

Springer Policy on Publishing Integrity

Guidelines for Journal Editors

Quick Links

Introduction

Statement of Ethical Issues

Seven Steps for Journal Editors When Encountering Possible Misconduct

Ethical Issues – Definitions, Examples, Recommended Actions

Undeclared Conflict of Interest

Authors

Reviewers

Disputed Authorship

Authorship without the author's knowledge

Unacknowledged authorship

Plagiarism/Duplicate Publication

Plagiarism

Duplicate publication

Data Fabrication/Falsification

Data fabrication

Data falsification

**Click on the quick link to go directly to the detail in the text
that you are interested in**

INTRODUCTION

Springer's business is publishing. We provide scientific and professional communities throughout the world, with superior specialist information – produced by authors and guided by editors across geographic boundaries and cultures in a nurtured collegial atmosphere of which we are justifiably proud.

We foster communication among researchers, faculty, students, and professionals enabling them to work more efficiently, thereby advancing knowledge and learning.

Springer's editors are central to our mission of publishing high-quality content. Our editors safeguard the quality of our journals and books and manage their content at every stage of the publishing process – from conception to final publication. In this process, an editor might encounter ethical issues. These guidelines serve to help manage ethical issues that may arise.

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL ISSUES

Springer has identified four fundamental ethical issues that a journal editor might encounter¹:

- 1) Undeclared conflict of interest
- 2) Disputed authorship
- 3) Plagiarism/duplicate publication
- 4) Data fabrication/falsification

Springer has identified these issues based on the landmark article by Magne Nylenna and Sigmund Simonsen, *Scientific Misconduct: A New Approach to Prevention*, and concurs in the belief that "...scientific misconduct is a continuum ranging from honest errors to outright fraud."²

In these guidelines you will find clear descriptions and practical examples of all four issues and clear plans of action if misconduct is substantiated³ by the responsible editors and/or Springer.

In finding evidence, defining the issues, and providing practical examples we closely followed the guidelines of the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE), which is a forum for editors of peer-reviewed journals to discuss issues related to the integrity of the scientific record. COPE has defined these acts of misconduct and misconduct cases on its website⁴, which is freely accessible to all editors at <http://publicationethics.org/>.

Please note that the COPE examples presented in this document to illustrate the issues are actual case studies and are used with the permission of COPE.

SEVEN STEPS FOR JOURNAL EDITORS WHEN ENCOUNTERING POSSIBLE MISCONDUCT

These guidelines are intended to help journal editors recognize misconduct and take appropriate action. However, before any steps are undertaken, the editor needs to make sure that all allegations and the evidence to support them are substantial and unquestionable. Before reaching this point, it is vital that editors take on an arbitral, investigative, and communicative role. An editor should keep a record of all communication and maintain confidentiality. **Judgment should always be provided in an official manner (email and/or letter) accompanied by substantial evidence supporting the decision.**

Springer encourages editors to thoroughly investigate all possible scenarios that could have led to the alleged misconduct. All alternative possibilities should be disproved before taking any final action.

If, on the basis of substantial allegations, further investigation, into misconduct relating to the four issues mentioned above is warranted, the following seven steps should be followed:

1) **Remain a neutral player!**

Up to the point of clear and unmistakable evidence for misconduct, the editor is a neutral communicator for all parties involved. It is important not to confirm nor deny any of the allegations or rebuttal arguments until clear evidence has been provided and a clear decision has been made.

2) **Raise the issue with the accused (co-) author(s) in a timely manner.**

It is vital that clarity is communicated quickly to all involved stakeholders. Ask both sides for sufficient evidence to support their positions.

3) **Record the allegation and the evidence of the complainant.**

Respond to the complainant in a neutral and timely manner. At this point the editor should examine whether a conflict of interest exists and upon disclosure either proceed accordingly.

4) **Assess and compare the evidence of both parties.**

If the situation is unclear, request an additional explanation in writing. Keep in mind that it is better to have too much information than not enough.

5) **Take time to assess exactly what has happened.**

It is possible that no malicious act has taken place and that the allegations are based on miscommunication or misunderstanding. If so, make sure that all parties are made aware of this by providing them with a written judgment.

6) **Be prepared to take the next steps.**

If the evidence leads to the belief that further investigation is required because misconduct may have occurred, start involving the following parties in the following sequence:

- 6.1) If not yet done, involve the Springer editor and present him/her with the collected allegations and/or evidence uncovered to date.
- 6.2) Involve members of the journal's Editorial Board.
- 6.3) Via Springer can consult professional bodies and/or organizations – such as COPE⁵ that have experience in such matters.
- 6.4) Involve other secondary parties, such as colleagues or superiors at the research institution of the (co-)author involved.

7) **Define findings**

Define findings according to one of the four ethical issues and follow up on the actions in case of proven misconduct as described further in these guidelines.

During the investigation process:

It is vital for the editor to involve these parties in this sequence and with utmost caution! Keep in mind that the editor is still a neutral player! Any confirmation or denial can be perceived as an official decision. Keep in mind that the outcome of an investigation and the resulting allegations can have a (dramatic) impact on the future of the accused (co-) author(s).

ETHICAL ISSUES – DEFINITIONS, EXAMPLES, RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Undeclared Conflict of Interest

Here we must distinguish between a conflict of interest between **authors** and a conflict of interest between **reviewers**:

Authors

When authors fail to declare all conflicts of interest relevant to their publication (i.e. relationships, both financial and personal, that might affect the conduct or interpretation of their work and about which editors or readers might wish to be made aware).

Example:

For authors

COPE case number 00-12 (2000)

A paper on a controversial topic from three authors is published. All three authors complete forms to say that they did not have competing interests. This was stated at the end of the paper. A reader subsequently contacts the journal to say that she had clear evidence that one of the authors did have competing interests. He had, she says, been involved in legal cases and received substantial payments for his work. The article was related to these legal cases.

The editor intends to write to the complainant and ask permission to send her letter to the author. If the author accepts that he did have a competing interest, then the journal will publish a statement to that effect.

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:

By journal editor:

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all co-authors in which they are informed about this specific act of misconduct and are possibly asked for further explanation and/or advice.
- ▶ The author is given a clear warning.

By Springer:

- ▶ Publication of a Springer Erratum that reports the conflict.

Reviewers

When reviewers fail to declare all conflicts of interest relevant to the submission being considered (i.e. relationships, both financial and personal, that might prevent an unbiased and objective evaluation of the work).

Example:

For reviewers

COPE case number 97-03 (1997)

A journal sends a paper to a reviewer, who subsequently suggests that the journal should reject the paper, principally because the reviewer thinks it is “virtually identical to a paper in press by the same authors.” The journal rejects the paper with these comments. The author replies to the journal saying that he does not believe that he had had a fair review of his paper because, he thought, the reviewer had a conflict of interest.

He writes: “The individual involved is situated in a rival institute and is presently undergoing negotiation to merge his and my institutes. This puts us in direct conflict with each other both academically and with regard to administrative details. Therefore I do not believe we have received a unbiased review of our paper.” He also writes: “Comments on our paper, most of which were unfavorable, have been cited by this individual to other senior academics and editors of other journals.”

The author does not respond to the accusation of duplicate publication. The editor of the journal writes back to this author saying that if he has correctly identified the reviewer (which seems likely), then the editor is disturbed that the reviewer did not declare a conflict of interest. The editor also asks him to respond to the point of possible redundant publication.

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:*By journal editor:*

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all co-authors in which they are informed about this specific act of misconduct and are possibly asked for further explanation and/or advice.
- ▶ The reviewer will not be consulted again by the journal.

By Springer:

- ▶ Publication of a Springer Erratum that reports the conflict.

2. Disputed Authorship

Disputed authorship occurs when those involved with a research project or publication cannot agree on how authorship should be represented.

Such a dispute can have two forms: **authorship without the author's knowledge** and **unacknowledged authorship**

Authorship without the author's knowledge

A published researcher is mentioned as a corresponding author in an article on which he/she has not cooperated.

Example:*Authorship without the author's knowledge**COPE case number: 99-17 (1999)*

Submission without knowledge of the corresponding author

A case report is received and the corresponding author is duly notified. The corresponding (and senior author) immediately faxes back, asking who had submitted the case report as he has not been consulted and has not seen the manuscript. The submission letter contains the names of all four authors; three of the signatures have been made using the same pen and probably the same hand. The signature of the senior and corresponding author was clearly "P.P." The editor responds, pointing out the misconduct and receives a prompt written response from the senior author agreeing that this is not the way to proceed. The senior author does not believe that the matter should be taken further other than through a formal letter from the editor to the author who had submitted the manuscript.

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:*By journal editor:*

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all other involved authors in which they are informed about the issue and possibly asked for advice.
- ▶ A copy of this letter is also sent to the head of the respective institute/ university.
- ▶ The corresponding author is banned in participating in any of the journal's publications for an initial period of 3 years.

By Springer:

- ▶ *Optional:* Chief editors of other Springer journals will be informed about the perpetrated act and related decision.
- ▶ Publication of a Springer Erratum that reports the conflict.

Unacknowledged authorship

An author is not acknowledged or incorrectly acknowledged for his/her contribution to an article.

Example:

The missing author

COPE case number: 98-16 (1998)

In March 1996, Journal A publishes a case report about an eye condition with two authors credited, Drs X and Y, both radiologists. Exactly two years later, one of their former colleagues (Dr Z) writes to the editor claiming that she had been responsible for the patient's care; she was the ophthalmologist on call the night the patient was admitted. She argues that, as the clinician responsible for the patient, her name should have been on this case report. Indeed, the clinical facts of the case are, she alleges, inaccurate. Dr Z wants Journal A to publish a full case report with additional facts about the case history. The editor of Journal A writes to the corresponding author of the original case report. Dr X discovers that the patient's chart was missing; it had been taken out at the request of Dr Z. It turns out that Dr Z was "moonlighting" in the hospital at the time that the patient was admitted. The clinical history remains disputed. What should the editor do next?

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:

By journal editor:

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ The journal editor decides whether or not to invite the unacknowledged author to write a letter to the editor (to be published in the next edition of the journal).
- ▶ A letter is sent to all other authors involved in which they are informed about the perpetrated act and possibly asked for advice.
- ▶ A copy of this letter is also sent to the head of the respective institute/university.
- ▶ The corresponding author is banned in participating in any of the journal's publications for an initial period of 3 years.

By author:

- ▶ The author writes a Letter to the Editor (which will possibly be published in the next edition of the journal).

By Springer:

- ▶ *Optional:* Chief editors of other Springer journals will be informed about the perpetrated act and related decision.
- ▶ Publication of a Springer Erratum that reports the conflict.

3. Plagiarism/Duplicate Publication

Plagiarism

Plagiarism occurs when someone presents the work of others (data, text, or theories) as if they were his/her own and without proper acknowledgment.

Example:

Plagiarism

COPE case number: 08-27 (2008)

A severe case of plagiarism?

A review article is submitted to the journal and sent out for peer review. One of the reviewers brings to the editor's attention that a substantial number of sentences and sections of the paper have been directly copied verbatim from book chapters and a monograph that he had written in the past. The editor asks the reviewer to provide the texts in question. The editor carefully compares the submitted manuscript with the publications provided by the reviewer and concludes that the submission presents a severe case of plagiarism with multiple copy-and-paste examples throughout the entire manuscript.

The editor contacts the corresponding author by email and requests an explanation within a week. The corresponding author replies within the deadline, but the editor does not find the explanation satisfactory. He then contacts the heads of the corresponding author's institution by email but does not hear from them, even though he has sent them several reminders.

In the meantime, the editor decides to reject the submission because of plagiarism. In his letter of rejection, the editor informs the corresponding author that he has taken action and has contacted the heads of the author's institution.

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:

By journal editor:

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all other authors involved in which they are informed about the perpetrated act and possibly asked for advice.
- ▶ A copy of this letter is also sent to the head of the respective institute/university.
- ▶ The corresponding author is banned in participating in any of the journal's publications for an initial period of 5 years.

By Springer:

- ▶ *Optional:* Chief editors of other Springer journals will be informed about the perpetrated act and related decision.
- ▶ Retraction of the article (recommended as most severe, irreversible repercussion):
 - ▶ **Online First publication:** The article will be fully retracted from Springer Link, Springer's online full-text journal platform – the PDF will no longer be available and no related articles, abstracts, and references will be found on SpringerLink. The initial PDF document will be replaced by a retraction note. Springer will pursue the retraction of this article from other online services besides SpringerLink. Please note that the metadata of the article (author's name and title) will still be findable on SpringerLink.
 - ▶ **Print publication in journal issue:** Since the article is already published, a retraction is no longer possible. The content will remain in its existing print form. However, in the next issue of the journal a retraction note referring to the article will be published. In addition, the title and each page of the related online article will be marked with a clear "RETRACTED" stamp.

Duplicate publication

When somebody uses his/her own work (data, words, or theories) presenting it as if it were completely new.

Example:

Duplicate publication

COPE case number: 01-25 (2001)

An author publishes a paper in Journal A that looks extremely similar to one already published as guidelines in Journal B. Of 48 paragraphs of text, 41 are almost identical. It has since transpired that several authors who were involved in the writing of the article published in Journal B have not been acknowledged. Prior publication elsewhere has not been acknowledged in the Journal A paper. The editor writes to the authors requesting an explanation. He informs them that the journal takes a strong line on duplicate publication and disclosure of related publications, and that there should also be an appropriate acknowledgement of the contribution of other authors. The editor also writes to the editor of Journal A asking him to look at both of the papers and to give him his views. Has enough been done?

Action(s) in case of publication and proven misconduct:

By journal editor:

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journals are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all other authors involved in which they are informed about the perpetrated act and possibly asked for advice.
- ▶ A copy of this letter is also sent to the head of the respective institute/university.
- ▶ The corresponding author is banned in participating in any of the journal's publications for an initial period of 5 years.

By Springer:

- ▶ *Optional:* Chief editors of other Springer journals will be informed about the perpetrated act and related decision.
- ▶ Retraction of the article (recommended as most severe, irreversible repercussion):
 - ▶ **Online First publication:** The article will be fully retracted from Springer Link, Springer's online full-text journal platform – the PDF will no longer be available and no related articles, abstracts, and references will be found on SpringerLink. The initial PDF document will be replaced by a retraction note. Springer will pursue the retraction of this article from other online services besides SpringerLink. Please note that the metadata of the article (author's name and title) will still be findable on SpringerLink.
 - ▶ **Print publication in journal issue:** Since the article is already published, a retraction is no longer possible. The content will remain in its existing print form. However, in the next issue of the journal a retraction note referring to the article will be published. In addition, the title and each page of the related online article will be marked with a clear "RETRACTED" stamp.
- ▶ *Optional:* If both articles are identical, the link to the contaminated article can be redirected to the DOI of the original article.

4. Data fabrication/falsification

The same repercussions are applicable for **data fabrication** and **data falsification**, which are considered incidents of grave misconduct.

Data fabrication

Making up research findings

Example:

Data fabrication

COPE case number 06-18 (2006)

Possible fabricated data -- a conspiracy of silence

I became involved in this issue after reports from doctors in a developing country alleged that three papers in a systematic review published by my company may have been fabricated. The papers in question had co-authors in two other countries and so I contacted them. One co-author replied that he had concerns, but as none of the studies was conducted in his country, he had no data. He said he was unaware of the papers until Dr X told him they had been accepted in the journals. Another co-author was unaware of when or where the studies took place. He said that Dr X had been suffering from depression for several years and had committed suicide. He had been included as a co-author on his last three articles more out of friendship than any active scientific cooperation. A third co-author explained that his role was "philosophical" rather than clinical. To his knowledge the study was conducted personally by Dr X, probably in his own country, and he only helped him with discussions and text revisions. Because several of Dr X's papers were published by Journal A, I wrote to the editor of Journal A to see if he had any concerns. He replied that he had doubts about the validity of the data, which were raised in an editorial by Dr Z. I am waiting to hear if the editor of Journal A is willing to help investigate the papers. I also contacted Dr Z and raised the possibility of fraud with him. He said that he had "serious concerns about the work" but declined to help me investigate. We have withdrawn the review until we can find out if the data are real. I have written to the National Committee on Ethics in Research in the author's country but have had no reply. An international expert on the statistical detection of fraud is currently looking at the papers. He has some concerns but his investigation is ongoing.

Data Falsification

Manipulating research data with the intention of giving a false impression. This includes manipulating images (e.g. micrographs, gels, radiological images), removing outliers or "inconvenient" results, changing data points, etc.

Example:

Data falsification

COPE case number 02-05 (2002)

New commercial cure for a common but incurable problem, role of sponsor

A randomized controlled trial was submitted, showing that a new treatment, which is a combination of familiar compounds, is highly beneficial in a common but largely untreatable problem. The authors came from several different countries and included people from the company that manufactures the treatment. The editors had great difficulty finding reviewers for the paper as many simply returned it, saying that they could not produce an opinion. The reviewer who did eventually do so said that the results were not credible and that all the signs suggested that the paper might be fraudulent. The statistical adviser was asked for his opinion, and, although he agreed that the results were very unlikely, he was less convinced that there had been any data manipulation. He suggested that the editors request the raw data. The editors were unsure what to do at this point. Their previous experience of asking for raw data was that it involved a highly complex and very expensive exercise. They wondered if instead they should simply alert the authors' employers – six different employers from four different countries – and ask them to investigate. The editors almost certainly did not want to publish the trial.

Action(s) in case of proven misconduct:*By journal editor:*

- ▶ All editors and all involved reviewers of the respective journal are notified at the same time.
- ▶ A letter is sent to all authors involved in which they are informed about the perpetrated act and possibly asked for an explanation.
- ▶ A copy of this letter is also sent to the authors' supervisors at their respective companies.
- ▶ The corresponding author is banned in participating in any of the journal's publications forever.

By Springer

- ▶ *Optional:* Chief editors of other Springer journals will be informed about the perpetrated act and related decision.

In the event of publication:

- ▶ Retraction of the article (recommended as most severe, irreversible repercussion):
 - Online First publication:** The article will be fully retracted from Springer Link, Springer's online full-text journal platform – the PDF will no longer be available and no related articles, abstracts, and references will be found on SpringerLink. The initial PDF document will be replaced by a retraction note. Springer will pursue the retraction of this article from other online services besides SpringerLink. Please note that the metadata of the article (author's name and title) will still be findable on SpringerLink.
 - Print publication in journal issue:** Since the article is already published, a retraction is no longer possible. The content will remain in its existing print form. However, in the next issue of the journal a retraction note referring to the article will be published. In addition, the title and each page of the related online article will be marked with a clear "RETRACTED" stamp.

¹ Nylenna & Simonsen, *The Lancet*, 367, 1882 – 1884, 10 June 2006.

² Nylenna & Simonsen, *The Lancet*, 367, 1882 – 1884, 10 June 2006, page 1883.

³ If misconduct cannot be proven, no action will be undertaken.

⁴ www.publicationethics.org, 28 January 2009.

⁵ COPE is the Committee for Publishing Ethics and functions on a small scale as a separate advising entity. When consulting COPE, we would suggest that editors first read through guidelines, policy, and cases before requesting them to look into a specific case. Please note that Springer should be notified in advance of submitting a request for an investigation to COPE.