

Closeout for M98100029

In October 1998, a National Science Foundation (NSF) employee¹ forwarded an allegation of possible improper duplicate publication by an engineer (the subject).² In 1993, the subject and a co-author³ (who served as the subject's doctoral thesis advisor) published the original manuscript (the original publication) in a peer-reviewed journal (the first journal).⁴ In 1996, the subject once again published a near identical copy of the manuscript (the second publication) in a different peer-reviewed journal (the second journal).⁵ A close examination of these two publications revealed substantial similarities in the written text, figures, and figure captions. The only difference between these publications was that the second publication included an additional, self-contained experiment which did not change the scope or conclusions of the study. The co-author and the original publication were not referenced in the second publication.

Although the second publication states that NSF supported this research project, in the course of an inquiry, our office learned that NSF did not directly support the subject's research. At the time of the research project, the subject and the co-author of the original manuscript were employed as NSF program directors.

According to the publication policies of the first journal, "only original contributions that have not been previously published or submitted elsewhere [may be accepted] for publication." According to the publication policies of the second journal, "submission of a paper will be held to imply that it contains original unpublished work and is not being submitted for publication elsewhere."

In response to a letter from our office, the subject described the reference to the co-author in the first publication as a gift authorship. In addition, the subject pointed to the self-contained experiment in the second publication as a defense to the allegation of duplicate publication. These statements were not a satisfactory response to our questions concerning his failure to reference the original publication or cite the original co-author in the second publication.

Our office requested an assessment of the ethical issues of this alleged duplicate publication from a member of the scientific community.⁶ According to this scientist, "the publication of these two articles constitutes a serious ethical problem."

In response to a letter from our office, the Editor-in-Chief of the first journal concluded the subject's failure to reference the original publication in the second publication "did not conform to the normal publication practices adhered to by the [first journal's] editorial staff." The Editor-in-Chief believed the first journal should ask the second journal to acknowledge the original publication. This acknowledgement should be written by the subject.

¹ [footnote redacted]

² [footnote redacted]

³ [footnote redacted]

⁴ [footnote redacted]

⁵ [footnote redacted]

⁶ [footnote redacted]

Closeout for M98100029

Our office sent two letters to the second journal editor to determine the second journal's perspective on this alleged duplicate publication. The second journal editor never responded.

We agree with the scientist and first journal editor that the subject's duplicate publication constitutes a "serious ethical problem" that deviates from acceptable practices. However, we could not justify additional review or recommend a finding of misconduct in science in light of the absence of clearly articulated community standards for duplicate publications. In the final analysis, we believe the decision of the first journal editor to request a written acknowledge in the second journal will protect NSF's interest in preserving scientific integrity. Accordingly, we sent a letter to the subject recommending the submission of a written acknowledgement for the second journal.

This case is closed and no further action will be taken by our office.

Cc: Integrity, IG