COPE
20TH ANNIVERSARY 1997-2017

An analysis of peer review cases brought to COPE from 1997-2016
COPE Council, September 2017.

Background

COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) provides resources and guidance to support all members on various aspects of publication ethics and how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct that arise at their journals (1).

One of the main benefits of COPE is the quarterly Forum where members can bring individual "cases" in publication ethics for discussion and advice.

All of the forum cases from 1997 onwards have been entered into a searchable database (2). This database contains over 500 cases together with the advice given by COPE providing a valuable resource for users.

In 2013, a new and more comprehensive classification scheme was developed to facilitate the coding of cases and to aid searching. This resulted in a new COPE Case Taxonomy comprising 18 main classification categories (3).

Objective

The aim of this study was to analyse the cases which are specifically related to peer review in the context of the other categories of cases brought to COPE and report on trends within peer review to inform future guidance.

Methods

The previous category analysis of all COPE cases from 1997-2012 was updated to include data from the last four years, 2013-2016.

Out of 44 cases from the peer review category, 43 were sufficiently detailed for further analysis.

The specific issue within peer review was noted, together with when the issue arose and who was responsible at that point (author, peer reviewer, editor). The broad subject area of the journal, as well as the recommendation for the journal was also recorded.

Results

All previously high frequency categories including peer review have declined in recent years, apart from cases relating to authorship which remain consistently high (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Variation in nine most common case categories 1997-2016
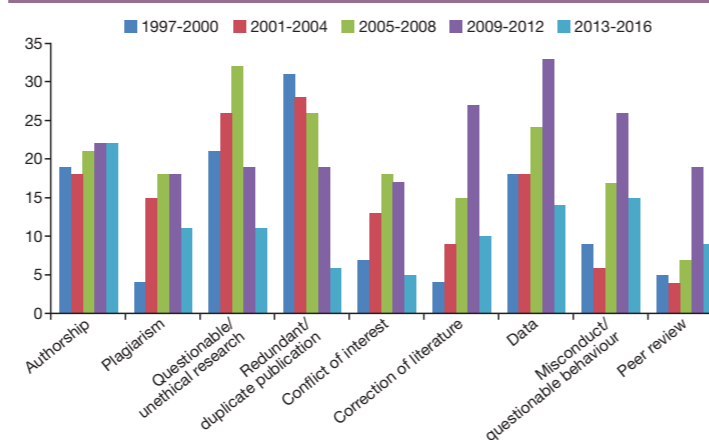
Of the 43 peer review cases, 29 occurred in science disciplines and 3 occurred in the arts and social sciences. In 11 cases the subject area was not recorded.

Most issues arose during the peer review process (32 cases) with breaches in confidentiality and concerns about the editorial process being the most common reasons why cases are brought to COPE (Figure 2). However, in recent years more complex issues relating to bias in peer review and compromised peer review (due to fraud) have occurred (Table 1).

Figure 2. Piechart highlighting specific issue in peer review for the case to be brought to COPE
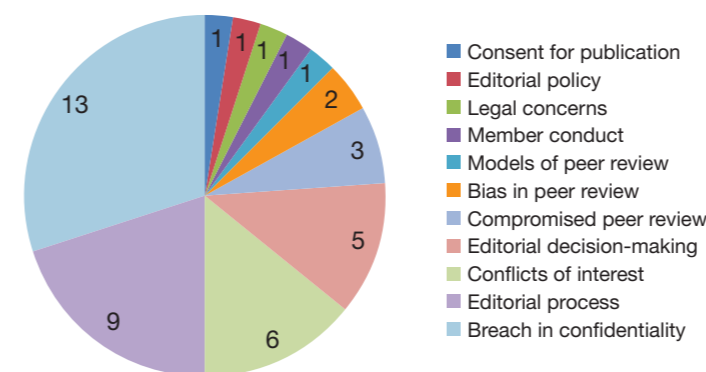

- Consent for publication
- Editorial policy
- Legal concerns
- Member conduct
- Models of peer review
- Bias in peer review
- Compromised peer review
- Editorial decision-making
- Conflicts of interest
- Editorial process
- Breach in confidentiality

Table 1. Frequency of various issues within peer review cases brought to COPE

Specific issue within peer review	Frequency	Consistent or recent issue	Years issue occurred
Bias in peer review	2	Recent	2015, 2016
Breach in confidentiality	13	Consistent	1997, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016
Conflicts of Interest	6	Consistent	1999, 2005, 2009 2010, 2012
Compromised peer review	3	Recent	2011, 2012
Consent for publication	1	Recent	2012
Editorial decision-making	5	Consistent	2000, 2003, 2004,
Editorial policy	1	Recent	2010
Editorial process	9	Consistent	2002, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013
Legal concerns	1	Rare	2003
Member conduct	1	Rare	1997
Models of peer review	1	Recent	2016

Although each case has unique outcomes and specific advice, a common finding was the recommendation to revise journal guidelines and policy.

Conclusions

The decline in incidence of cases brought to COPE in previously high frequency categories (except for authorship) may reflect the use of the COPE cases database which facilitates users learning from related cases. It may also reflect a growing awareness of relevant COPE guidance in this area e.g. COPE ethical guidelines for peer reviewers (4). However, there is potential for further guidance in peer review, particularly with respect to maintaining confidentiality and best practice in editorial processes and for handling cases involving more than one journal. The findings presented here will inform the creation of further COPE guidance documents and resources in future.

References

1) COPE: https://publicationethics.org/

2) COPE Cases database: https://publicationethics.org/cases

3) The COPE Case Taxonomy: https://publicationethics.org/cope-case-taxonomy

4) COPE Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers: https://publicationethics.org/peerreviewguidelines

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