

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

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## INTRODUCTION

As a Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology, I never considered racism/discrimination will be a subject for me 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 becomes apparent that this is an issue that is becoming more common in the last few years and needs to be addressed sufficiently.

Racism and discrimination at 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 member 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. I investigated the behavior of few reviewers who threw accusations of scientific misconduct about data integrity for articles published 10 years back or even more. From my viewpoint, it is almost impossible to find a motive for someone to critically review articles that old. It took me a lot of time to be able to describe the possible mechanism such reviewers follow in PPR based on their criticism for articles coming from the 3rd world countries. First, they select their target(s) whether an individual or a population, and then search for their publications over many years. They then start to communicate with journal editors where these publications appeared, raising some concerns and questioning the accuracy of methodology and data analysis of these publications as a preparatory step to throw accusations of scientific misconduct.

At this stage, editors have a major role to identify whether the allegations are true or not. They should be aware how to differentiate between a scientific misconduct, honest error, disagreement in the scientific view [3,4] or untrue claims about data integrity. While scientific misconduct includes data fabrication, falsification or plagiarism, honest error may include mistakes in methods, analysis or misinterpretation of data.

Disagreement in scientific view may occur in selecting the best way to implement the research experiment or the statistical analysis [5]. Untrue claims can be checked by thorough reviewing of the manuscripts. Most editors are aware of these differences. However, they will probably respond to the concerns raised by requesting answers from authors, and few of them may even go further by requesting the raw data of the concerned studies completed many years ago.

In this regard, it is important to clarify that archiving data files is much different between the developed world and the third world/low income countries. The retention of old data is not the routine in developing countries mainly because of the limited archiving ability. That is 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" [6].

After the authors respond to the queries and concerns sent to the journal, there will be either one of 2 possibilities. Claims are possibly true and in this case, an official investigation should be carried out to verify the allegations. The second possibility is that claims are not true and subject is closed by the journal. In this situation, many complainants will contact the institution leaders where the publications came from, and repeat the same exact complaints to them. Complainants avoid contacting the same journals again because "COPE" guidelines are against multiple complainants to journals. 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.

The persistence of repeating the same concerns to journals and the researchers' departments and universities reflects the real intention of the complainant. It is not for the sake of science or research. It is to hinder the academic achievements of the

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researcher(s), ruin their reputation and the academic progression of the institution.

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 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 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.

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