VOICE OF EDITORS

Publication Ethics for Researchers

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The community of researchers unanimously agrees that a code of ethics must be followed when engaging in research and consenting to publication of research findings in academic journals. However, unethical research practice continues to cause concern. In an effort to address the concern, several researchers have prescribed remedial action. Publishers and members of the research community have also tried to raise awareness of this malady plaguing the research community. For example, Ethics in Research & Publication, a website created by Elsevier, a trusted publisher of science and health information, aims to raise awareness in this regard by providing examples of scientific misconduct and breach of publications ethics, including plagiarism. Similarly, the iThenticate blog discusses plagiarism and other scholarly misconduct issues in a bid to promote integrity and ethical writing practices. Nevertheless, unethical research practice continues unabated, as evidenced by some recent research publications that have investigated this issue (e.g. Cheema et al., 2011; Honig and Bedi, 2012). The motivation for this editorial piece is to examine and discuss feasible remedies for two issues at the forefront of unethical research practice – plagiarism by researchers and irresponsible peer–

reviews of research manuscripts. These two issues remain unresolved, and may continue to remain so unless judicious deliberations and concerted actions are taken by researchers, reviewers and publishers.

The incidence of high–profile plagiarism cases in higher education is a cause of major discomfort, both for researchers whose intellectual property is wrongfully used and for the society at large, because it violates the trust that consumers of research place on academic researchers and publishers of journals. Cheema et al. (2011) found that scholars engaged in plagiarism in higher education research, in most cases, intentionally, even though researchers, by and large, are found to have a general idea of what constitutes plagiarism. Their study also found cases of unintentional plagiarism, linked to lack of awareness of what constitutes plagiarism and the penalties involved. While researchers agree that plagiarism is a punishable offence and needs censoring, there is no straight–forward rule for such censorship. Several questions emerge here. For example, should there be variants of censorship for intentional and unintentional plagiarism? Is ignorance of plagiarism acceptable in researchers who are supposed to be highly educated and capable of analysing the consequences to themselves, to other researchers, and publishers when passing on

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someone else's work as their own? Is ignorance of law an excuse for the common man to commit crimes? If not, can ignorance of plagiarism be condoned for an educated researcher?

It may be argued that developments in information technology, particularly the Internet has, to some extent, made the issue of plagiarism a little blurred, particularly in respect of material used from the Internet. Hinman (2002) has argued that 'the very structure of the Internet undermines the notion of private intellectual property on the web: The inner dynamic of the Web moves us increasingly toward a much more communal notion of property'. Information sources on the Web may not display copyrights, and many even lack an identifiable author (Kolko, 2002). Be that as it may, the paradigm of conventional ethics is not really challenged by this. Moral and legal confusion may result from the vagueness of "fair use" provisions in copyright law when it is not clearly stated whether copying for personal use is permitted, but in most such cases, researchers are expected to override legal freedom with the call of ethics, particularly in consideration of the fact that material posted on the Internet, irrespective of whether it has a copyright notice or not, has originated elsewhere and is therefore not the researcher's own intellectual property.

The following definition of ethics serves to illustrate the point.

"When most people think of ethics (or morals), they think of rules for distinguishing between right and wrong, such as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), a code of professional conduct like the Hippocratic Oath ("First of all, do no harm"), a religious creed like the Ten Commandments ("Thou Shalt not kill…"), or a wise aphorisms like the sayings of Confucius. This is the most common way of defining "ethics": norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour".

David B. Resnik, Ph.D.

The above text taken from Resnik's article "What is Ethics in Research & Why is it Important?" clearly indicates that ethical conduct is essentially predicated on self-regulation, based on deliberation of the consequence of the individual's unethical conduct to himself and the society, and willingness to follow generally accepted principles of good conduct that individual members of a society contribute to and believe in. It can be seen that ethical conduct is largely based on an individual's natural sense of what is right and wrong, and rational human beings are therefore expected to behave ethically. Most would thus agree that a researcher does not need intense formal training to acquire knowledge of plagiarism; in a large part, it is just common sense of ethics.

In another study on plagiarism in academic research, Honig and Bedi (2012) raised concerns about high plagiarism rate amongst high-ranking scholars and the influence of such unethical practice on their students and other junior scholars. It is worth noting here that apart from incentives available to the researcher from an undetected plagiarised publication, the institution to which the researcher is affiliated as well as the journal that publishes the research also gain from

it, the former in terms of improved ranking and the latter in terms of publishing papers of high ranking scholars. The question is, for plagiarised research and its publication, should it be directed at all these three stakeholders and if so, with what levels of severity? Should reviewers nominated by the editors be also censored for failing to detect plagiarised research and recommending acceptance? While blatant copying of others work may be detected easily with software, finer shades of plagiarism, such as using another researcher' s unpublished research idea presented in a seminar, copying ideas from older journals without due credit, cooking data or extrapolating data when adequate response is not available for statistical analysis may remain undetected by even the most astute reviewer. Should reviewers be reprimanded along with the researcher(s) in such situations?

In terms of remedial action, Honig and Bedi (2012) suggest that a system of monitoring and censorship be implemented world-wide for all scholarly research and that scholarly researchers be held to the highest standards of ethical conduct. The question is whether censorship rules can be easily formulated. Let us assume a scenario to further highlight the complexity that may be encountered in censorship of plagiarism. Consider a medical practitioner who refers to a plagiarised published medical research report and prescribes the recommended therapy. The consequences to the patient, to the medical practitioner himself and to the community of medical practitioners at large could be disastrous. For a business researcher, the consequences may not be as devastating,

primarily because human life is not directly involved in such research and generally speaking, immediate application of research findings reported in business, management and economics journals do not take place with the same rapidity and frequency as medical journals. So the question is, should there be variants in censorship for plagiarism depending on the severity of consequences? Some may argue that institutional mechanisms such as monitoring and censorship may be difficult to implement uniformly and may serve limited purpose; plagiarism can only be eliminated if the researcher considers such practice below their dignity, and engage in ethical practice rather than succumbing to the lure of personal gains such as high performance evaluation and tenure that may wrongfully accrue from undetected plagiarised work.

Another area of concern is the unethical practice surrounding the peer-review process. Despite acceptance of this process within the research community as a means of ensuring quality, concerns have been raised about its overall effectiveness. Several criticisms have been raised in regard to adherence to ethics in the process. Cawley (2011) did a survey of review ethics in traditional academic publishing and found evidence of corrupt peer-reviewing practice by reviewers. In the study, 9.6% of scientists reported that their articles had been deliberately delayed so that the reviewer could publish a similar article elsewhere. Cantekin et al. (1990) mention reviewer bias, reviewer conflict of interest and breach of confidentiality as likely issues in the peer review process. Peters and Ceci (1982)

confirm that reviewers favor prominent researchers from well-reputed institutions. Editors or reviewers are known to look unfavorably upon manuscripts containing unconventional ideas and reject such articles, especially if they are from unknown researchers, thus blocking chances for lesser known researchers even if they have research that is ground-breaking. For example, Hans Krebs' description of the citric acid cycle and Barbara McClintock's description of mobile gene elements were rejected by *Nature, but later b*oth these authors won the Nobel Prize for their findings (Kilwein, 1999). Ethical practices of gatekeepers who guard the review process therefore come under intense scrutiny. Cawley (2011) takes a very radical stand on this issue and mentions 'empowerment of one's competitors to frustrate one's career, is an unethical empowerment and thus, peer review is, by its very nature, unethical in design' !!. In terms of remedial action, h*e suggests that ' in an ideal ethical system of peer review, the reviewers must be made known to the reviewed and to the public; they should be identified by name, affiliation, discipline and speciality'*. Once again, implementation of such a review practice remains debatable. Some may argue that such practices of unethical behavior may not be easily detected through policing; they can only be eliminated with self-regulated disciplined behavior on the part of editors and reviewers who are put into these positions of responsibility by the community of researchers.

To summarise, this editorial has raised questions that pertain to the complexity and feasibility of defining a uniform code of ethics for research malpractice. Arguments have been put forward to highlight the practical difficulties in framing and enforcing institutional mechanisms such as monitoring and censorship as remedial actions to curb the malpractice. Rather than prescribing institutional mechanisms, perhaps the remedy for the malady of unethical research practice lies in disciplined self-regulated ethical conduct of researchers, reviewers and publishers. I would like to conclude this editorial with an anecdote. Warren Buffet, when delivering an invited talk to MBA students in a US university was asked this question by one MBA student.. ' What qualities do you look for when you decide on hiring a new employee? He said, Integrity, Intelligence and Initiative, and in that order, because if the employee does not have integrity, but has high intelligence and initiative, he could be disastrous for my company!! Integrity, then, is the keyword in research, as in all walks of life.

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