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Post-Publication Discrimination and Racism: A Nail in the Coffin of Academic Medical Publishing

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Abstract

Discrimination and racism are deeply rooted in many aspects of the daily life activities in many societies. Academic medical publishing is not immune. There are many reports about pre-publication discrimination in academic medical publishing. This may be practiced at different levels. It may involve the editorial leadership, members of the editorial board and unfair peer review. This type of discrimination is reflected in the low number of accepted publications coming from the developing countries. Discrimination may manifest even after publication "post-publication". This appears in the form of continuous harassment of authors by throwing accusations of scientific misconduct many years after publication of the original documents. This situation will never improve without serious actions. Authors who were exposed to post-publication discrimination /racism should be invited to suggest ideologies to fight this practice. A blacklist for those involved in these practices should become available to help editors avoid misleading claims. The editorial board of highly esteemed journals should include well known members from the developing countries with sound scientific conduct and established medical reputation.

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Discrimination is defined as “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex” [1]. It may relate to some other personal characteristics such as color, birth place, health status, nationality, language or religion [2]. These forms are well described and can be detected at school or college admissions, and workplaces. Racism, on the other hand, is “the belief that race has an effect on human abilities and traits and that a particular race is superior to other” [1]. Racism may lead to discrimination but not vice versa.

As a Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology, I never considered discrimination/racism will be a subject to write about. I always thought this is only a subject for sociologists and political scientists, and has no place in medical research and/or academic medical publishing. However, because many colleagues in low/middle income countries started to speak up about it in medical publishing [3], it became apparent that this is an issue that is becoming more common in the last few years and needs to be properly addressed.

Discrimination and racism at academic medical publishing were described to occur before publication. Desk rejection may occur shortly after submission [4] mostly for manuscripts coming from low resource countries [3][4]. Rejection may also occur while the paper is in the initial screening phase by one of the editorial team member of the journal, or it may occur at the peer review stage or even later. This actually creates a feeling of being treated unequally compared with authors from the western world.

To the best of my knowledge, post publication discrimination/racism (PPR) has never been described in the literature. It probably manifests when a reviewer/researcher starts to throw accusations of scientific misconduct about data integrity for articles published many years back, up to 10 year or even more. It is almost impossible to find a motive for someone to critically review articles that old. Accusations are usually followed by requests for the original data to be submitted. Although the author of this article stands in line with open data sharing, a clarification must be made in this occasion. The retention of data in most of the developing countries for many years is not an easy task because of a variety of reasons. Digital archiving is not currently available, and the available file archiving abilities are limited (space, equipment and finance). In addition, a large number of research articles are derived from postgraduate theses and it is extremely hard to reach the candidates after many years to request the original data. That is probably why the committee for publication ethics “COPE” advised journals “to specify that only in extraordinary cases will the journal investigate complaints relating to a paper where greater than a specified number of years have elapsed since publication” [5]. Sadly, I am not aware of any journal which seriously considered this recommendation. The number of years is left open. It ends up that the accused authors find themselves, out of hand, in a situation where they are unable to adequately respond to editors’ requests for original data submission.

Editors should not consider any post-publication concerns and misconduct allegations as true and are not supposed to automatically forward any concerns to authors. They should be able to identify different patterns for scientific misconduct including data fabrication, falsification or plagiarism. Editors should also be able to identify honest error and disagreement in the scientific view [6][7]. Honest error may include mistakes in the methodology or misinterpretation of data while disagreement in scientific view may occur in selecting the best way to implement the research experiment or the methods of statistical analysis [8].

After the editors review the claims, there will be either one of two scenarios. Claims are possibly true and in this case, an official investigation should be requested and carried out to verify the allegations. The second possibility is that claims are not true and subject is closed by the journal. In few occasions, a complainant may persist and escalate complaining. In this regard, COPE guidelines state clearly “In the event that a complainant persists in submitting complaints on a meritless or unsubstantiated matter, the journal may choose to refer the complainant to legal or ethical mandates that may be applicable to the complainant, particularly any applicable laws, codes, or legal standards on defamation, and any ethical guidelines prescribing reckless, false, or malicious statements or indiscriminate criticism”. Unfortunately, COPE did not address what to do when a persistent complainant switches his repeated complaints from the journal to the authors’ institutions. A complainant should never contact the authors’ institution and this should be left for the editors of the journal where the article in question was published. A double kick “to journal editors and institutions” most probably will hurt in a way or another. In this, the complainant follows the principle “If it does not catch, it sure will distort”.

I understand that the argument made in this article needs more evidence to support and back it up, and because it is becoming more difficult to prove discrimination ^[9], I urge editors to trace whether there is any previous allegations made by a single complainant or complainants against different authors from the same country/ethnic group and whether these allegations were true or not. Unproven previous allegations should be considered as a sign for possible PPR. The persistent complaints against the publications of researchers belonging to one nationality over another, or an ethnic group over another, and for a long period of time, should be a matter of concern and should ring a bell for possible post publication discrimination/racism. The tactic of persistently repeating the same concerns to journals and the researchers’ institutes cannot be for the sake of science or research. This tactic mostly aims at putting increased pressure on the researcher (s), and its ultimate goal is to hinder the academic achievements of the researcher (s), ruin their reputation and the academic progression of the institution.

It is human nature that with such academic harassment that you will find yourself alone, scared to publish, ruining your own career by the words of someone else.

I invite authors who were exposed to possible discrimination/racism to speak up loud about their experiences. At the same time, we should continue suggesting ideologies to fight both discrimination and racism in academic publishing. I urge the scientific community to spot those involved in these practices and prepare a blacklist for them to help editors avoid misleading claims and regrets that may follow improper decisions. Authors from the third world countries known of sound scientific behavior should be included in the editorial boards of major medical journals.

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