



**National Code
of Best Practice**
in Editorial Discretion and
Peer Review for South African
Scholarly Journals

ACADEMY OF SCIENCE OF SOUTH AFRICA
ASSAf



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National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals

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A. Fundamental Principles of Research Publishing

Providing the Building Blocks to the Matrix of Human Knowledge

- [1] An impressive degree of order has been afforded to a potentially chaotic world knowledge system by the explicit or tacit acceptance by virtually all participants of a set of principles which regulate the publishing of research findings or ideas. Some of the most important of these are:
- The reported findings and/or conceptual insights must be original, in the sense that they are the first report of such findings and/or insights. This perhaps most fundamental principle pre-supposes that authors submitting manuscripts containing new findings and/or insights will have had access to the universe of relevant existing literature and will not knowingly suppress the fact that the findings and/or insights have in fact been published before. A key function of multiple peer review is to ensure that the

knowledge of peers as to this situation is also tested before publication of the new findings and/or insights. A frequently vexed question is whether there is in fact exact replication of existing information, or whether the context and/or detail of the new findings and/or insights are sufficiently different to merit addition to the matrix of knowledge through publication;

- Any paper submitted to a journal should be considered for possible publication only if the author(s) have certified in writing that the paper in question is not under consideration by another journal, AND will not be submitted to such a journal until and unless a final, written rejection decision from the present journal has been received;
- Reports must contain, or permit reference to, sufficient detail of the methods and materials used in the study to permit replication in the hands of other scholars;
- Integrity of reporting requires that no inconsistent data are omitted or fabricated data presented;
- The statistical treatment of data must be thorough and the conclusions reasonable;
- The existing relevant literature must be appropriately and fairly cited; in this respect, efforts should always be made to ensure that reference is made to the first report of a finding or conceptual insight rather than a later elaboration;

- Authorship must conform to the notions of responsibility and credit; thus special attention must be given to the first 'lead' author (sometimes explicitly shared), and the inclusion in the authorship listing only of persons who have contributed directly to the production of the work at an intellectual/conceptual level;
- Speculative deductions and postulations must be clearly specified and kept to a minimum;
- Acknowledgement of funding sources and possible conflict of interest must be complete, and author affiliations provided which reflect both the period of the study and the present situation;
- While priority is accorded from the date of acceptance of an article, not from its date of receipt, i.e. the peer review must have already taken place, both dates are always given in the published version;
- Post-publication detection of errors and falsifications must always be retracted in print in the same journal; and
- Finally, there is a strong 'best-practice' rule that studies addressing a particular question should not be broken up into a series of scattered short publications but preferably be presented once as a full record of the work and its results. This rule recognises and condones the possible exception arising from publication of short preliminary communications of urgent results.

B. The Core Role of Editors

- [2] While there may be large or small editorial teams in charge of the production of particular journals, and variable designations of the participants, the essential requirement is for responsible and fair editorial oversight, exercised to ensure that:
- an editorial policy exists and is accessible to authors;
 - submitted manuscripts are carefully examined with a view to the selection of appropriate peer reviewers (who should be scholars who have not previously co-published extensively with the author(s), who are for this and other reasons free of known bias in relation to the subject matter, the author(s) and/or their institutions, and who can cover, from a position of authority and peer expertise, the topic(s) dealt with in the paper concerned);
 - reviewer reports are carefully assessed to decide whether, individually and summatively, they constitute the basis for the publication of the article in question, or whether publication should follow if certain improvements are effected and/or further work done and reported on; or whether the paper should be refused;
 - special statistical and/or mathematical review is sought, if needed;
 - the focus of the journal is protected;

- misconduct is detected if at all possible (e.g. presentation of data, graphs or figures already published elsewhere; inconsistent data sets; plagiarism);
- errata and retractions are properly managed and made part of the record;
- all reports and substantive correspondence relating to all published papers are properly and accessibly stored, preferably as part of a well-designed record- and document-handling system; and
- the journal as a whole contextualises reported findings in its editorial and supplementary sections (see above).

[3] Editors who submit papers to their own journals must delegate the full editorial discretion in respect of those papers to a deputy or associate editor. Editors should compile an annual report on their journals, with recommendations for journal improvement, for consideration by editorial boards and publishers.

C. The Indispensable Functions of Peer Reviewers

[4] Peer reviewers (always more than one, and preferably three) must have expertise and special knowledge of the topic addressed in a submitted paper, in order to fulfil a range of functions in the system of global knowledge accumulation. They must always report in writing, with clear recommendations for acceptance of the paper in question, with or without revision, or rejection, as the case may be. They must especially:

- scrutinise the methods and results in terms of consistency, interpretability and likely reproducibility;
- identify gaps that could or should be filled to enhance the interpretability and strength of the findings and/or insights;
- suggest how the paper can be improved in terms of style, length and focus;
- assess the proper citation and referencing of previously published studies (as outlined above the 'principles' section), including the critical issue of the originality of the work;
- contest conclusions not justified by the results or arguments presented; and



- ‘place’ the work in the existing matrix of knowledge in the relevant area or field.
- [5] Any potential or real conflict of interest must be declared to the editor by a peer reviewer before the review is submitted. All peer reports and substantive correspondence must be retained, for possible later scrutiny, within a well-designed record system out. A list of peer reviewers used by a journal should be published at least once a year, and reviewers who default on their obligations should not be retained for further service.
- [6] Context-bound prior academic examination, as part of a thesis or dissertation submitted for degree purposes, of scholarly work submitted for publication in a journal does not replace peer review in the specific and different context of the latter.

Reference: ASSAf (2006). *Report on a Strategic Approach to Research Publishing in South Africa*, Chapter 1, pp. 6-7, available online at www.assaf.org.za

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