



Consultation questions on publication ethics from 2016 to 2020 addressed by the Committee on Publication Ethics of the Korean Council of Science Editors

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Abstract

With the goal of improving the publishing ecosystem and promoting transparency in journal publishing, we describe some recent cases in scientific publishing in Korea. The current article summarizes ethical inquiries from domestic journals and publishers, most of whom are members of the Korean Council of Science Editors. We selected 15 representative questions asked during the last 4 years. Those inquiries were classified into hot topics such as plagiarism, duplicate publications, multiple submission, and others (informed consent, copyright, compliance with journal regulations, authors' responsibilities, and voluntary retraction requests). When plagiarism is suspected, editors and reviewers should assess the situation following the relevant rules and procedures, and if necessary, the manuscript should be rejected. Cases of duplicate publication should be clearly stated in both papers based on the explicit agreement of the editor-in-chief of both journals. As a general rule, the entire content of an article should be published in one issue, but if the article is too long, it may need to be published in two issues. Permission from both journals is required. The abstract and references should be separated accordingly. In cases of copyright conflict, voluntary withdrawal of a paper, or non-compliance with publishing regulations, the manuscript must be withdrawn according to specific procedures (referring to the COPE flow chart). All correspondence regarding a manuscript should be with the corresponding author, who communicates directly with the journal. We hope that these recommendations will help readers in the field of scientific publishing to address issues related to publication ethics.

Keywords

Duplicate publication; Multiple submission; Plagiarism; Publication ethics

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Introduction

Publication ethics is a virtue that researchers and specialists should cultivate in the process of writing and publishing articles. It encompasses the ethical standards necessary to ensure high-quality scientific publications, to enrich public trust in the findings reported by the scientific community, and to provide scientists with appropriate credit for their ideas. The overall principle of publication ethics in practice is to avoid data fabrication and falsification, plagiarism, multiple submissions, duplicate publications, and improper author contributions or attributions. Nonetheless, publishers and journals often face ethical issues, which appear impossible to avoid completely. Therefore, the importance of publication ethics is being increasingly recognized in order to disseminate research results in an ethically principled manner.

In many cases, the identification of wrongdoing may be clear, but it may not be clear whether the wrongdoing was accidental or intentional. As the proverb says, “people learn from mistakes,” and therefore, it would be helpful to collect questions based on actual, practical cases from the field. For this reason, this article presents a compilation and analysis of questions about publication ethics that the Korean Council of Science Editors (KCSE) received through various sources, including e-mail and questionnaires at in-person seminars and symposia. The KCSE has the goal of promoting the quality of science journals published in Korea through information exchange and discussions on editing activities, with the vision of improving the style and format of science journals in Korea to reach the international level, and the ultimate mission of promoting cultural development and human well-being through scientific journal publishing. The questions and the corresponding responses are summarized below, with the goal of helping readers, authors, and editors at journals and publishers to cope with publication ethics problems more smoothly, since these difficulties often present complicated issues during the publication process of a manuscript.

Definitions of Terms Used in the Present Article on Publication Ethics

Plagiarism: Plagiarism refers to taking the ideas, thoughts, or expressions of others without giving them credit (proper citation); this practice is unfair and dishonest, and is an act of fraud.

COPE: The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), is a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging integrity in research and its publication. COPE provides official guidelines on publication ethics, practical resources including flowcharts and cases, e-learning, seminars, forum and more to ed-

ucate and support editors and publishers. COPE has defined a set of recommended core practices that are applicable in publishing scholarly literature for reviewers, editors, journal team members, publishers and institutions [1].

Similarity Check: This platform was developed by Crossref in collaboration with the STM (science, technology, and medicine) publishing community in 2008, mainly in order to help editors verify the originality of papers. Similarity Check is powered by the iThenticate software from iParadigms, known as the provider of Turnitin.

Salami publication or segmented publication: A form of self-plagiarism, salami or segmented publication can be defined as the publication of two or more articles derived from a single study.

Duplicate publication: A duplicate publication is also called a multiple publication or redundant publication, and this concept refers to publishing the same intellectual material more than once, by the author or publisher. It should be noted that this category does not include unauthorized republication by someone else, which constitutes plagiarism and/or copyright violation.

Informed consent: This term refers to the process of getting permission before conducting a healthcare intervention on a person, or disclosing personal information [2]. The patient must be competent to make a voluntary decision about whether to undergo the procedure or intervention. The required elements for documentation of the informed consent discussion are the nature of the procedure, the risks and benefits and the procedure, reasonable alternatives, risks and benefits of alternatives, and assessment of the patient's understanding of elements 1 through 4 [3].

Methods

Ethics statement: Since this study did not involve human subjects, no institutional review board approval or informed consent was required.

Study design: This study presents a descriptive analysis of the categories of questions on publication ethics.

Setting and data source: We analyzed inquiries submitted to the KCSE between January 2016 and April 2020. The inquiries and questions were received through the website of the KCSE or via e-mail from the editorial boards of journals or individuals in Korea. Dozens of inquiries were classified into various categories that reflected important and noteworthy issues in the field of publication ethics, including plagiarism, duplicate or multiple publications, salami publication, informed consent, copyright, journal regulation, and the author's responsibilities. The inquiries were transferred to the Committee on Publication Ethics at the KCSE and reviewed

carefully. Formal deliberations were conducted through discussions among members of the Committee on Publication Ethics. Soon after the meeting, replies were sent for most—if not all—questions and inquiries to the corresponding person or organization. During the period when an inquiry was being discussed among the committee members and a response was being composed to the person who made the query, the KCSE maintained a neutral position on the issue. Cases were classified according to common categories of misconduct in publication ethics; furthermore, specific cases were described. **Statistical methods:** A descriptive analysis of the data was done.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the inquiries were classified into the categories of plagiarism, duplicate publications, and others (informed consent, copyright, non-compliance with journal regulations, the author’s responsibilities, and voluntary retraction requests). The 15 cases we described here were selected among the numerous inquiries submitted to the KCSE, excluding similar questions.

Plagiarism

Case 1-1. A review paper was published in 2017, and seven out of eight figures in the paper received reports of research misconduct from journals alleging plagiarism, as the figures were first published in other journals. Some of the journals were paid journals, making the problem especially serious.

Recommendation: In this case, it was determined that the journal editors had a significant responsibility. The editorial committee of the journal that published the plagiarized paper and its ethics committee should have identified the problem and notified the author, who was responsible for the plagia-

rized paper, that this was a fraudulent act. After withdrawing the paper, the plagiarized academic journals should have been informed of the paper’s withdrawal. According to COPE regulations, it is possible to inform the organization where the responsible author is affiliated; however, it is also possible that this issue may reflect mistakes in the editing process, such as manuscript editing. Therefore, in the process of journal editing, it is necessary to check whether the original manuscript is acknowledged in the figure or table of a review article and to ensure that material from the original article is not published without permission (or citation) if that article was not published under an appropriate CC license.

Case 1-2. After internal deliberation by the editorial committee of a journal due to the suspicion of plagiarism in a submitted manuscript, it was found that the results, discussion, and abstract were completely identical to previously published articles.

Recommendation: The authors should be notified of the deliberation results and should be requested to send the raw data for review; alternatively, if plagiarism is evident, the submission should be rejected.

Case 1-3. After Similarity Check for a submitted paper, it was found that significant parts of previously published papers were copied in the submitted paper.

Recommendation: First, it is necessary to figure out exactly what parts of other papers were duplicated. If the author of the submission does not provide accurate information, it must be identified by the relevant journal. This is because in the field of medical and scientific research, overlapping materials and methods are not considered to be plagiarism. Duplication of results is much more serious than that in the introduction; therefore, the journal editor should contact the responsible author to verify that the submitted manuscript is the original manuscript. If this cannot be proven, it can be considered a case of evident plagiarism.

Table 1. Classifications used in the present article

Category	Detail	No. of cases
Plagiarism	Copying	2
	Partial overlap	1
Duplicate publication	(Un)acceptable duplicate publication	4
	Self-plagiarism	1
	Salami publishing	1
Others	Informed consent	1
	Copyright	2
	Voluntary retraction request	1
	Author’s responsibilities	1
	Compliance with journal regulations	1

Duplicate publications

Case 2-1. A question arose regarding whether if it is possible to publish guidelines or review articles in multiple journals.

Recommendation: Duplicate publications are not considered a problem if the relevant journals decide to publish the article based on mutual consultation. However, it is mandatory that the relevant information be published on the first page of the article. For multiple submissions, it is recommended not to change the order of the authors or the corresponding author. To do so, permission must be granted by the editor and all co-authors.

Case 2-2. A paper being submitted to an SCI-indexed journal is planned to be published as a brief communication in another journal.

Recommendation: If the editors (or editor-in-chief) of both journals agree, duplicate publication is possible; however, on the first page of the brief communication paper, it must be revealed that the content overlaps with a previously published paper. Importantly, the editorial format is recommended rather than the brief communication format. If the manuscript has not been published yet, and is currently under the submission and review process, as distinct from the previous recommendation, it is suggested to move forward with the agreement of the editorial committees of both journals after confirming that the manuscript will be published, since otherwise it may not be published in the relevant journal and the submission rules of each journal may be different.

Case 2-3. A question arose regarding whether it is possible to submit a paper presented at a conference to the journal associated with that conference or another conference.

Recommendation: Papers presented at academic conferences are generally considered less important than publications in academic journals, but presentations at conferences in specific fields may be considered more important, so it is difficult to present a uniform standard. In particular, conference proceedings (e.g., the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) in fields with rapidly changing trends, such as electric engineering and computer science, have a journal-like character.

Case 2-4. A paper was submitted to an academic journal by a supervisor who was not the corresponding author.

Recommendation: It is not malfeasance for a thesis for a degree to be published in an academic journal. However, it is recommended to use the following phrasing in the paper to avoid confusion: “A paper submitted in a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.” In cases similar to those introduced, authorship disputes can arise. Even if the corresponding author and the first author’s supervisor of a thesis for a degree have mutually agreed to publication, the parties must be notified if there is a problem, such as the source of research funding.

Case 2-5. A submitted paper being reviewed by other journals was caught.

Recommendation: The editors should contact the author to have one of the duplicate submissions withdrawn.

Case 2-6. Salami publication: At a meeting of the journal editorial committee, the length of a submitted review article was judged to be too long; instead, it was thought to be more suitable for the two parts to be published separately.

Recommendation: Even if a manuscript is long, it should be published in one issue. However, if the journal permits it, each abstract of the paper to be divided should be prepared separately, and each part of the paper should have a clearly separate list of references.

Others

Case 3-1. A question arose of whether informed consent must be provided in animal research papers.

Recommendation: In almost all animal experiments, informed consent is not applicable. However, if a companion animal is used for experimental purpose, its owner’s signature is required, and the owner should be informed about the meaning of the study and its effect on the companion animal.

Case 3-2. A question arose regarding the relationship between copyright and the article processing charge when a manuscript that received research funding from a European public institution was submitted (related to changes in European open access [OA] publishing policy).

Recommendation: If an OA journal is published under a CC-BY license, the publication cost must be paid by the author or the relevant academy. If it is a subscription-based journal that is operated through fees paid by libraries without requiring authors to pay for publication costs, under current European OA publishing policies, the publication cost must be received from the author and the article must be processed as an OA article under the CC-BY license.

Case 3-3. A case was reported in which a patient’s photo was published without informed consent.

Recommendation: This problem was caused by failing to include a statement of patient consent during the paper submission process. It is recommended that the journal should promptly take measures to prevent the patient’s photo from being seen publicly and immediately proceed with the paper withdrawal procedure.

Case 3-4. A voluntary retraction request was made by the responsible author due to a data error that occurred by mistake.

Recommendation: It is necessary to clearly confirm the content affected by the author’s mistake, and the incorrect part should then be corrected by writing and publishing an erratum, assuming that the manuscript has not been published in other journals. If the journal considers withdrawing the paper, it is necessary to receive consent from the co-author(s) and corresponding author of the manuscript.

Case 3-5. Responsibility and role of corresponding author: a first author, who was not the corresponding author, regularly sent and received correspondence with the journal.

Recommendation: If an editor realizes this during the editing process, the author should be notified that this practice is inappropriate, and correspondence should be discontinued immediately. Communication during the publication process must be conducted with the corresponding author.

Case 3-6. Non-compliance with journal regulations: non-compliance with the journal’s regulations was found in a published article.

Recommendation: This amounts to a confession that the editing level of the journal is poor. Furthermore, since there is a

possibility of dispute with the author(s), the issue should be handled carefully. After determining exactly which regulations were not followed, the editor should make a judgment of whether it is reasonable to withdraw the paper. In this particular case, the fault of the editor is as large as that of the authors, so it is necessary to determine whether the problem is serious enough to cause readers to doubt the scientific integrity and prestige of the journal. If the decision is made to withdraw the paper for aforementioned reasons, consent from all authors must be received before the withdrawal procedure. A retraction notice must be issued for the manuscript, containing the reason for retraction and the bibliographic information in unambiguous language that is distinct from other types of corrections or comments. The retraction must also be freely available to all readers without barriers to access.

Conclusion

Issues related to publication ethics are as important as any other aspect of research activities, such as conceptualizing and designing experiments, obtaining research results, and writing the manuscript. It is our hope that the readers of this article will be able to prevent and handle inadvertent misconduct when they face various issues related to publication ethics in light of the recommendations made herein. We also strongly recommend readers to refer to the guidance from the COPE that deals with publication ethics in detail, including flowcharts [4], guidelines [5], and cases [6]. Recently, the Korean Association of Medical Journal Editors reported consulting cases on publication ethics issues including duplicate publication, author qualifications, copyright disputes, and plagiarism [7]. The current article presents questions and consultations from 2016 to 2020 handled by the Committee on Publication Ethics of the KCSE after in-depth consideration of issues related to publication ethics that arose with regard to actual cases. Therefore, the content of the present article might be of practical help to authors, reviewers, and editors involved in the publication process who face publishing-related ethical issues. Although we all know the importance of publication ethics, once ethical principles are violated unexpectedly or even unknowingly, serious consequences can ensue; thus, one needs to know exactly how to deal with these issues in advance. It is our hope that various issues in publication ethics

that have been problems in the past might gradually disappear in the near future as we establish a healthier publishing culture.

Conflict of Interest

Cheol-Heui Yun serves as an editor of *Science Editing*, but has no role in the decision to publish this article. Except for that, no potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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