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

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Abstract

Racism and discrimination 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, unfair peer review and constraints on time. This type of discrimination is reflected in the low number of accepted publications coming from the third world 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 racism/discrimination 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 third world countries with sound scientific conduct and established medical reputation.

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As a Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology, I never considered racism/discrimination 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 ^[1], it became apparent that this is an issue that is becoming more common in the last few years and needs to be properly addressed.

Racism and discrimination in academic medical publishing were described to occur before publication. Desk rejection may occur shortly after submission ^[2] and this is probably more common for manuscripts coming from low-resource countries ^{[1][2]}. Rejection may also occur while the paper is in the initial screening phase by one of the editorial team members of the journal, or it may occur at the peer review stage or even later.

To the best of my knowledge, post-publication 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 years or even more. It is almost impossible to find a motive for someone to critically review articles that old. Accusations are mostly directed towards publications from the 3rd world countries and are usually followed by requests for the original data to be submitted. In most of the 3rd world countries, it is almost impossible to retain data for this number of years because of many reasons. Digital archiving is not currently available in most of these countries, 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" ^[3]. 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 are not supposed to automatically forward any submitted concerns to authors.

They have a major role to detect whether the misconduct allegations are true or not. Different patterns for scientific misconduct include data fabrication, falsification or plagiarism. Editors should also be able to identify honest error, disagreement in the scientific view ^{[4][5]} or untrue claims about data integrity. 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 statistical analysis ^[6]. Untrue claims can be checked by thorough reviewing of the manuscripts.

After the editors review the claims, there will be either one of two situations. 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 the claims are not true, and that the subject gets closed by the journal. On a few occasions, a complainant may persist in 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 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". It is human nature that with such academic harassment you will find yourself alone, scared to publish, and ruining your own career by the words of someone else. A complainant should never contact the authors' institution and this should be left to the editors of the journal where the article in question was published.

The persistence of repeating the same concerns to journals and the researchers' institutions reflects the racist attitude of the complainant which cannot be for the sake of science or research. It is to hinder the academic achievements of the researcher(s), and ruin their reputation and the academic progression of the institution.

I invite authors who were exposed to possible racism/discrimination to speak up loud about their experiences. At the same time, we should continue suggesting ideologies to fight both racism and discrimination 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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