Editorial: A roadmap to ethical research

Introduction

Ethics is a big word. As Wet (2010) argued, ethics in research is an extensive and complicated subject that requires thorough and thoughtful discussion. However, such a subject is critical, as it plays an essential role in maintaining the integrity and quality of scientific research.

Ethical issues in research, such as data fabrication and falsification, conflicts of interest, harm to participants and plagiarism, among others, are numerous, complex and diverse. These issues can potentially undermine the credibility of scientific findings, leading to negative consequences for various stakeholders, including researchers, participants, academic institutions and society (Drolet *et al.*, 2023). Regardless of the importance of the topic, however, previous studies have found that while researchers have a negative attitude toward violations of ethical principles in research, they often lack knowledge of the issue or feel unprepared to address ethical dilemmas (e.g. Kaiser *et al.*, 2022; Roy and Edwards, 2023).

This editorial aims to provide authors with a clear understanding of ethical expectations, journal policies, publisher guidelines and best practices to ensure their studies and publications align with recognized ethical standards. To illustrate these principles, this editorial presents hypothetical scenarios to explore key ethical considerations in research and publication. The goal is to provide guidance for authors who are preparing to submit their work to our journal or others, ensuring that their studies adhere to the highest ethical standards.

Hypothetical scenario 1: Institutional review board approval

Ava, a university instructor, designed a survey to gather insights on student learning habits. She invited students currently enrolled in her class to participate, explaining that the survey would help improve the learning experience for future cohorts. To encourage participation, she assured students that their responses would remain confidential. However, Ava did not obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before distributing the survey because she thought there were no ethical concerns. After collecting the responses, Ava is eager to analyze the data and submit her findings for publication. She hopes the results will contribute valuable insights to the field of education.

Analysis and best practices for scenario 1

An Institutional Review Board (IRB), also sometimes known as an Independent Ethics Committee (IEC), Ethical Review Board (ERB) or Research Ethics Board (REB), is an administrative body responsible for protecting the rights, safety and welfare of human research participants. It ensures that studies involving human subjects adhere to ethical principles, such as respect for persons, beneficence and justice [United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2018].

In many countries, IRB review and approval is required for any research involving human subjects [1], whether it involves direct interactions or interventions with individuals, such as interviews and surveys, the use of bodily materials, such as cells and blood or individually identifiable personal information.

To support consistent ethical standards throughout the scholarly publishing community in line with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), our journal, like other journals published by Emerald Publishing, asks authors whether their research involves human or animal participants. If so, they must provide evidence of an ethics review board clearance and include an ethical statement that contains the name and location of the institutional ethics review committee or review board, the approval number, the date of approval, and other relevant details.

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Some activities involving human subjects or data may not require IRB review. These activities may include classroom exercises not intended to create generalizable knowledge, such as publications or conference presentations, analysis of de-identified publicly available data, oral history, and case studies. However, if case studies include information related to individual participants, such as direct quotes, their photographs, recordings, videos or any other identifying details, informed consent must be obtained from study participants and submitted via a complete consent-to-publish form [2].

Hypothetical scenario 2: Social media data for research

William, a doctoral student, wants to collect and analyze YouTube comments on videos related to political discourse for his dissertation study. Since the comments on the videos are publicly posted and accessible to anyone with an internet connection, he assumes that no IRB approval is needed. What ethical considerations should he keep in mind when using this data for research? How should the issues of consent, anonymity and potential harm be addressed, even when using publicly posted content?

Analysis and best practices for scenario 2

Generally, the secondary analysis of existing data does not require IRB review as long as the publicly available data is not individually identifiable. However, it should be noted that social media data labeled as "private" by the data owner or not readily available without permission of the site owner or administrator under the terms of service of the site is not regarded as "publicly available" data. Such data may require IRB review, so it is recommended that researchers consult with their institution's IRB to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and regulatory requirements. It is imperative to remember that the responsibility for compliance is shared between researchers and the IRB.

One should also consider that just because data is publicly accessible, it does not automatically make its use ethical. Researchers should keep in mind that social media data often contain human-generated content, which may include identifying or sensitive information. If such content is republished, search engines can easily re-identify it, posing potential privacy risks. Even though publicly available social media data does not require IRB review, there are still ethical considerations for using this data. The Association of Internet Research (AoIR) has published guidelines for the ethical use of publicly available data and recommendations for obtaining permission to use data and protect content creators [3]. A recently published paper by Fiesler and colleagues (2024) offered an excellent set of recommendations for ethically informed methods for social media research.

Hypothetical scenario 3: Secondary data analysis

Ethan came across a paper by a colleague who had conducted a large-scale survey and made the data publicly available on Figshare, an open data-sharing platform. After reviewing the data set, Ethan found it valuable for further analysis. He would like to analyze that survey data and incorporate his findings into a new research paper.

Analysis and best practices for scenario 3

Open science promotes open data to encourage data sharing and maximize its potential for reuse. As a result of this movement, more and more researchers have embraced data transparency by making their data sets publicly available through discipline-specific data repositories, cross-disciplinary repositories, and institutional repositories. As Borgman (2012) argued, data sharing enables researchers to facilitate new questions of extant data and

contribute to advancing research and innovation. Now, the possibility of secondary data analysis is more accessible than ever.

Secondary data analysis refers to the analysis of data originally collected by someone else for another primary purpose. Although such analysis has been regarded as a cost-effective and efficient method, researchers should acknowledge its limitations, such as possible constraints in aligning the data with new research questions, a lack of control over data quality, and limited knowledge of data collection procedures (Johnston, 2014).

When reusing published data, it is important to check the license terms and conditions for use, reproduction, and distribution. Additionally, a proper citation of data is essential; many publishers support the Force 11 Joint Declaration of Citation Principles [4], which recognize data as important, citable products of research, and that data citations should be both understandable by humans and machine-readable.

Hypothetical scenarios 4: Authorship change and dispute

Sophia recently received a major revision decision on a paper she submitted to a journal. The feedback from the reviewers suggests significant improvements to the analysis and methodology. Sophia has been working closely with a colleague, Noah, who provided valuable insights and suggestions for the revisions. Sophia is considering adding Noah as a coauthor on the revised version, as she feels his contributions were substantial to the revised paper.

Dr Miller was working on a research paper but had limited time to complete the manuscript. To expedite the process, he asked his doctoral student, Sarah, to write the entire paper using the collected research data. Sarah conducted the analysis and drafted the manuscript; however, upon submission, she discovered that her name was not included as an author.

Analysis and best practices for scenarios 4

"Authorship establishes accountability, responsibility, and credit for scientific information" (Flanagin *et al.*, 1998, p. 222). Determining authorship is a complicated process but an important component of upholding the integrity of the research. Many journals, including ours, follow the authorship principles outlined by the *International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)*, an institution comprising internationally renowned medical journal editors. According to these principles, all of the following four criteria *must be met* to be considered an author:

(1) substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work;

(2) drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content;

(3) final approval of the version to be published; and

(4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved [International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), 2025].

Such authorship should be agreed upon before submission, ensuring that no one is unfairly granted authorship or denied rightful credit. Nevertheless, authorship disputes can still arise, and inappropriate authorship, such as honorary authorship and ghost authorship, remains a concern. To mitigate such conflicts and issues, the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) was introduced to provide "a controlled vocabulary of contributor roles for published

research outputs" (Brand *et al.*, 2015); some publishers and journals have adopted CRediT as part of their submission process.

Authorship changes can occur at various stages of the publication process and for various reasons, including adding additional authors, removing existing authors, or rearranging the authorship order. Such changes can only be made with the mutual agreement of all listed authors and must be approved by the journal's editorial team.

Hypothetical scenario 5: AI-generated content

James is considering using ChatGPT to assist in drafting the literature review section. He has heard that AI tools like ChatGPT can help generate summaries of existing research. Is it acceptable for James to use ChatGPT to assist in drafting the literature review section of his paper?

Analysis and best practices for scenario 5

With the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, the ethics of using such tools are controversial. The use of such tools in scholarly publishing raises concerns related to copyright, citation practices, and their potential impact on the "Matthew Effect," which can influence visibility and recognition in academic research (Lund *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, many academic publishers have quickly responded to the impact of the tools on authorship and academic integrity and implemented AI authorship policies and guidelines for acknowledging AI usage in manuscript preparation.

Many publishers now require disclosure of the use of AI tools in writing assistance. For instance, Emerald's publishing ethics clearly state that such tools cannot be credited with authorship, implying that generating the abstract or the literature review using AI is not permitted, in accordance with COPE's position statement on AI tools. In many journals, the use of AI for spelling and grammar improvement is allowed; however, authors should be mindful of the potential for bias, fabrication, inaccurate attribution and plagiarism when using such tools. In some journals, such as *Science* or *Nature*, AI-generated images and other multimedia are generally prohibited. However, exceptions may be granted for images or videos included in manuscripts specifically focused on AI or machine learning.

The question of how much AI-generated content is permissible in journal publications is still subject to ongoing discussion. As AI technology rapidly evolves, publishers and journals anticipate that their stance on AI-generated content will change in response to developments in copyright law and industry standards on ethical use.

Hypothetical scenarios 6: duplicate submissions and self-plagiarism

Daniel had his long paper accepted for presentation at a research conference. After receiving positive feedback during the event, he is considering submitting the same paper to a peer-reviewed journal for publication. His long paper will be published in a conference proceeding.

Lily recently authored a paper in Korean that was published in a local academic journal. She is considering translating the paper into English and submitting it to an international journal for broader exposure.

Analysis and best practices for scenarios 6

Any work to be submitted to a journal must be an original work that has neither appeared elsewhere for publication nor is under review for another refereed publication. Simultaneous submission – the practice of submitting a manuscript that is already under consideration at another journal – should be avoided as it not only wastes important editorial resources but

also violates ethical publishing standards, potentially leading to copyright violation and disputes, and retraction of the manuscript if the duplicity is discovered.

The definition, classification, rules, handling and regulations of self-plagiarism have remained controversial topics (Lin, 2020). In general, self-plagiarism occurs when authors reuse their previously published work without proper citation or translate their published work into another language and submit it to a different journal without acknowledging the original source. This practice is considered a form of scientific misconduct. Emerald Publishing's *Editorial Policy and Originality Guidelines* clearly state that if any part of a work has been previously published, authors must acknowledge and cite the original source and clarify how the new work differs from and expands upon the research and conclusions of the prior publication.

Although the best practice for self-plagiarism emphasizes the requirement of proper citation of previously published work, the extent to which one's own work can be legally reused remains a subject of debate.

Hypothetical scenario 7: Preprints

Taylor recently completed a study on machine learning applications in genomics. As he was eager to share his findings with the scientific community, he uploaded his paper to bioRxiv, a preprint server, making it publicly accessible. A few months later, Taylor decided to submit the same paper to a peer-reviewed journal for formal publication. Should he mention the preprint in the submission?

Analysis and best practices for scenario 7

Preprints, drafts of scholarly articles, and research papers shared before peer review have become valuable tools for the rapid and open dissemination of scientific findings. Preprint servers, which serve as online repositories for these works, allow researchers to share their findings immediately, receive feedback from a broader audience, and demonstrate research progress well before formal publication (Bourne *et al.*, 2017). Examples of preprint servers include: arXiv in physics, mathematics, and engineering; bioRxiv in biology; SSRN in social science; and psyArXiv in psychological science.

Authors should be aware that not all publishers and journals accept submissions of articles previously released as preprints. Some journals may reject such submissions. Transpose, a database of journal policies [5], was once a useful resource for checking whether a journal supports preprinting. However, the best approach is to verify the journal's policies directly by visiting its official website.

Even for journals that accept preprints, authors should inform the journal editor at the time of submission whether their paper has already been shared on a preprint server. For detailed requirements, authors should consult the publisher's author policies – for instance, Emerald Publishing's *Author Policies* – on preprints, conference papers, and theses [6].

Conclusion

Quality research requires ethical practices. Ethics and quality are not separate; they go hand in hand. Violations of ethical standards and principles in research and publication undermine the credibility and reliability of research outcomes, hindering scientific progress, and potentially causing harm to individuals or communities affected by flawed or misleading research.

Researchers should work closely with IRB/ethics committees, journal editors, and colleagues to address these issues and ensure their work adheres to established ethical and

publication standards. They should also stay informed about best practices in research integrity, data transparency, authorship ethics and responsible publication.

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Notes

1. See the definition of "Human Subject": www.ecfr.gov/on/2018-07-19/title-45/subtitle-A/subchapter-A/part-46#46.102
2. www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/sites/default/files/assets/Emerald-consent-to-publish-form-2024.pdf
3. https://aoir.org/ethics/
4. https://force11.org/info/joint-declaration-of-data-citation-principles-final/
5. https://transpose-publishing.github.io/
6. www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/publish-with-us/author-policies/pre-prints-conference-papers-policies

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Further reading

Emerald Publishing's *Author Policies* www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/publish-with-us/author-policies

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