



Author Ethical Dilemmas in the Research Publication Process

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ABSTRACT While editors and their editorial teams play an important role in gatekeeping the knowledge dissemination process, the majority of the responsibility to ensure the quality of the created knowledge and its fair review actually falls on the shoulder of the authors. This essay discusses the dilemmas faced by authors between maximizing their publication possibilities and being truthful to data, to co-authors, and to editors. Potential solutions are also discussed.

KEYWORDS ethical dilemma, ethics, research ethics, research publication

INTRODUCTION

Publishing research in top-tier management journals not only contributes knowledge to advance our understanding of organizational phenomena, but also brings the authors potential benefits, such as fame, recognition, a salary increase, or a career boost. Knowledge creation and publication in organizational science is a process that involves many people and takes a long time to complete (see Aguinis & Vaschetto, 2011, in this issue for a discussion of all the stakeholders in the publication process). In this process, researchers often face a conflict between publishing their research as frequently and quickly as possible, thereby compromising quality and conducting studies, and reporting results rigorously, giving appropriate credit to collaborators, and following explicit/implicit professional rules during the paper submission and review process. This article is about the ethical problems that authors face in the research and publication process.

In August 2010, a group of editors gathered in Montreal, Canada and held a symposium on publication ethics. The symposium was organized by Jeff Edwards, a former editor of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (OBHDP)*. All editors were from major management journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and others. I participated in this symposium as the newly appointed

editor of *OBHDP*. In the symposium we discussed many interesting scenarios, some of which were specifically related to author ethics in the research publication process. In this essay, I will pick a few of these scenarios to discuss the issues related to author responsibilities.

AUTHOR ETHICS IMPLIED IN FOUR SCENARIOS

Scenario 1: Data Reporting Ethics

A group of authors undertook a large-scale study that examined predictors of team effectiveness. In total, about ten independent variables were used to predict five dimensions of team effectiveness. The authors decided to present their results in three separate papers submitted to three different journals. Although the papers were separate, they addressed the same general question, and the measures in each study overlapped to a considerable extent. One predictor variable appeared in all three papers, and eight other predictor variables appeared in two of the three papers. The two papers that used the smallest set of the variables were the first to be published. The third paper, which was the most comprehensive, was published last and referenced the earlier papers. The editor noticed these references but did not have easy access to the papers because they had yet to appear in print.

The behaviour in this scenario is that the author wanted to publish several papers from a fixed amount of investment in the research project. Without speculating on the author's motivation, there are problems with this approach to creating new knowledge. The problems include: (i) may not be revealing the whole truth regarding the research findings; (ii) overusing the same sample to represent the general population when presenting partial findings in separate papers; and (iii) possibly distorting the real picture of how the ten independent variables are related to the five dimensions of team effectiveness.

The most important purpose of management research is to discover new organizational phenomena and to develop theories to understand and explain such phenomena. The phenomenon discovered through research should be reliable, stable, and replicable within given contexts. The theories proposed to account for the phenomenon should capture the essence of the relationships between all possible variables, explicate the mechanisms and contingencies underlying the observed phenomenon, and provide insights to more generalized settings and samples. Pursuing the truth and the whole truth behind certain phenomenon is therefore the ultimate purpose of scientific endeavour. In the above scenario, however, the authors examined ten factors (presumably based on theoretical reasoning and empirical observation) that might affect team effectiveness, but chose to use the 'peek-a-boo'^[1] approach to show partial results one at a time in separate papers. This would not only prevent the examination of the more complex/intricate relationships between the variables in a comprehensive manner, but also

could mislead the readers to believe that team effectiveness is related to only the factors reported in the paper. While this approach may maximize the number of publications for the authors, it may significantly damage the value of the scientific research.

My suggestion for the authors in this case is to write one paper to report their complete findings instead of writing several papers. One significant paper is more impactful in the field than several minor papers that make incremental contributions. One important paper that receives a lot of recognition and many citations is also more likely to establish one's reputation in the field. However, there are cases where scholars with different expertise collaborate and conduct a large-scale study that includes many different variables. For example, a scholar who does leadership research collaborates with a scholar of employee turnover research, and they design a large survey to be completed by employees from the same set of organizations. While there might be a few variables that both scholars wanted to include in the phenomena they study, the main independent and dependent variables of interest are different for the two scholars. In such a case, it would be reasonable to write two separate papers from this dataset, one focusing on leadership and the other focusing on employee turnover. Kirkman and Chen (2011) in this issue offer a detailed discussion on how to plan a multiple-paper study.

When there is doubt, it is often wise for authors to report to the editor what other papers they have written from their data and why they chose to write another paper using the same dataset. Many journals, in fact, ask the authors to self-report whether or not they used the dataset in other published or unpublished research before they submit a paper. Both the American Psychological Association (2011) (Standard 8.13) and Academy of Management (2011) (Code of Ethics 4.1.2) require their members to uphold this ethics principle when submitting papers to their journals. The reporting responsibility always lies on the shoulders of the author, whereas the judgment of whether or not such practice is appropriate or acceptable will be the editor's call.

Scenario 2: Co-authorship Ethics

Two students (A and B) in the same graduate programme developed similar research interests and started a collaborative relationship. They co-authored a paper that was eventually published, and after this initial success, they agreed to continue their collaboration after graduation. They soon faced the pressures of working towards tenure and struggled to balance the demands of research, teaching, and service. During a particularly gruelling semester, A had no time to work on a manuscript that they had discussed in some detail, so B wrote the entire manuscript, put both of their names on it, and submitted it to a journal. After the semester ended, the previously overwhelmed A offered to write the next manuscript on behalf of the duo. This pattern continued with A and B taking turns writing manuscripts and putting both of their names on

each submission. The department chair of one of the co-authors became aware of this reciprocal arrangement and, after further investigation, discovered that graduate students who collected and analysed data for the manuscript were rarely recognized as co-authors.

Collaboration can be very rewarding and enjoyable, but it can become tricky when it comes to co-authorship. There are several questions related to co-authorship ethics in this scenario. The first is whether or not a colleague who discussed ideas with you, but did not participate in any other stages of data collection or paper writing, deserves a co-authorship. Second, whether or not the reciprocal co-authorship exchange between A and B reflects the true contribution made to the knowledge creation process. Third, whether or not it is acceptable to exclude graduate students involved in the empirical testing of the research ideas as co-authors. Finally, the ultimate question is who should be the qualified candidates for co-authorship on a manuscript.

Admittedly, co-authorship determination is a rather gray area, and there are no set rules to follow. Authorship is a way to acknowledge a person's contribution to a paper or to give credit to a person who participated in the knowledge creation process. At the very least, authorship should NOT be used as a favour to someone you are indebted to, or as a means of maintaining a collaborative relationship. Whether or not a person deserves a co-authorship should depend on the significance of contribution this person made to the production of the final paper, and these people often include those who were involved in the development of the idea, designing of the study, collecting and analysing data, drafting the paper, or revising the paper. However, the significance level is a subjective judgment rather than a hard fact. I have seen cases where the leading author is generous and gives co-authorship to everyone who had any involvement at any stage of the research project; and I have also observed cases where the leading author discounts all other people's contribution.

Regarding the above scenario, my personal judgment is that A and B's conduct may have violated the general ethics in co-authorship determination. First, after the publication of their first co-authored paper (which was a true collaboration), they claimed that they 'wrote together' in subsequent papers, but one person never contributed beyond the idea discussion stage. There is an implicit agreement that they would take turns in writing a paper (which may include developing the idea, designing the study, collecting and analysing data, etc.) without the other person contributing beyond an agreement of the initial idea. At best, I think this person may deserve an acknowledgement from the leading author in a footnote, but a co-authorship would be an inaccurate reflection of his or her contribution. Moreover, by failing to give credit to graduate students who truly deserved co-authorship because of their heavy involvement in data collection and analyses, this constitutes a violation of the ethics of co-authorship. This also could have more serious consequences of discouraging the students' interest in research and even

damage their career progress. Finally, it is an ethical violation by taking credit for scholarship they do not truly deserve to boost their own careers. Suppose that they published seven articles together at the end of the fifth year after receiving their Ph.D. It is expected that both would get tenure in their respective universities given their publication record. However, among these seven articles, each person only deserved (co) authorship for four articles, which would make a very difficult case for tenure in many major research universities. Thus, it is clear that A and B's reciprocal co-authorship exchange behaviour involved both credit stealing and dishonesty from which they benefitted. Lee and Mitchell (2011) in this issue discuss how they handled the co-authorship issue over a long academic career.

Scenario 3: Ethics in Selecting Peer Reviewers

Following the advice of her advisor and mentor, a researcher adopts the practice of circulating manuscripts for peer review prior to submission. In response to the comments she receives, the researcher polishes each manuscript, dutifully acknowledges the peer reviewers in a footnote, and submits the manuscript for review. In one case, the researcher asked a colleague to take a final look at a manuscript before submitting it, and the colleague noticed a particularly long list of peer reviewers in a footnote. The colleague commended the researcher for her savvy, noting that the reviewers on the list were effectively eliminated from the review process, leaving only reviewers who were unlikely to detect substantive problems with the manuscript. Disturbed by the implications of this comment, the researcher removed the footnote in its entirety, knowing that some of the peer reviewers would probably be assigned to the manuscript. Fortunately, most of the comments she had received from the peer reviewers were favourable. By removing them from the footnote, there is a chance that the editor may choose some of them as reviewers for the manuscript. This could increase the chances that the manuscript would receive a favourable review from that journal.

As scholars, we are all encouraged to engage in peer review before submitting our paper for journal consideration for the purposes of improving and perfecting our manuscript to increase its chance to be accepted. The paradox here is that, as a general rule, editors are likely to exclude peer reviewers from the formal review process in order to maintain the double-blind review principle. Authors sometimes engage in certain strategies to 'game' the system to maximize the probability that a paper receives positive reviews. For example, they invite as many peer reviewers as possible to get a general sense as to how other scholars in the field evaluate their research, and then categorize them into the 'positive' and 'negative' camps. Then they may acknowledge only those who provided 'negative' feedback in the footnote in order to prevent them from being chosen as potential reviewers for their submission. As described in the above scenario, because most of the peer reviews were positive, the author purposefully did not acknowledge any of these peer reviewers in the footnote. I have also heard that some people only invite those who

are potential 'negative' reviewers and send their papers to them right before their submission, for the sole purpose of excluding them from the review process. These are obvious unethical behaviours because they violate the very purpose of scientific research, which is to pursue truth rather than just to publish a paper. Because the editor usually has no means of knowing who reviewed the paper beforehand, it is entirely the author's responsibility to reveal this information.

The downside of not revealing this information is that when the authors are 'caught' (which happens more often than one would expect), they would be putting their own reputation at risk. Because of the problem described above, editors seem to pay less and less attention to the list of peer reviewers indicated in the paper's footnotes; instead they just select the reviewers they perceive as most appropriate for the article, even when the reviewer is listed as one of the peer reviewers. If the invited reviewer informs the editor that he or she reviewed the paper earlier while his or her name was not on the peer reviewer list, then suspicion could arise. Conversely, if the listed peer reviewer does not mention his or her familiarity with the paper, suspicion could also arise. In any case, honestly reporting who peer reviewed your paper is the best way to avoid any ethical concerns. The editor will make the final decision as to who the most appropriate reviewers for the paper are, regardless of whether or not they had prior contact with the paper.

Scenario 4: Ethics in Dealing with the Review Process

An author submitted a manuscript and received a lukewarm invitation to revise and resubmit, one that the editor characterized as 'high risk'. The author was discouraged and debated whether to take on the revision or submit the manuscript to a different journal. After wrestling with this dilemma, the author decided to submit the manuscript to a second journal, assess the response, and then decide whether to embark on the high-risk revision for the first journal. The author reasoned that, if the manuscript was rejected at the second journal, then the high-risk revision might be worth the gamble, but if it received favourable reviews, the high-risk revision would not be worth the trouble. The author knew it was improper to submit a manuscript to more than one journal at a time, but with this strategy, the journals would review the manuscript at separate times. A reviewer for the second journal had reviewed the manuscript for the first journal, and she notified the editors of both journals. After being confronted by both editors, the author staunchly defended his behaviour and demanded to know the identity of the reviewer, claiming the reviewer had unjustifiably damaged the author's professional reputation in the eyes of the editors.

For authors, the review process itself is often stressful because of the numerous uncertainties involved. Even though it is always encouraging to receive a 'revise and resubmit' invitation (often times only between 15 percent and 30 percent of the manuscripts are invited for revision in most of the premier management journals), the 'high risk' label also scares authors, not to mention the patience-and-

endurance-test of the manuscript revision process itself. It is therefore understandable why the author in the above scenario came up with this 'clever' strategy to avoid the obvious violation of the 'submitting the same article under review simultaneously in two journals' rule but to get the benefit of having the chance to be reviewed in two journals.

There are at least three issues involved in this scenario: (i) From the author's perspective, the manuscript was NOT under review at the two journals *at the same time*, therefore he did not do anything wrong. Is it truly the case? (ii) From the author's perspective, the reviewer who reviewed the article for both journals should not have reported this to the journal editors because such reporting damages the author's professional reputation. Does the author have the right to know the identity of the reviewer? (iii) Given what happened in the case, did the author commit ethical violations?

To answer these questions, I would like to view this situation as analogous to a 'marriage' in human relationships. In this case, the first journal to which you submitted your paper is like the person you married; this journal becomes your spouse and you are legally bound. When the journal editor accepts the paper, you are happy and the marriage continues, and your paper has this journal as its final home. When the journal editor rejects the paper, the marriage automatically ends, and you are free to marry a new person, i.e., submit your paper to a second journal. These are clear-cut situations. The scenario described above is a little vague, but we can still apply this analogy in determining whether the author violated ethics. It was evident that the author was unhappy with her 'marriage' with the first journal, but before formally ending the relationship by withdrawing the paper (a divorce), she ventured out to the second journal. During the time that she sent her paper to the second journal, her legal relationship with the first journal still existed. Essentially, she had secretly 'proposed to and then married' to the second journal without telling either 'spouse'. Whether or not the 'spouse' finds out the truth, this person committed a crime of 'bigamy'. In other words, even though the author did not think she did anything wrong, she in fact violated the basic rule of 'not submitting the same article under review in two journals at the same time'.

Another ethical violation the author committed in this case is to ask the editor to reveal the identity of the reviewer who reported her 'crime'. Double blindness is one of the most important rules in the review process followed by virtually all major journals. The purpose of this is to ensure the fairness, neutrality, and objectivity of the review. Not at any point is the editor allowed to break this rule, and not at any point should an author ask for this information. Moreover, the author's accusation of the reviewer's intention of damaging her professional reputation is simply not warranted because the reviewer had no knowledge of the author's identity; he or she just provided relevant information for the editor's reference.

Additional Considerations

The four scenarios discussed above are all real stories collected from the editors who participated in the symposium. You may not have experienced the exact same situation, but may have encountered variations of these scenarios. The four scenarios I have discussed are just a few of the many ways authors are responsible for the ethicality of the publication process. Let me list a couple more for you, as authors, to ponder and think about. I pose a few questions about the possible ethics involved in each situation but do not provide the answers to them. If you know the answer to these questions without any doubt, you are either totally right or totally wrong. I encourage you to consult your experienced colleagues or editors of major journals for the correct answers to the ethical dilemma involved.

An author had a manuscript rejected at a top journal. The author was very disappointed, given that he thought the manuscript was a perfect fit for this particular journal. While struggling with this situation, the author learned that a new editor was taking over the journal and bringing a new group of associate editors and board members. After the editorial transition was complete, the author resubmitted the manuscript to the journal, thinking it made sense to give it another chance. After all, authors submit rejected manuscripts to other journals all the time, and with an entirely new editorial team, the author reasoned that the journal could be considered a different publication outlet. This impression was bolstered by an editorial published by the new editor, which described several ways in which the journal would depart from its prior emphasis and focus. The editor sent the manuscript out for review, and by chance, one of the reviewers had been the action editor of the rejected manuscript. The reviewer notified the editor with a scathing email saying that the manuscript should be summarily rejected and that the author should be banned from the journal.

Questions to ponder:

- Did the author commit an ethical violation by resubmitting the rejected manuscript?
- Under what conditions is it appropriate to resubmit a rejected manuscript to the same journal?

While reviewing a manuscript for a journal, an alert reviewer recognized sections of text that seemed very familiar. After further investigation, the reviewer found that the familiar text was taken almost verbatim from a recently published article. The reviewer contacted the editor and described in detail the overlap between the manuscript and the published article, admonishing the editor to immediately reject the manuscript and expose the author to the editor of the journal in which the article had been published. The editor contacted the author about the situation, who responded by saying that the redundant text mostly involved the literature review and methods

section, which would naturally overlap because the studies described in the two papers drew from the same literature and used the same design, measures, and analytical procedures. The author added that the literature review and methods sections of the papers had been written by his or her graduate student who was new to the publication process.

Questions to ponder:

- Does the overlap between the published article and manuscript constitute an ethical violation?
- To what extent is the overlap the responsibility of the author versus the graduate student?

CONCLUSION

Because paper publication is so tightly connected to a scholar's academic career, there is often the temptation for authors to find 'loopholes' in the system and use them for their own advantage. Meanwhile, the paper publication process follows an *honour system* that does not monitor authors' behaviours, which makes it even more tempting to take advantage of the system. However, if every author starts to do this, there will be only one outcome, i.e., untruthful knowledge or decreased quality of the published research, which could bring down the reputation of the entire management research field. Therefore, to protect the reputation of our profession and the integrity of scientific inquiry, we as authors have the responsibility to be truthful to the data, to the co-author(s), and to the editor(s). It is written in the Code of Ethics in our academic associations such as the Academy of Management, American Psychological Association, and the International Association for Chinese Management Research. But more importantly, it should be deeply ingrained into our brains to guide our research behaviour at all times.

Sooner or later the people who tried to 'game' the system will get caught. Our academic circle is rather small, and the number of scholars who do similar research is often only a handful. It is very likely that your paper will be reviewed by the same set of scholars regardless which journal you submit your paper to. These scholars are familiar with the work in the field, and they will recognize if there is a resemblance between papers. Once you are caught, your reputation will suffer. Of course, refraining from such 'gaming' behaviour is not only for protecting one's reputation. It is simply the right thing to do. It is our responsibility and duty to be ethical in our conduct as scholars and scientists in our pursuit of 'truth' (Kaplan, 1964).

In conclusion, authors play important roles in the knowledge creation process. Their ethics will have a huge impact on the quality of the knowledge they create

and disseminate to the rest of the world, on the appropriate credit-giving to the creators of such knowledge, as well as on the integrity of the profession.

NOTE

[1] 'Peek-a-boo' is a game played by or with very young children, usually infants, typically in which an adult covers the face (of the adult or of the infant), and then suddenly uncovers the face or reappears, calling 'Peek-a-boo!'. Infants usually laugh and enjoy the game. It refers to seeing the hiding part of the whole thing.

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