research centres) and scholarly journals have important duties and common interests in research and publication integrity. Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers and the integrity of what their researchers publish, and for encouraging a healthy and responsible research environment that promotes research integrity. Journals are accountable for the conduct of their editors, for editorial policy and process, for safeguarding the research record, and for ensuring the integrity of the published record.

Ensuring research and publication integrity requires that institutions and journals/publishers prioritise their shared interests and cooperate with each other where necessary. Institutions and journals should promote best practice among researchers, authors, reviewers, and editors (eg, through policies and training). Journals should make efforts to detect misconduct before publication (eg, by screening for plagiarism, paper mill manuscripts, and peer review fraud). Institutions should investigate allegations of research misconduct, and journals should correct or retract findings that are invalid or unreliable (whether the errors are because of misconduct or honest errors) to prevent readers from being misled. Research that is incorrect or misleading may require post-publication amendment even when allegations of misconduct by researchers are not upheld after institutional investigation.

These guidelines have been revised to reflect the importance of effective collaboration between publishers, journal editors, and research institutions on cases of publication ethics and research integrity, and to highlight the launch of **COPE** membership for universities and research institutes in 2022. The guidelines were originally prepared in consultation with the individuals and institutions listed at the end of the document. The revised guidelines also take into account further recommendations by the CLUE (Cooperation & Liaison between Universities & Editors) Working Group, Enhancing Partnerships of Institutions and Journals' Working Group,^{1, 2} and other discussions.³

Scope

These guidelines focus on the investigation by research institutions and journals of concerns about the reliability of research or misconduct, and the related exchanges of information to ensure that the validity of the published record is maintained. This focus does not diminish the importance of prevention and education of researchers and editors; journal and institutional policies and practices should cover all aspects. Journal policies should describe their responses to both misconduct and genuine errors; more details can be found in the **COPE** Retraction guidelines⁴ because action should be taken to correct or retract unreliable findings, regardless of whether misconduct is proven.

Similarly, **COPE** recognises that other parties, notably funders, have an important role in promoting research integrity and should be informed about research or publication misconduct that relates to research they have funded. These guidelines focus on the roles of institutions and journals but they may help funders to develop their own policies to foster research integrity and responsible conduct of research in collaboration with institutions and journals.

Background principles

COPE advises that investigations into concerns about research integrity or misconduct should be undertaken by the researcher's institution and not by journals. The journal/publisher has a duty to amend the published record if the research published is unreliable or fraudulent. However, although many concerns that come to the attention of the journal or publisher can be handled without contacting the institution, responsibility for disciplining researchers and ensuring further misconduct is not committed lies with their institution or employer. **COPE's** advice on sanctions is "to be cautious because of the potential for legal challenges based on loss of earnings, reputational damage, discrimination, or suppressing access to the publishing market".⁵

COPE guidance notes that, in cases of suspected or alleged research or publication misconduct, journals are encouraged to first request a response from those suspected of misconduct. If the response is not satisfactory, journals should ask the relevant employer or institution to investigate.^{6, 7} Recommendations from the CLUE working group further advises that the institution could be the first point of contact if journals have strong suspicions or if authors might alter or destroy evidence of misconduct.^{1, 8} **COPE** encourages journals and publishers to transparently highlight in their published ethics guidelines that institutions might be contacted concomitantly or before contacting the authors, under particular circumstances.

When presented with evidence of misconduct (eg, plagiarism, image or data falsification or fabrication, or missing ethical approval) or of invalid findings, and there is a clear need to correct the published record, journals should liaise and collaborate with institutions, ensuring the institutions are informed of any actions taken by the journal without unnecessarily delaying correction of the scholarly record.

Although these guidelines encourage exchange of information between institutions and journals on cases of possible and proven misconduct, **COPE** recognises that full disclosure may often be restricted by concerns about confidentiality (eg, to protect the identity of a complainant), conventions about confidential communication (eg, peer review comments), and legal considerations. These matters will also be discussed in this document.

The guidelines are based on the principle that institutions have responsibilities for the conduct of their researchers, which include investigating possible integrity issues or misconduct and applying appropriate sanctions, whereas journals are responsible for what they publish.

"In cases of suspected or alleged research or publication misconduct, journals are encouraged to first request a response from those suspected of misconduct. [...] the institution could be the first point of contact if journals have strong suspicions or if authors might alter or destroy evidence of misconduct."

Defining misconduct and research integrity

There is no one definition of misconduct used by publishers or research institutions globally. Some organisations more narrowly define misconduct as FFP (falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism), whereas others interpret the term more broadly to include a range of unacceptable research practices. Some organisations prefer to avoid the term ‘misconduct’ altogether and instead refer to a range of research integrity breaches and questionable research practices that occur along a spectrum of seriousness.

The concerns relevant to publishers are behaviours that could negatively impact the reliability of the research record in terms of findings, conclusions, or attribution, including serious concerns that fall short of FFP but may nevertheless affect the reliability of the research and distort the research record. Therefore, these concerns might not always result in a full investigation by the institution. However, in these instances, an institution could find that a researcher is not ‘guilty of misconduct’ but coordination between institutions and journals is still needed because a correction or retraction might be required to inform readers (eg, to alert readers to redundant publication or warn of incorrect data).

In these guidelines, **COPE** does not define serious or lesser breaches of research integrity, or so-called questionable practices, but the term misconduct is used in its broadest sense to include any practice that deviates from standard research practices, relates to research integrity, and that might affect the reliability of the research record in terms of findings, conclusions, or attribution. This misconduct includes (but is not limited to) concerns about authorship, mentorship, data storage practices, as well as plagiarism, data fabrication, and manipulations of research and peer review. Research institutions can decide who is best to handle the specific process of investigation of each of these research integrity issues, based on internal policies and workflows.

Recommendations for cooperation between research institutions and journals

1. Points of contact

To facilitate communication, research institutions should designate and specify a nominated contact or contacts, or an office with responsibility for research reliability and integrity, as well as a contact for dealing with allegations of misconduct. Contact details of the research integrity officer, if named at an institution, should be published prominently on the institution’s website. If journals are unable to find the information for individuals handling allegations of research misconduct on institutional websites, they should contact the vice president, provost, or head of research, or the most senior person identified at the institution, to request the name, and email or telephone number of the correct institutional contact who handles these allegations.

The contact person (or office) should have no conflicts of interest with individual cases (ie, have no involvement with the researcher or project being investigated). If a suitable individual without conflicts of interest cannot be found, involving an external person in investigations might be necessary. The procedure for including an external person should be clearly stated in internal institutional policy.⁹

COPE encourages institutions undertaking primary research to develop robust policies to investigate misconduct that take into account potential conflicts of interest of all staff and leadership.

Journals should have clear public guidelines on how and to whom concerns about research integrity or allegations of research misconduct should be raised, and how these concerns or allegations will be handled. Clear contact information should be available, and **COPE** recommends a standardised email address (eg, [publication.ethics@\[publisherdomain.ext\]](mailto:publication.ethics@[publisherdomain.ext]) or [research.integrity@\[publisherdomain.ext\]](mailto:research.integrity@[publisherdomain.ext])).

COPE also recommends that journals should appoint an ombudsperson to adjudicate complaints that cannot be resolved internally or that are about the conduct of the editor.⁷

2. Information sharing about cases of research and publication misconduct

If an institution investigates allegations of misconduct against one of its researchers and finds that the reliability or attribution of published work is affected (eg, fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, or honest error), the institution should directly inform the journals where the affected work has been published.

If a case is investigated by another organisation (eg, a national body), the findings should be sent to the institution, who should in turn contact the relevant journals.

Institutions should be prepared to answer journals' questions about ongoing investigations that are necessary to determine the appropriate publishing outcome and be ready to share relevant summaries or sections from official reports of investigations of concerns with data or text, where permitted, without breaching confidentiality. Included would be evidence of data falsification or plagiarism, or forensics evidence, without naming specific individuals or attributing responsibility, or revealing the state or extent of the proceeding. This information will enable journals to more readily correct the published record and use clear language for retraction statements, correction notices, or other related editorial explanations.

Institutions should notify journals or publishers and answer their questions in cases of inappropriate publication practices, such as authorship misattribution, redundant publication, duplicate submission, failure to disclose competing interests, or misleading reporting. Although these practices may fall outside the institution's standard definition of research misconduct, as part of research integrity practices, institutions should have, or should develop, procedures to assess these practices, regardless of whether research misconduct occurred. Institutions should also encourage researchers to inform journals about honest errors that are likely to affect the validity of published work.

Journals should cooperate with investigations and respond to institutions' questions about allegations of misconduct in a timely manner. Institutions can also share or escalate these cases to the relevant editorial teams at the journal or publisher. Institutions should contact the publisher if they do not receive a response from the journal.

3. Communication between institutions and journals



INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

- acknowledge receipt of communications from journal editors or staff, or publisher ethics or research integrity staff promptly, and respond to allegations of research misconduct;
- inform journals (or respond to enquiries from editors or publishers) about their concerns as to whether the validity of publications are affected (eg, to confirm that the institution is reviewing the matter and will keep the journal updated) so that journals, editors, or publishers have enough information to decide if a post-publication amendment is needed;
- share the relevant findings of misconduct investigations about the data or text with journals so that journals and editors can determine if retractions or corrections are needed;
- ensure that all communications about misconduct investigations (such as press briefings and notifications to journals) are clear, accurate, and complete regarding the problematic data or text.



JOURNALS/PUBLISHERS SHOULD:

- acknowledge receipt of communications from institutions promptly and respond to findings of research misconduct;
- inform or respond to enquiries from institutions about possible misconduct and provide evidence to support these concerns (eg, analysis of text similarity in cases of suspected plagiarism, or evidence of inappropriate image manipulation);
- investigate allegations of misconduct by researchers acting as editors or peer reviewers for a journal (eg, that reviewers plagiarised another researcher's work), follow the appropriate **COPE** flowchart, and liaise with the institution as required¹⁰;
- follow the **COPE** guidelines on retractions.⁴

Institutions and journals should generally ensure that communications about ongoing misconduct investigations are confidential between the parties. However, journals may publish an expression of concern to inform readers about serious allegations that are likely to affect the reliability or integrity of an article. Journals, editors, and publishers should also consider that under several jurisdictions, ongoing disciplinary procedures or misconduct investigations are confidential. Institutions may not be able to share specific information with journals until the conclusion of the investigation but should notify the journal of unreliable or incorrect published work in a way that is consistent with confidentiality principles and regulations.⁸ In some jurisdictions, even stating the existence of an ongoing investigation could be prohibited, which creates additional problems for all parties. In these cases, institutions should provide information to requesters as soon as they are authorised to do so.

4. Responding to journal concerns about research integrity or publication practices

Institutions should investigate allegations if they meet the institution's definition of research misconduct. Assessment should also be made of questionable or unacceptable publication practices, and research integrity concerns, raised by journals.

Where possible, journals should provide evidence to support allegations of misconduct or questionable practices (eg, copies of overlapping publications, evidence of plagiarism). However, journals may have to protect the identity of complainants or peer reviewers.

Institutions should respond promptly and constructively to journals' requests for clarification of authorship or data ownership. Journals and publishers cannot adjudicate in authorship disputes and thus rely on institutions to arbitrate in these matters. Journals should respond to authorship adjudications from institutions and, where necessary, publish corrections (ie, by adding or removing authors from the byline of published or submitted articles). Journals and editors should follow the relevant **COPE** flowcharts in these cases.¹¹

Journals and publishers will often coordinate with institutions when disputes arise between researchers (eg, about authorship). Journals generally cannot investigate or resolve authorship disputes but can investigate potential misconduct about the integrity of their publications and processes (eg, authorship-for-sale cases). Otherwise, journals should refer the complaint or the authors themselves to the relevant institutional officials. These complaints might be dealt with by the department or faculty head, or university dean. Authors and institutions can refer to journal guidelines on authorship, ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) criteria, **COPE** guidelines on authorship, and other resources.^{9, 12-16}

5. Cases involving multiple institutions or journals

In collaborative research involving multiple institutions, **COPE** recommends that institutions cooperate and communicate in investigations in line with institutional policies and procedures. Ideally, one institution should be nominated to coordinate investigations and act as the point of contact, unless there is an obvious lead institution (eg, that administers the grant or employed the researchers at the time the research was conducted). This decision should be determined by the institution, and not imposed by the journal or publisher. Disputes between institutions over authorship or data ownership may require adjudication by an independent arbitrator agreeable to all parties.

Journals dealing with cases where multiple institutions are involved should first contact the lead institution (ie, that employed the corresponding author of the article, that funded the research or publication of the article, or that administered the grant for the research), communicating that other researchers at other institutions are involved, and requesting that the lead institution coordinate the investigation. If the institution contacted is not the primary coordinator institution, they should tell the journal which institution to contact to deal with the issue, or put them in touch with the relevant parties. Collaborating institutions should decide in a timely way which institution is taking responsibility as the lead institution in each case.

When research or publication integrity concerns (eg, plagiarism, breach of copyright, or redundant publication) involve several journals, editors should cooperate with each other and share information as required (eg, about submission dates and copyright transfer agreements) to resolve the issues.¹⁷

6. Ensuring the reliability of the published research record

If an institutional investigation, disciplinary hearing, or internal assessment into research integrity or misconduct uncovers behaviour that negatively impacts the reliability of the research record in terms of findings, conclusions, or attribution for one or more published articles, the institution should inform the journal or journals. Institutions should provide evidence of error, fraud, and ethical breaches so that the journal can make informed decisions about potential correction or retraction of the scholarly record. Similarly, journals should make post-publication amendments when provided with evidence of unreliable or invalid research, or of findings of misconduct, from appropriate institutional investigations.⁴

In general, articles should be retracted if the data are unreliable (for whatever reason), but if only a small part of the article is affected (and most of the results and conclusions are valid), then a correction should be published.⁴ Journals and publishers have the ultimate decision on corrections and retractions, even if these decisions are not in line with the institution's recommendations.

Journals rely on the honesty of researchers in declaring their contributions to a project, and should be prepared to publish corrections or retractions when honest errors are admitted. Published notices about these retractions should include the reasons for retraction, describing the context in the case of honest errors, to encourage researchers to report errors and avoid stigmas attached to retractions.⁴

In general, a paper should be retracted as soon as possible when evidence is found of the unreliability or invalidity of the data. Retraction can occur before institutional investigations of misconduct have been completed. Retraction statements should provide clear information to readers on the specific findings that invalidate the research, in terms of accuracy, validity, or veracity, and not focus on the culpability or intent of the authors.

Expressions of concern or notes/notifications may be published to alert readers to an ongoing review into actions that are likely to affect the reliability of published findings; these notices may be followed by a retraction, exoneration, or correction based on the conclusions from the institutional assessment or investigation. Expressions of concern should not be viewed as milder versions of retractions.

7. Journal and institutional policies and good practices



INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

- have programmes to educate researchers or policies for research integrity and good practice (eg, for authorship), describing research misconduct (eg, data falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism) and unacceptable publication practices (eg, redundant publication, inappropriate authorship, and use of confidential material by reviewers), and how these are handled.¹⁸ These policies should be publicised and enforced through investigations into allegations of misconduct and malpractices within the institution;
- include training in good publication practices as part of their programmes of education in research integrity;
- aim to create research environments that encourage good practice and lead by example in their own publication practices;
- strive to create systems for appointments and assessing research productivity that do not create incentives for unacceptable practices



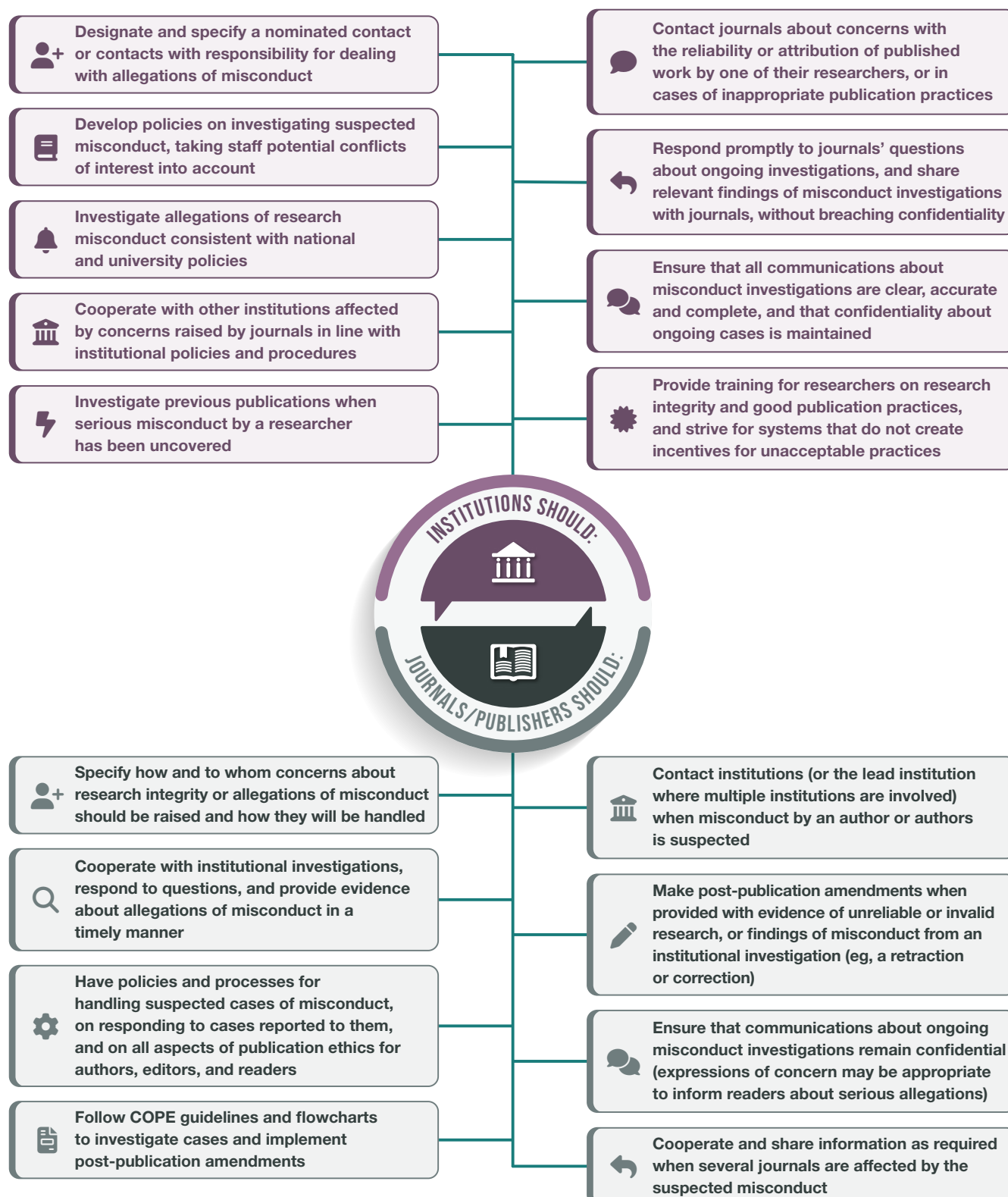
JOURNALS/PUBLISHERS SHOULD:

- have policies and processes about how they handle internally suspected misconduct and how they respond to institutions and other organisations that investigate cases of research misconduct (eg, national bodies);
- provide clear policies for authors and reviewers and have appropriate processes for editors and staff on all aspects of publication ethics.¹⁹ Journals should inform authors and readers about how they handle cases of suspected research misconduct or unacceptable publication practices.

8. Investigating previous publications

Research and publication misconduct may not be an isolated incident. In many cases, when serious misconduct is identified, investigation of the researcher's earlier work reveals further problems. Therefore, when a researcher has committed serious misconduct (such as data fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism), the institution should review a reasonable scope of their previous publications, including those published before the proven misconduct. If broad research integrity concerns are found, **COPE** recommends alerting previous and subsequent employers. These employers should review the work carried out by the discredited researcher when working at their institution to determine the reliability of publications arising from that work (see Reich²⁰ for an example). Employers might need legal advice on what information can be shared.

Summary of recommendations



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RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

1. Office of Research Integrity. Handling misconduct. <https://b.link/ori-misconduct>
2. UK Research Integrity Office. Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research. <https://b.link/ukrio>
3. Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. <https://b.link/australian-code>
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