

# The Relevance of Integrity in Research and Publication

Ademola J. Ajuwon

Department of Health Promotion and Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Scholarly publication is a verifiable indicator of academic achievement<sup>1, 2</sup>. The benefits of scholarly publications are numerous for authors: respect among peers, promotion, and global visibility. Of the existing outlets of dissemination, most scientists rely on journals to disseminate their work mainly because of peer review<sup>3</sup>, a quality control mechanism in which an informed third party scrutinizes the rigor of the scientific methodology and the ethical integrity of the work described in the manuscript, before it is published by the journal<sup>4</sup>.

It is a global best practice that authors and reviewers of manuscripts demonstrate integrity in all the phases of the review process, from submission, peer review, revision, acceptance or rejection of the manuscript. It is for this reason that, authors when submitting a manuscript, are required to attest that the manuscript has not been published before, that it is not under any review for publication by any other journal, and that all authors have approved of it<sup>5</sup>.

The Malawi Medical Journal (*MMJ*) have had its own share of experiences in detecting many cases of infractions during submission and review of manuscripts.

Examples of the infractions detected by the *MMJ* editorial team are fragmentation (salami slicing), duplication, plagiarism, and simultaneous submission of a manuscript to multiple journals. Each one of these infractions is a serious breach of integrity with potentially serious consequences for authors, the journal and society. Fragmentation is a practice whereby authors inappropriately divide study outcomes or components into several articles primarily to inflate the value of authors' curriculum vitae for pecuniary purposes<sup>5</sup>. The goal of those involved in fragmentation is to achieve quantity instead of quality publications. This practice also has negative impact on journals and readers. For example, fragmentations disproportionately consume journal spaces and make literature search cumbersome<sup>5</sup>. However, a caveat on fragmentation is appropriate. Due to word limit constraints, it is not feasible to present in a single paper, all findings from a large, multi-center research. Instead, the ethically acceptable practice is for authors to publish related outcome data in an article and make full disclosure that data presented in the paper is a component of a big study. Authors are also expected to cite previous related publications, if any, to enable readers have full understanding of the research.

Duplicate publication refers to a publication "*which has duplicated previous, simultaneous, or future publications by the same author or authors*"<sup>5</sup>. Duplicate publications may mislead readers into believing that each article is the outcome of a different research. Simultaneous submission of a manuscript to multiple journals for publication is unacceptable not only because it is a breach of integrity but also because it is a

waste of efforts when two or more journals review the same manuscript at the same time. Of course, authors can submit the same manuscript to another journal after it has been rejected by the first journal.

The factors contributing to publication misconduct are pressure to succeed arising from the publish-or-perish syndrome in many academic institutions, and the proliferation of predatory journals<sup>3</sup>, which influence some authors to neglect their ethical responsibilities to and adhere to best publication practices. Regardless of the reasons the fact that these infractions continue to occur underscore the need for editorial vigilance and editorial systems and practices to prevent them.

All stakeholders involved in journal publication have important roles to play to minimize the incidence of publication misconduct. Editors must continue to inform readers and scientists interested in submitting manuscripts to the journal of the need for integrity in the entire review process.

In addition, institutions to which authors are affiliated need to develop clear policies and train staff of the importance of integrity not only in conduct of research but also in disseminating findings. Institutions also have a responsibility to impose sanctions on affected authors in proven cases of publication misconduct. Senior faculty have a duty to mentor junior researchers and serve as role models for promotion of integrity in all scholarly activities including publications of research findings. In signing attestation forms during manuscript submission, authors must understand the implications of dishonesty and its consequences. When implemented these concerted efforts are likely to promote integrity, contribute to prevention of publication misconduct, and enhance the profile of journals as credible sources of scientific information.

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Correspondence: Ademola J. Ajuwon  
(ajajuwon@yahoo.com)

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