PUBLICATION ETHICS – MORAL PRINCIPLES
AND CULTURAL DISSONANCE

Nicholas John Rushby

Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Abstract. The incidence of academic misconduct in publishing appears to be increasing and is creating a moral outrage. This paper looks at two contributing factors: the collision of different understandings of what is and what is not, acceptable, and the increasing pressure on students and faculty to publish. It concludes that detection and punishment are not the sole solution to the problem: we need better education in publication ethics and the responsibility for that must be shared between journal and research supervisors.

Keywords: publishing ethics, plagiarism, Dissernet, scientific publications

ПУБЛИКАЦИОННАЯ ЭТИКА – МОР АЛЬНЫЕ ПРИНЦИПЫ И КУ ЛЬТУРНЫЙ ДИССОНАНС

Николас Джон Рашби

Казанский (Приволжский) федеральный университет, г. Казань, Россия

Аннотация. Недобросовестность в академической среде набирает все большие обороты, нарушая принципы морали. В статье рассматриваются два важных фактора проблемы: с одной стороны, противоречивость различных восприятий недобросовестности, с другой – усиливающееся давление на студентов и преподавателей в вопросах публикационной активности. Делается вывод, что выявление и пресечение недобросовестности не является единственным решением проблемы: важно просвещение в области этики научных публикаций, и ответственность за него должны разделить журналы и научные руководители.

Ключевые слова: публикационная этика, плагиат, Диссернет, научные публикации

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К содержанию
1. Introduction

I have lived with the problems of dealing with plagiarism throughout my many years as the editor of different scholarly journals. Indeed I encountered my first case with a few weeks of becoming the acting editor of Programmed Learning & Educational Technology in 1979. It was a baptism of fire because the two protagonists (each claimed that the other had plagiarised their work) both worked in California and for a while it seemed likely that I would have to spend time on the West Coast of America as a material witness in their court case. Fortunately, the matter was resolved without the need for a legal process. I learned a great deal from the experience and developed an interest in publishing ethics.

The activities of Dissernet have raised the awareness of academic misconduct in Russian journals to a level which seems - to someone from Western Europe - to be a public outrage. For readers who are not in Russia, we need to explain that Dissernet is a network of volunteers both from Russia and other countries, whose mission is to expose plagiarism within academia (theses and articles in scholarly journals) and government. Dissernet claims to be “independent from any government agencies, governmental or administrative entities, political movements or associations, commercial corporations or companies. Participants are working in the community, regardless of their political, corporate or any other affiliation, do not pursue any commercial purposes, their efforts are not aimed at advertisement or promotion of a product or brand, they do not set themselves any purpose other than... [counteracting] illegal fraud and forgery in the field of scientific and educational activities, particularly in the defense of dissertations and awarding academic degrees in Russia” (Dissernet, 2017). It was launched in 2013 and by 2016 had identified around 5,600 individuals that it suspected of plagiarism, and had named a large number of academic journals that had published suspect articles.

Clearly, any investigation that will help to identify academic misconduct and educate authors about ethics in research and publication is to be welcomed. However, we also need to look at the reasons why plagiarism and other breaches of ethics is considered to be academic misconduct and what, in addition to naming and shaming the culprits, can be done to eliminate - or at least reduce it.

I described our anger about publication ethics as a moral outrage because it reflects our anger at the mistreatment of others (for example, those whose work has been plagiarised and those who are misled about the academic standing of the plagiarist) rather than the mistreatment of ourselves. We selflessly denounce the plagiarists because we value fairness and justice. However, in a recent letter to Nature, Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom and Rand (2017) suggest that the roots of moral outrage can also be self-serving because people who support the condemnation of those who behave badly (such as plagiarists) are more like to be trusted by others. Moral outrages can quickly generate their own momentum and need to be treated carefully.

So, while Dissernet is providing a valuable service, the issue of publication ethics needs to be kept in proportion and set into context. We need more light on the matter and less heat!

There are many aspects to publication ethics and there is insufficient time within a single article to explore all of them. So in this paper we will focus on plagiarism (and the related topics of text-recycling and simultaneous submission) and on the issues surrounding authorship. There is a brief mention of predatory publishing and those who wish to explore this aspect further, should read Roberts (2017) for a useful commentary.
2. Ethics as a cultural construct

Before we go further, it is helpful to look at what we mean by ‘ethics’ in the context of the publication process. Most dictionaries define the noun as the ‘moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity’ or the ‘the moral correctness of specified conduct.’ In this case the activity is the process of writing and submitting a scholarly paper or, from the editorial perspective, the process of reviewing and assessing scholarly papers. (Other actors in the publication process, for example, reviewers, academic board members and publishers, will have different perspectives.) This definition asks us to understand what we mean by ‘morals’. The same dictionaries define morals as ‘concerned with or derived from the code of behaviour that is considered right or acceptable in a particular society.’ And it is this definition that, I believe, is one of the reasons for our present difficulties. It reminds us that what is considered right or acceptable may vary from society to society. What is acceptable – and is therefore ethical – in one society may not be acceptable or ethical in another.

Consider for example, the Confucian tradition of education that prevails throughout much of South-East Asia. Anyone who has taught there will be familiar with the culture in which the professor is the person who knows everything about the subject and who is imparting some of that knowledge to the learners who know little or nothing. So incorporating significant passages of the professor’s writing is an acknowledgement of his or her superior knowledge and position. Furthermore, the students are often given lecture notes and handouts to memorise and copy which results in ‘learned plagiarism’ (Deckert, 1992). Chinese culture does not emphasize attribution of cited text and Xueqin (2002) claims that plagiarism has only recently emerged as a matter of concern in Asian institutions. So not surprisingly, Asian students can be unfamiliar with the concept.

In Russia, the word ‘plagiarism’ has the single meaning of copying someone else’s work. It does not include the notion of copying or re-cycling the author’s own work and so this is regarded as acceptable practice. In comes then, as a shock to be told that self-plagiarism is unethical and banned by reputable international journals.

In his 1840 book, “What is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government”, French anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, declared “Property is theft”. We might well say, “Intellectual property is theft”. Intellectual property (IP) is a person’s proprietary knowledge, a productive new idea that they have created which enables them to earn recognition or financial benefit from what they have created. A number of websites engage in intellectual property theft, claiming that they are doing nothing wrong in collecting academic papers from other websites and making them available free of charge. Such unacknowledged replication means that others realize value or gain competitive advantage from others intellectual assets that have the same protective rights as physical property.

Use of the Internet has made us lazy. It is so easy to find a wealth of information using a search engine that we forget the text was written by someone, that it may be copyright, and that it should always be acknowledged if we reuse it.

_Academic publishing is becoming increasingly international and so, if the system is to work then authors and journals have to come to a common understanding of what is acceptable in academic publishing._
3. Why is plagiarism academic misconduct?

There are two main forms of plagiarism. The first and most serious involves taking the work of another researcher or author and claiming it as your own. Put simply, this is theft. Scientific research is built on the foundations of work carried out by others: very few of us ever have an idea that is so original, so novel, that it does not owe something to the work of others. Because our research is built on the ideas and results obtained by others, we need to acknowledge those contributions. We need to quote from their published work to show how we have extended their findings or perhaps contradicted them. This notion was recognised nearly 900 years ago. A quote, which is often attributed to the 17th century English philosopher, astronomer and mathematician Isaac Newton, but comes in fact from the 12th century English educationalist, diplomat and Bishop of Chartres, John of Salisbury, runs:

“We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size” (John of Salisbury, 1159).

There are well established international conventions governing the amount of someone else’s work that you can quote without obtaining their written permission and these usually cover any of the quotes that you might want to use in a scholarly article. This is called ‘fair usage’ or ‘fair dealing’ (University of Leeds, 2017). However, authors need to be aware that the interpretation of fair dealing differs from country to country. For example the rules that apply in the UK and North America are far more generous than those in Germany.

The use of your own work, published in another paper, book, or conference proceedings is called ‘self-plagiarism’, or – less pejoratively – ‘text recycling’. In this case you are not stealing someone else’s work but, by making extensive reuse of things that you have already written, you are making your research output seem larger than it actually is. In so doing, you may be breaking the agreement you have made with the publishers of the original work and this later work, in which you gave the publisher the exclusive right to publish the work. The Chicago Manual of Style cautions that “In signing a contract with a publisher an author guarantees that the work is original, that the author owns it, that no part of it has been previously published, and that no other agreement to publish it or part of it is outstanding” (University of Chicago, 2010). The extent to which text-recycling is acceptable has to be judged on a case by case basis: the line between ethical and unethical behaviour is a matter of judgement. A comprehensive discussion of the ethical issues can be found in iParadigms (2011).

The notes for authors issued by many journals will include the warning that authors must “confirm that their contribution is original and that is has neither been published previously nor is currently being considered for publication elsewhere.” Submitting an article to two or more journals simultaneously causes endless problems because it is often difficult to determine which version was published first! The second is considered to be a redundant publication and should be retracted. However, some journals are very slow to decide whether they want to publish a submitted manuscript and some authors are, understandably, impatient. Nevertheless to avoid confusion, authors should always formally withdraw their submission before sending it to another journal. In some cases, simultaneous submission is a deliberate act to try and get two publications for the price of one and this is quite unacceptable.
If we go back 15 years, to the time before plagiarism checkers were generally available, it was assumed that the reviewers reading the manuscript would be able to detect cases of plagiarism because of their comprehensive knowledge of the field and its literature. This was probably not the case then - and is certainly not the case now. Only once in my 37 years’ experience as an editor has a reviewer correctly identified a plagiarism issue. Fortunately, the now widespread use of software to detect plagiarism has made the process more certain. We may assume that plagiarism has always been common in academic publishing but now we can detect it with greater certainty.

Plagiarism is not restricted to Russian authors and Russian journals. Over a three-year period the highly respected British Journal of Educational Technology (BJET), iThenticate detected plagiarism in 1237 submissions (Turnitin, 2016). Of these, 132 (10.6 %) registered a similarity index over 40 %, the threshold at which iThenticate issues a plagiarism warning. Although, on further investigation, a small number of these were found to be false positives (review papers for example, typically have a high degree of overlap), most of these papers had to be rejected. A further analysis of the data confirmed that plagiarism is more common in certain countries than others.

Editors tend to be reticent about talking publicly about the levels of plagiarism in their own journals. Some would even prefer not to check, for fear of what they might find! However, conversations with editors of other journals in the field of learning technology who do check for plagiarism, corroborate that these BJET figures are not unusual.

4. Ethical issues in authorship

Having their names in the list of authors of a published paper evidences that they have made significant inputs to an article that the reviewers believe makes a valuable contribution to the field, and thus confers kudos and status. It also signifies that these scholars take collective responsibility for everything in the article - not just the sections they have contributed. If the results are subsequently found to be inaccurate and there has to be a published correction, their reputation will suffer. Even more seriously, if the paper is subsequently found to be plagiarised and has to be retracted, their reputation will be seriously damaged. One of the most notorious recent cases of retraction (Godlee, Smith, and Marcovitch, 2011) has caused significant damage to the careers of the co-authors who were probably unaware of the misconduct of the lead author.

Albert and Wager (2003) note that “people generally lie about authorship in two ways: by putting down names of people who took little or no part in the research (‘gift authorship’), or by leaving out names of people who did take part (‘ghost authorship’).

Why would authors include the names of other people who did not make a significant contribution to the research? In some institutions is it customary to include the name of the research supervisor, whether or not they made a contribution. Indeed, some supervisors insist on this. It is an acknowledgement of their position and of course, it adds another publication to their curriculum vitae! They should remember that by having their name on the article, they are taking collective responsibility for its contents; if it is a poor paper then it will reflect adversely on their professionalism. Some authors will add a well-known researcher to the list of authors in the hope that their submission will be considered more favourably by the journal editor.

Some manuscripts list more than 50 authors and it is difficult to imagine how so many people could possibly contribute to an article of - say - 4000 words in length. Even if each did make a small contribution there can be little credit in sharing an article with so many others!
Failing to include the name of someone who did make a significant contribution in the list of authors is another form of plagiarism. It means that the listed authors are making use of the work of someone else and denying them due credit. In an extreme case, this could be that the ‘author’ commissioned someone else to write the paper for them in order to further their career.

It is difficult for an editor to detect errors (and probable misconduct) in the list of authors unless the effects are very obvious. For example, the editor may believe that it is exceedingly unlikely that a particular author did, in fact, contribute to the work and then make personal enquiries. Usually the misconduct only comes to light after the article is published.

5. The pressure to publish

The second strand that I would like to explore is the impact on publication ethics of the inexorable pressure to publish. In universities across the world faculty are required to publish in order to keep their jobs and gain promotion, and students are required to publish to obtain their doctorates. With so many manuscripts looking for space in disproportionately few quality journals it is little wonder that the predatory journals flourish.

This pressure to publish also encourages (although it does not excuse) misconduct such as plagiarism and gift authorship. Early career researchers mistakenly believe that more submissions increase their chances of being published. Their reasoning is that if 10% of submissions to journals in their field are accepted for publication then ten submissions should ensure that at least one of theirs will be published. And if they believe that they need to write more and more papers, then there is a strong temptation to take short cuts – such as ‘borrowing’ material from other authors, recycling their earlier work, and adding the names of prominent researchers to the author list in the hope that this will attract the editor’s attention. Unfortunately, editors look for quality: for well written articles that take the readers beyond what is already known in the field. So ten poor manuscripts are no realistic alternative to one, good manuscript.

The pressure to publish is based on the assumption that the number of articles is a good measure of a researcher’s worth and contribution to scholarship. It has always seemed unreasonable to me for university administrations to devolve academic appraisal to journals and their editors. Yet we continue to play that game. We chase journal metrics (such as impact factors) to show the benefit of publishing in our journals and take the consequences of dealing with academic misconduct, perhaps because most editors are themselves part of the same appraisal system.

The assumption that the number of an individual’s publications is the only or the best measure of their worth as a researcher needs to be challenged. There are other better measures, particularly for doctoral students and early career researchers. One of these is their contribution to scholarship as a critical reviewer for one or more journals. This contribution is more difficult to assess: instead of simply recording the number of publications, there has to be evidence of the quality of the reviews conducted. In time, some of these metrics will be automated by organisations like ORCID and ResearchGate. Arguably, reviewing is a better way for the early career researcher to develop their skills than writing articles that seldom take the reader beyond what is already known.

6. Journals or authors to blame?

Both authors and journals are victims of different forms of academic misconduct. It is unjust to condemn journals that unwittingly publish work that has been plagiarised or where authors
have lied about their co-authors – unless the journals have been negligent in checking for misconduct. Experience has shown that even experienced reviewers fail to detect similarities - probably because of the sheer volume of material from which the plagiarist can choose. It is only relatively recently that effective software checking systems (such as iThenticate and Antiplagiat have become available and even then the cost of checking every submission may be unaffordable. The responsibility for avoiding plagiarism must lie with the authors and, where appropriate, their research supervisors.

It is equally unjust to condemn authors who have unwittingly submitted their work for publication in a predatory journal or one that is subsequently de-listed by Scopus. We used to be able to refer to ‘Beall’s List’, which chronicled “potential, possible, or probable” predatory publishers. Now this is no longer published it is difficult to identify predatory journals. However, as Roberts (2017) notes, forthcoming research will show that “rather than Beall’s List journals being a repository of the corrupt, inept and rejected, they also published a lot of perfectly good studies”. It is not yet clear how the issue of predatory journals will be resolved. Robert’s closing remarks are that, “So, for now, Beall’s List is gone. Something may follow soon. If it does, it better meet some high standards or otherwise expect withering criticism from an increasingly alert research community. Let’s all use this pause to think about what each of us can do to contribute to the conversation and uphold the qualities of good peer review and the proper publication of expertly validated research” (Roberts, 2017).

7. Conclusion

Having identified at least two of the drivers for academic misconduct (different cultural ethics, and the pressure to publish), what should we do to address the causes of our moral outrage? How should we defeat, or at least reduce the incidence of, unethical behaviour?

Detection and punishment clearly have a role. If those committing misconduct believe that there is a high probability that they will be caught, and that the consequence (a public notice of retraction or of redundant publication) will be public damage to their academic reputation, then they will be less likely to offend. If all journals use plagiarism checkers and desk-reject those where there is credible evidence of unacceptable plagiarism, then we should reduce the number of such articles that are published. If journals go back to check the articles they have published in past years, and deal firmly with those that are plagiarised, then offending authors will be discouraged from re-offending.

But the criminal justice system has not succeeded in eliminating property theft and sanctions will not entirely eliminate intellectual property theft. So we also need to educate authors and work to reduce the underlying causes of ethical misconduct. Journals and their editors need to publish clear ethical statements defining their expectations of authors (and the reviewers, editorial board members and the editors themselves) and develop other educational resources on plagiarism, including edu-information videos (see for example Bergen University Library, 2010; Texas A&M University, 2009; Annunzio, 2013). And research supervisors also have the key role here. They are responsible for helping their mentees through their early research work and instilling, not only the techniques that they will need, but the research ethics they should observe. We need more discussion and collaboration on these issues.
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References


Information about the author

Nick John Rushby, Journal Education & Self Development, Editor-in-Chief. E-mail: nick.rushby@btinternet.com

Информация об авторе

Ник Дж. Рашби, главный редактор журнала «Образование и саморазвитие», E-mail: nick.rushby@btinternet.com