EDITOR’S COMMENTS:
THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE—ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN THE PUBLISHING PROCESS

Our profession has no formal audit function. More precisely, our research and publishing activities are not monitored by a formal audit process. Rather, our work rests on a foundation of individual professionalism and responsibility. The result is that ethics, not audits, serve as the primary assurance of integrity and fairness in our research process and the veracity of the products that emerge from it.

As chair of the Ethics Education Committee of the Academy, I spend considerable time talking with journal editors, division chairs, and other Academy leaders about the challenges involved in communicating and upholding professional ethical standards. The most common theme emerging from these conversations involves research and publication ethics. The most common explanation from violators includes some form of “I didn’t know.”

My comments here seek to shine light on ethical challenges that arise in the research and publishing process and to present solutions to them. I do so on two fronts. Formally, I present information from the Academy’s Code of Ethics relevant to research and publishing. Informally, I present anecdotal evidence from journal editors that highlights the ethical challenges that sometimes arise as this work reaches the journal submission and publication stage. Through these formal and informal illustrations, readers might better understand the challenges we face in our research and publishing activities and how to minimize ethical problems related to them.

LIMITED FORMAL OVERSIGHT

In a profession in which six-figure starting salaries are commonplace and quarter-million-dollar packages for successful scholars are no longer surprising, the absence of a formal audit system is truly noteworthy. No other profession comes to mind in which the stakes are so high but the formal, systemic accountability bar is so low as to be nonexistent. Not law. Not medicine. Not accounting. Not engineering. None.

Of course, some management scholars are subject to some types of formal review. For example, for both theoretical and empirical work the peer review process provides a rigorous check on the theorizing, analysis, and conclusions presented in a paper. For empirical researchers IRB oversight helps to ensure the propriety of the process by which certain types of data are collected. However, beyond these, little formal assessment exists. The processes by which both theoretical and empirical scholars seek to publish their research are not assessed in a formal, systematic way. Likewise, no formal assessment examines the authenticity of the data underlying empirical research results. We are essentially alone out there, guided—and, perhaps more important, protected—only by our understanding of and compliance with our professional ethics.

Unfortunately, mounting evidence suggests we may be falling short. Strike up a conversation with nearly anyone with editorial experience at a top journal, and before long the conversation will turn to ethics. One former editor recounts a typical story:

In my first few months as editor, a reviewer indicated a manuscript I had sent to him was very similar to something he had seen before. I contacted the prior editor who quickly turned up a paper that had previously been flatly rejected. I was astonished as I looked through it. Everything in the prior paper was identical to everything in the currently submitted paper... except the title. All words and all paragraphs, all hypotheses and all tests of hypotheses, all statistics and ALL statistical results, were the same. I contacted the lead author and laid out the facts. The author stated one of the junior authors had submitted the paper to the journal not realizing it had been submitted before. However, much other evidence, including statements in a cover letter from the lead author, made it clear that this version of the facts was not possible. So, I started out confused. I got irritated. Then I got angry. Several sources of information clearly pointed to the authors play-
ing the system, hoping to sneak by this second submission of the same paper under a new editor.

Accounts like these are more common than most scholars realize. Although most Academy members embrace the highest possible ethical principles, some are simply unaware of the specific ethical standards they are expected to uphold as members of the Academy. Still others are aware of these standards but choose not to uphold them. Both represent a significant challenge for our profession. Fortunately, the Academy provides guidance.

THE ACADEMY CODE OF ETHICS: AN OVERVIEW

The Academy of Management Code of Ethics identifies both general principles and specific standards of conduct for individuals involved in Academy activities. (The full Code of Ethics is available at http://www.aomonline.org/aom.asp?id=268.) The three general aspirational principles that serve as a guide for Academy members’ professional activities include (1) responsibility, (2) integrity, and (3) respect for people’s rights and dignity. The Code of Ethics outlines how these general principles relate to our responsibilities to our students, our profession, the Academy, practicing managers, and the larger communities in which we live and work.

In addition, the Code of Ethics provides explicit standards of conduct spanning five specific areas, including Human Relations, Privacy and Confidentiality, Public Statements, Research and Publication, and Ascribing to the Code of Ethics. Our focus here is on the Research and Publication section of this explicit standards section of the code.

Ethical standards regarding research and the publication process range from the obvious to the subtle. For example, the Research and Publication section of the code details ethical standards, such as “AOM members do not fabricate data or falsify results,” “AOM members explicitly cite others’ work and ideas,” and “AOM members take responsibility and credit...only for work they have actually performed.” If only publishing ethics were always so simple, so straightforward, so universally understood. Unfortunately, conversations with editors reveal they are not.

ACCOUNTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

I recently polled sixteen former editors (chief and associate) of top-tier management journals. I asked them to recount—anonymously—one or two instances in which they were forced to deal with a potential or apparent ethical violation at their journal. The good news is nearly half were unable to recall even a single instance of ethically questionable behavior. (That is, so long as we are willing to classify “bad sportsmanship” issues as something other than unethical!) The bad news is slightly more than half had no difficulty whatsoever in identifying an ethical breach.

The events described by the editors reflect multiple themes. The most common of these parallels the event described above, involving authors submitting manuscripts conspicuously similar to previously rejected manuscripts or to papers already published in other journals. Such papers often reflect only minor changes in theorizing, hypothesizing, data, and/or analyses. As another former editor recalls:

One submission had received favorable reactions from the three reviewers. However, I happened upon an article with a similar title published by different authors in another field of business. This published article had used the exact same sampling frame and analysis. The main results were virtually identical. In my decision letter, I simply identified the similarities and asked the authors to differentiate their work and resubmit. The authors wrote a scathing reply, and angrily withdrew their submission.

A second theme reflects the significant role serendipity plays in identifying problematic manuscripts. In nearly every case in which a questionable paper was identified, it was not a systemic audit of previous submissions or the broader literature that revealed the problem. “My discovery was purely accidental,” said one former editor. “I was wildly lucky to have assigned the manuscript to one of the same reviewers who had received it under a different editor,” said another. “Each problem was identified serendipitously,” noted a third. Still another stated, “An already published article was caught in the review process [only] by an alert and well-read reviewer.”

One editor recounted an even more circuitous accidental path to discovery. The editor had assigned to a doctoral seminar (with the permi-
sion of the journal and the authors) the initial version of a recently accepted but not yet published manuscript.

My plan was to provide the students the initial draft for consideration, and then follow up with the final, accepted version of the paper for comparison. Although the initial draft was presented anonymously, the students uncovered an already published paper by the same authors that presented a virtually identical model and tested the model by examining a set of variables that overlapped those of the first paper by about 95 percent! Naturally, the students’ first question was, ‘How can this happen? How can such a similar paper be published twice?’ My only thought was, ‘It can’t.’ After considerable investigation, the paper was pulled from the ‘in press’ papers at the journal and rejected. Nabbed by curious doctoral students. How sad is that?

The third theme permeating editors’ comments reflects the regularity with which violations are committed by experienced authors. ‘Nearly all instances involved authors that were well established,’ noted one editor. ‘Each of these indiscretions involved a top scholar,’ observed another. Overall, most ethical violations do not appear to be cases of junior scholars not knowing or understanding the rules. Nor are they a result of junior scholars running ethical yellow lights because of pressures imposed by tenure time lines. Perhaps more troubling, in many cases the more experienced authors explained that the problem resulted from mistakes on the part of junior colleagues or graduate students. One editor recalls, ‘When the author was asked about . . . [the issue], she responded that a graduate student had mistakenly sent the wrong electronic file.’ Another said, ‘The lead author stated he was not sure why that happened but that he would talk to his coauthors and get back to me. The next day I received an email stating that one of the more junior coauthors had submitted the paper to . . . [the journal] not realizing it had been submitted once before.’ Of course, it is impossible to know where the truth lies in such explanations. At best, they imply a troublesome lack of care by some senior authors in managing their manuscripts. At worst, these authors may be guilty not only of violating publishing ethics but also of adding the equally troubling violation of blaming a junior colleague for the action.

In other cases authors claimed either ignorance or innocence. In diplomatic circles this is called the “plausible deniability” strategy, and, in rare instances, such explanations may be effective. However, editors are a lot like teachers or parents or cops, in that they have “heard them all” and are not often swayed by such accounts. This is especially true in cases where the subterfuge is obviously deliberate. “The author in this case deliberately camouflaged the paper,” stated one editor. “Despite the difference in construct labels [between the two papers], the correlation matrix between the two was exactly the same! That is, down to the second decimal place, relationships between variables in one paper were identical with those in the other paper, yet the names of the variables were somewhat different.” It is understandable that activities like these sometimes push editors beyond disappointment, past annoyance, and on to the point of anger.

The editors generated other examples of ethical violations as well. For example, one recalled an author who failed to respond to an invitation to revise and resubmit:

I couldn’t understand this. It was an R&R at . . . [a top journal], and this author seemed to ignore it (even after repeated follow-ups)! Nearly three months after the close of the deadline for revision, the author finally responded to an inquiry about the manuscript, and only then formally declined the opportunity to revise. Sixty days later, the paper appeared in another journal. Apparently, after receiving the R&R from us, the author had resubmitted the manuscript to another journal, while keeping the R&R invitation active as a backup. Only after the paper had been accepted elsewhere did the author formally withdraw from our system.

In all, the editors recounted a wide variety of unethical actions. But, different as they were, these actions shared a single attribute: not a single one needed to happen. Two very simple—and potentially very valuable—solutions could have prevented them all.

THE ACADEMY CODE OF ETHICS: RESEARCH AND PUBLISHING DIRECTIVES

The first involves a visit to the Academy website to read carefully the sections of the Code of Ethics devoted to research and publishing. The code identifies two specific issues relevant to authors. The first addresses issues related to reporting on research (Section 4.1). It states: “AOM members adhere to the highest ethical
standards when disseminating their research findings, such as at the annual meeting or in AOM publications.” It goes on to provide several specific directives with respect to reporting on research:

4.1 AOM members do not fabricate data or falsify results in their publications or presentations.
4.2 In presenting their work, AOM members report their findings fully and do not omit data that are relevant within the context of the research question(s). They report results whether they support or contradict expected outcomes.
4.3 AOM members take particular care to present relevant qualifications to their research or to the findings and interpretations of them. AOM members also disclose underlying assumptions, theories, methods, measures, and research designs that are relevant to the findings and interpretations of their work.
4.4 In keeping with the spirit of full disclosure of methods and analyses, once findings are publicly disseminated, AOM members permit their open assessment and verification by other responsible researchers, with appropriate safeguards, where applicable, to protect the anonymity of research participants.
4.5 If AOM members discover significant errors in their publication or presentation of data, they take appropriate steps to correct such errors in the form of a correction, a retraction, published erratum, or other public statement.
4.6 AOM members report sources of financial support in their papers and note any special relations to any sponsor. AOM members may withhold the names of specific sponsors if they provide an adequate and full description of the sponsor’s nature and interest.
4.7 AOM members report accurately the results of others’ scholarship by using complete and correct information and citations when presenting the work of others.
4.8 AOM members who analyze data from others explicitly acknowledge the contribution of the initial researchers.

The second section of the code relevant to authors addresses issues related to the publication process itself (Section 4.2). It states: “AOM members adhere to the highest ethical standards when participating in publication and review processes.” This section includes directives concerning plagiarism, authorship credit, and the submission process:

4.2.1 Plagiarism
4.2.1.1 AOM members explicitly identify, credit, and reference the author of any data or material taken verbatim from written work, whether that work is published, unpublished, or electronically available.
4.2.1.2 AOM members explicitly cite others’ work and ideas, including their own, even if the work or ideas are not quoted verbatim or paraphrased. This standard applies whether the previous work is published, unpublished, or electronically available.

4.2.2 Authorship Credit
4.2.2.1 AOM members ensure that authorship and other publication credits are based on the scientific or professional contributions of the individuals involved.
4.2.2.2 AOM members take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed or to which they have contributed.
4.2.2.3 AOM members usually list a student as principal author on multiple-authored publications that substantially derive from the student’s dissertation or thesis.

4.2.3 Submission of Manuscripts for Publication
4.2.3.1 In cases of multiple authorship, AOM members confer with all other authors prior to submitting work for publication, and they establish mutually acceptable agreements regarding submission.
4.2.3.2 In submitting a manuscript to an AOM publication, members grant that publication first claim to publication except where explicit policies allow multiple submissions.
4.2.3.3 It is AOM policy to permit manuscripts that have been previously published in any proceedings to submit substantially embellished manuscripts for AOM-journal review.
4.2.3.4 AOM members may not submit a manuscript to a second publication until after a decision has been received from the first publication or until the authors have formally withdrawn the manuscript. AOM members submitting a manuscript for publication in a journal, book series, or edited book can withdraw a manuscript from consideration up until an official acceptance is made.
4.2.3.5 When AOM members publish data or findings that overlap with work
they have previously published elsewhere, they cite these publications. AOM members must also send the prior publication or “in press” work to the AOM journal editor to whom they are submitting their work.

FULL DISCLOSURE AND OTHER ISSUES

A careful reading of the Code of Ethics is likely to prevent most “misunderstandings” of the sort reported by the editors. (It also places you among the most knowledgeable members of the Academy. A recent member survey revealed that fewer than 10 percent of members have carefully read the code. Thus, doing so places you among the Academy’s ethically enlightened elite!)

However, if any ambiguities remain, the second solution for avoiding ethical missteps is equally simple and equally effective: disclose. Simply ask the editor. If that “new” manuscript really is significantly different from a previously rejected or previously published paper, then show them both to the editor, clarify the similarities and differences, and let the decision emerge from a full hearing of the facts. You cannot go wrong with a strategy of full disclosure.

Along with this appeal for full disclosure, three other issues emerged from my conversations with the editors. The first involves the lingering effects of transgressions like these. As one editor noted, “Even though the author’s excuse was vaguely plausible, nobody on our team believed it. Even now, years later, when I encounter this author or one of his papers, I immediately think of this situation, and I wonder how often the author did things like this in his other work.” As one of my colleagues often says, “It’s a very long career in a very small field.” It makes sense to protect one’s reputation intensely.

The second issue involves the ethics of those on the other side of the publishing process: editors and reviewers. Several editors commented at length about the ethical challenges they and their teams face, and how the integrity of the system relies on strict ethical compliance on that side of the editorial process as well. Appropriately, the Code of Ethics devotes specific sections to each of these issues. Section 4.2.4 deals with ethical responsibilities of editors, and Section 4.2.5 addresses those of reviewers. This is an important issue, and although it lies outside the scope of this essay, these sections of the code are worth reading.

The third issue is a reminder that although many editors were able to recall unethical activities on the part of authors, many could not. And even those who did provide examples noted that unethical actions represent low base rate events. That is good news. But all of us depend on the system to support the integrity of our own work. Therefore, even a very few bad apples can potentially harm the reputation of the system and, in turn, each one of us in it.

CLOSING COMMENTS

I opened this conversation by noting the absence of a formal, institutionalized audit process at work in our profession. I cited the enormous pressure that places on professional ethics to ensure the integrity of a system like ours. But the situation is actually even more extreme than that. It is true that we have no formal, mandatory audit process. However, even the optional audit opportunities we have available are rarely used. In more than twenty years of publishing, I have never once been asked—either by an editor or by a reviewer—to show my data, much less the records involved in collecting and assembling those data. In my tenure as associate editor at the Academy of Management Journal, and more recently at Business Ethics Quarterly, I have served as steward for more than 500 manuscripts. Yet I have never asked an author for access to or documentation of his or her raw data. Further, those 500 plus manuscripts involved more than 1,500 reviews, and I never had even a single reviewer request access to data or documentation.

Looking back, I find this to be stunning. It may also be fortunate, if evidence from a recent paper in the Journal of Applied Psychology is any indication. As part of a study aimed at reassessing the predictive validity of the Implicit Association Test, Blanton et al. (2009) asked authors of eight studies to provide their raw data for reassessment. Only three were able to do so, even though all were published relatively recently, between 2001 and 2007.
I have heard it said that integrity is not just an important piece of what our profession sells; it is, in fact, the only thing we sell. Each of us depends on the integrity of the system in which we research, write, and publish to ensure our own personal professional integrity. As a profession, “the better angels of our nature” may well be superior to those of professions that utilize formal audit processes. But they are not perfect. Therefore, our professional ethics may be the only thing supporting those of us fortunate to hold this, the best job in the world. Do yourself, your colleagues, and your profession a favor. Read that Code of Ethics. Now.

REFERENCE

Marshall Schminke
Chair, AOM Ethics Education Committee