

Scientists Behaving Badly: Insights from the Fraud Triangle

Blog No. 2011-02 (July 27, 2011)

Key Insight: Occasionally, journal editors are confronted with evidence that authors have engaged in unethical behaviors such as plagiarism, multiple submissions or fabricating data. What causes scientists to behave badly? I argue that the fraud triangle can provide useful insights into the pressures that lead scholars to engage in research fraud.

*From: xxx
To: Lorraine Eden
Sent: Mon 2/22/2010
Subject: ethical question*
Hi Lorraine, I have an important ethical question to ask you: I have received the same article from two different journals to review. One journal wants me to send them a regular referee form evaluating the quality of the article and the other wants me to write a commentary on the piece. Should I inform the editors that the manuscript has been submitted to two journals simultaneously? Thanks, xxx

-----Original Message-----

From: Lorraine Eden

Sent: Mon 2/22/2010

To: xxx

Subject: Re: ethical question

Dear xxx, I would inform the editors of both journals, attach the other paper, and not do either review. I'll send you tomorrow my editorial on journal ethics. Lorraine

-----Original Message-----

From: xxx

Sent: Tues 2/23/2010

To: Eden, Lorraine

Subject: Re: ethical question

Lorraine, Thanks for the editorial on the ethics of scientific writing. I found it very useful myself, especially the section on redundancy (self-plagiarism). I was not aware that it would be an issue! Below you will find the reaction of one of the editors. Rather disappointing I think. I would have sent the author a rejection. Best, xxx

-----Original Message-----

From: xxx

Sent: Tues 2/23/21010

To: EDITOR

Subject: FW: request to review...

Dear EDITOR, Thank you for your kind invitation to write a commentary on paper[.....]for your journal. I was very surprised when I got your email yesterday as I had just finished reviewing the SAME article for another journal. I asked a couple of senior scholars on the usual procedure for this kind of problem, and they advised me to let you and the other editor know the article had been simultaneously submitted to two venues. I am curious to know how this will play out, so please keep me abreast of the journal's decision regarding this article. Sincerely, xxx

-----Original Message-----

From: EDITOR

Sent: Tues 2/23/2010

To: xxx

Subject: RE: request to review...

Dear xxx, Thank you so much for this message. This is not acceptable at our journal. I am going to contact the author and I will let you know. As far as I know, the author is currently revising the paper for our journal based on suggestions of two reviewers. If he/she withdraws the submission of the paper from the other journal it would not be a problem here. Sincerely, EDITOR

I think that most if not all AOM members would see the email exchange above (which actually happened; I made minor revisions to the emails) as unethical behavior by the author. Sending the same or substantially the same paper for review at and possible publication in two different journals is unacceptable behavior at most social science journals. At least one of the journals was unaware that this was happening, based on one editor's response, and probably both were unaware. Why would an author engage in this activity? I argue that insights from the fraud triangle can help explain why and when scientists are likely to behave badly.

Fraudulent behavior involves “intentional deception, lying, deceitful pretenses, cunning, willing misrepresentation of material fact, and deliberate trickery intended to gain an unfair and dishonest advantage” (Chui 2010: 8). Fraud involves deliberate intent – lying – either by (1) concealing relevant facts that the individual is under an obligation to disclose or by (2) distorting relevant facts. Building on this definition, **I define research fraud as a deliberate intent by an author to conceal or to distort facts relevant to the research process, all the way from the original research idea through to publication.**

Cressey (1953) argued the individuals are more likely to commit fraud when three conditions or pressures occur: opportunity, incentive and rationalization. “[I]nformation asymmetries, uncertainty, or ambiguity combined with absent or lax monitoring and enforcement mechanisms” create opportunity for fraud (Stuebs and Wilkinson 2010: 27). The individual must also have an incentive (financial, social or otherwise) to commit fraud. Third, the individual must rationalize the act as consistent with his or her code of ethics. Either the individual see the action as compliant (fitting within existing norms or rules) or strategically noncompliant (modifying or stretching the interpretation of the rules or norms so they encompass the action). There is a large literature providing empirical support to the fraud triangle at both the individual and organizational levels (e.g., Hogan, Rezaee, Riley & Velury 2008).

Let's apply the fraud triangle to the example above where a reviewer is sent the same paper by two journals. Eden (2010) and Schminke (2009) provide other examples of scientists behaving badly where the fraud triangle could also be applied. (Note that the November 2011 issue of *Management and Organization Review (MOR)* will also be devoted to research ethics.)

Opportunity, the first corner of the research fraud triangle, comes from informational hazards, weak monitoring and poor enforcement mechanisms. Clearly, information asymmetries characterize the journal submission process. Individuals voluntarily submit papers to journals for possible publication, and journal editors rely either wholly or primarily on authors to disclose relevant information about their manuscripts.

Monitoring mechanisms are typically weak. Most journals now have a "check the box" mechanism whereby authors must state that their submission is new and not under review elsewhere. Some journals, such as *Journal of International Business Studies*, have an elaborate Code of Ethics, and authors are required to "check the box" that they have read and abided by the code (http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jibs/jibs_ethics_code.html). However, editors normally cannot verify author statements and, given huge number of submissions, may not have the time or ability for due diligence. Detection depends on serendipity or accident, as in the case above where the same individual was asked to review both manuscripts. (Monitoring mechanisms may be improving, however, as journals start to run submitted manuscripts through cross-checking programs, such as iThenticate, that highlight overlaps with already published research.)

Lastly, weak enforcement also creates opportunity. As the case above demonstrates, many journal editors may not punish authors for misbehavior. When detection and punishment are low, authors may make a rational benefit-cost calculation and decide to engage in research fraud.

My search for the phrase "publish or perish" generated more than 450,000 results in Google; clearly, the **incentive** to engage in research fraud is well known inside and outside of academia. Publication pressures can occur at any stage of a faculty member's career, whether searching for the first or a new job, seeking tenure and/or promotion, or merit salary increases. One might expect that pre-tenured faculty face the strongest pressures to publish and therefore might be most expected to engage in research fraud. Schminke (2009: 588), however, found otherwise based on his interviews with 16 journal editors: most ethical violations were not caused by "junior scholars running ethical yellow lights because of pressures imposed by tenure time lines." Thus, pressures to publish occur across one's academic career. Moreover, financial rewards can involve more than simple merit pay increases. Some universities now pay a faculty member \$US 10,000 or even \$20,000 for an AOM publication, providing a strong incentive to engage in research fraud, particularly where opportunity, the first corner of the fraud triangle, is also strong.

The third corner of the research fraud triangle is **rationalization**. In order to commit research fraud, the scholar must be able to rationalize the action as consistent with his/her code of ethics. Either the individual sees the action as fitting within existing norms or rules, or they can be bent to encompass the activity. Simple egoism (what benefits me most?) can also be a rationalizing factor.

As a starter, authors may simply be unaware of publication norms and rules; for example, PhD students or junior scholars may not be familiar with existing rules and procedures at major scholarly journals. Authors may "check the box" that they have read and abided by the journal's ethics code without actually having done so. (How many times have you installed an updated version of a software program where you had to check the box that

you had read the terms and conditions, and you checked the box – but didn't read the 30+ pages of terms and conditions?)

In the case of research fraud above, where the author sends the same paper through the review process at two journals, the author may have also rationalized the behavior on the grounds that the reviewing process of satisfying the demands of two or three reviewers plus an editor, through two or three rounds of review, would result in two sufficiently different papers by the end of the process. Thus, the ends (two separate publications) justified the means (sending the same paper to two journals).

Moreover, individuals may be conditioned by their colleagues and peers that it is OK because “everyone is doing it”. If authors believe or see other scholars also engaged in strategic noncompliance with ethical norms and rules—particularly where the behavior is not caught and may even be rewarded -- it is easier to rationalize engaging in research fraud.

Cressey (1959) argued that all three corners of the fraud triangle had to occur simultaneously for individuals to engage in fraudulent behaviors. Similarly, **I argue that when opportunity, incentive and rationalization combine to create strong pressures to engage in research fraud, we will find scientists behaving badly.**

In another blog, I will talk about how to reduce the pressures for research fraud, but for my first blog on this topic, **I would like to hear your views on the topic of pressures to engage in research fraud.** Some issues for possible discussion and comments might include (but are not limited to):

1. *What do you see as research fraud?*
2. *Please share examples from your own experience – as an author, reviewer and/or editor – of pressures affecting research fraud.*
3. *Is the research fraud triangle a useful framework for explaining pressures for scientists to behave badly?*
4. *Can you provide other examples of the three pressures (opportunity, incentive and rationalization) in addition to the ones I have above?*
5. *Some authors argue the appropriate framework for understanding fraud is a diamond rather than a triangle, adding capability as a fourth pressure (Wolfe & Hermanson 2004). Capability considers personal traits and abilities (e.g., intelligence, experience, creativity, ability to lie and cope with stress) that make it more or less easy for individuals or organizations to successfully commit fraud. Can capability apply to research fraud also?*

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