

Sigmar de Mello Rode
Scientific Editor

Plagiarism in scientific publication*

The University of São Paulo (USP) and the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) have appeared in the newspapers because of suspicion of fraud in scientific research and publication. Among the main concerns of any scientific journal is the possibility of authors tampering with or simply inventing data in their published articles, of reproducing data or texts by other authors without citing the reference, or even of repeating the published version of research or texts already published in another journal.

Plagiarism is the appropriation of ideas of another author, without giving due credit, and auto-plagiarism occurs when an author republishes the same material or data – however disguised – of a scientific production. Plagiarism is a ghost that haunts editors of journals (scientific or otherwise) because, with the exponential increase in the production of texts, it is not easy to immediately ascertain the occurrence of plagiarism. Fortunately, the same digital media that facilitates plagiarism through copy/paste procedures allows comparing texts just as easily, thus providing evidence of the misconduct.

A journal's Instructions to Authors section should clearly cover misconduct practices in order to guide authors in the publication process. Good reviewers, conscientious and knowledgeable of the subject being reviewed, may be able to minimize the problem, but not eliminate it completely. The pressure put on authors to increase their production and consequent publication rates renders plagiarism increasingly more frequent, mainly – albeit not exclusively – among more inexperienced authors.

In 2010, the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, put forth as part of the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, held in that city from July 21 to 24, 2010, became a global reference for conducting research responsibly. It is not, however, a regulatory document, neither does it represent the official policies of the countries and organizations that funded or participated in the Conference. The original statement (available at <http://www.singaporestatement.org/statement>) states that the value and benefits of research are vitally dependent on research integrity, and while there can be, and are, national and disciplinary differences in the way research is organized and conducted, there are also common principles and professional responsibilities that are fundamental to ensuring research integrity wherever it is undertaken.

Also noteworthy is the work of the Committee on Publication Ethics – COPE (www.publicationethics.org), a forum for editors and publishers of peer-reviewed journals to discuss all aspects of publication ethics. It also advises editors on how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct. A series of detailed flowcharts of how to manage issues of potential ethical breaches has been produced and is available freely online.

Renowned universities and research institutions have faced the problem and, together with professional boards and government agencies, are urged to create workgroups, committees or associations to control and judge any situations arising.

Good sense and the principles guiding proper conduct in research and related publication should always be borne in mind by researchers willing to obviate misconduct. The same applies to the production of unworthy research with the sole purpose of increasing the apparent scientific productivity of its authors.

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