

Researcher Perspectives on Publishing Ethics

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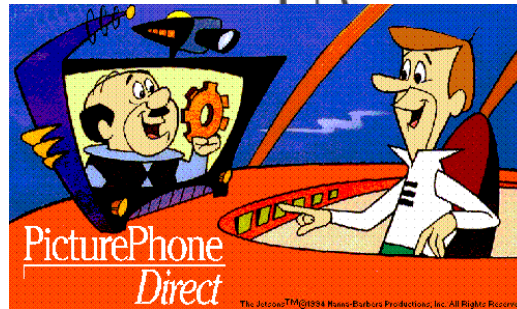
Graduate Programs in Life Sciences

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The pressures of business



Academic research is a business -- there is pressure to produce a product that “sells”

- The Parent Company -- The University
- The Investors -- Your Department and Chair
- The Employees -- Students, Postdocs, Fellows, Staff
- The Customers -- Foundations and Federal Agencies
- Sales -- Talks, posters, etc. that can tell your story
- The Product -- Your scholarly work (papers, books, etc.)

All things follow the pub

- Peer-reviewed publications demonstrate a productive and significant research program.
- They are needed to secure funding (e.g., grants), especially over the long term.
- Pubs get you in the door to speak about your research (conferences, seminars, etc.).
- This perception -- that all things follow the publication -- means that your employer will value them above almost everything else when making decisions about promotion, retention or tenure.

These are all wrong

- Lying
- Cheating
- Stealing

If you are unsure whether you are properly addressing an issue, ask a colleague you respect. An open discussion of ethical issues is the best way to resolve them.

1. Ethics of coauthorship

2. Reviewer ethics

1. Ethics of coauthorship

- Most research publications have multiple authors.
- Each coauthor should have made a substantive contribution to the work.
- Authorship order should be consistent with standards in the field and agreed to by all coauthors.
- Each coauthor may have distinct:
 - Research goals
 - Career goals
 - Power or status
- There is an ethical obligation of each author to maximize the benefits for each coauthor within the context of their contributions to the research and manuscript.

Choosing a journal

“High-impact” vs. specialty

- There are advantages and disadvantages to each.
- These may differ for each coauthor.

Advantages to publishing in a high-impact journal

- Prestigious
- More researchers may see your study
- May open up new funding opportunities
- Boost for the careers of junior coauthors
- Many institutions and granting organizations weigh journal “impact factors” as a measure of research significance

Disadvantages to publishing in a high-impact journal

- The review and revision process often takes longer
- May divert valuable resources (time, money, attention) from other projects or publications
- Could tempt you to alter your interpretations to find the “sexy” angle
- One high-impact paper often combines studies that could have appeared in multiple smaller papers
- In some cases, a larger number of publications in quality specialty journals is viewed more favorably than a smaller number of “bigger” papers

Students

- Need peer-reviewed papers to obtain their degree
- Higher profile pubs may help them obtain quality postdocs/fellowships, competitive grants, awards
- Delayed publications may hamper them in their career progression.

Postdocs / Research Fellows

- If they aspire to an academic career, at least one high-profile publication is an important differentiator
- Primary authorship is also critical for those who want a faculty position
- Many may have career goals (clinical practice, industry, writing, etc.) that stress other factors (type of journal, number of papers, etc.)

Junior vs. Senior Faculty

- Concerns for junior faculty
 - Promotion and tenure
 - Establishing a national reputation
 - Obtaining funding
 - Demonstrating that they lead the research program
- Concerns for senior faculty
 - Supporting larger research group
 - Establishing an international reputation
 - Maintaining continuity of funding
 - Collaborative research is an appealing way to expand the research program and is not viewed as a negative

2. Reviewer Ethics

- Effective peer review depends on the participation of experts who can critically evaluate the research.
- Reviewers and authors are often in the same field, and may be competitors.
- What are the obligations of the reviewer to the journal, to the authors, and to their own research group?

Ethical obligations to the journal

- If you can't give a knowledgeable review...decline.
- If you can't give a timely review...decline.
- If you can't give an objective review...decline.
- If you think that there may be a conflict, but you feel you can give a knowledgeable and objective review...disclose the conflict and let the editor decide.

Ethical obligations to the authors

- If you can't give a knowledgeable review...decline.
- If you can't give a timely review...decline.
- If you can't give an objective review...decline.
- If you are in direct competition with the authors on this area of research...decline.
- But, if you have already read the abstract.....

Ethical obligations to your research group

- What do you do if you see another group is going to scoop your graduate student?
 - It is unethical to hold up the competing paper...you must immediately decline to review.
 - Do you tell your student? Put them on another project immediately? Let them continue working? Speed your paper to submission?
- What do you do if you see that the research approach you have been pursuing is the wrong one?
 - Do you shift to the new promising area? Stop your current work until the paper is published (or the study is otherwise presented in public)?
- How do you unlearn what you have learned?

Final thoughts

- No one is perfect, and ethical issues are rarely black and white.
- Conflicts (whether perwill constantly arise...the important thing is how you manage them.
- When in doubt, solicit the opinions of your colleagues.
- Be open with your coauthors and with the journals.

Acknowledgements

Work in my laboratory is supported by:

- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD)
- Tate & Lyle Americas, LLC

And yes, I have published in Elsevier journals