COPE membership for MECPsych: a message behind the news

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Good news! In June 2011, along with all Lippincott/ Williams & Wilkins journals, Middle East Current Psychiatry (MECPsych) became a new member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Thus, I was spurred to write this Editorial with a number of aims. I wanted first to congratulate the Editor-in-Chief and all staff members of the MECPsych on this membership. I also wanted to briefly introduce COPE to our interested readers and to try to construe the message behind the news. Moreover, I saw this as an opportunity to draw the attention of readers and contributors to some of the main processes of research ethics that aim to ensure transparency and integrity of the scientific process that all COPE members including the most recent one, the MECPsych, are very concerned about and to finally discuss in brief the impact of cultural factors on the practice of these ethics.

It is no wonder that our editorial team should feel proud because MECPsych is the first in the history of psychiatric journals in Egypt to obtain the COPE membership. However, my congratulations should be extended to all Egyptian psychiatric academics and clinicians who can see that out of all scientific publications in the Middle East region, there is at least one psychiatric journal from Egypt that has earned the membership of COPE. My wish, however, is to see as many more as possible, if not all the journals of Egypt and the Middle East becoming members of highly reputable organizations concerned with publishing Ethics such as COPE.

COPE was inaugurated in 1997 as a small self-help group of medical journal editors in the UK providing a forum for editors to share problems around difficult ethical cases. It also took on the role of a pressure group to force the government to place research misconduct on the national agenda, and in this, it has been successful (*http://www.publicationethics.org/*). COPE has continued to flourish. By 2000, COPE had over 90 members. Currently, it includes more than 6000 members worldwide from all academic fields. All COPE members are expected to follow the Code of Conduct for Journal Editors. COPE takes on the responsibility of investigating complaints that a member has not followed the Code.

Well, as far as I can see, there is a clear message behind the news that MECPsych has become a member of COPE. The message is that articles in this Journal can be considered trustworthy, that MECPsych is aiming for the highest ethical standards, striving to follow COPE's Code of Conduct, and will take suitable action in cases of possible scientific misconduct. This is vital because basically, academic publishing has to be dependent on trust. Editors trust peer reviewers to provide fair assessments, authors trust editors to select appropriate peer reviewers, and readers place their trust in the peer-review process [1]. Scientists are generally perceived as well-intentioned seekers of truth and as producers of knowledge vital to the health and welfare of society, while fraudsters are seen as just a 'few bad apples' [2], and the public is reassured that fraudulent scientists are ultimately caught and punished. Nevertheless, dark clouds of distrust and concern are hanging over research. Highly publicized instances of scientific fraud have led to increased scrutiny of research ethics. Although this scrutiny has extended across all branches of medicine, it has been most extensive on psychiatric research. Perhaps this is because mental illness is less well understood by scientists and the general public or perhaps individuals with mental illness are viewed as more susceptible to exploitation. In addition, some ethical issues relevant to psychiatric research have arisen primarily from the risks posed by some research methodologies. Ethical questions concerning the recent rapid progress in the acquisition and application of knowledge and technologies stemming from the sciences of the mind have led to the development of a novel eld called 'neuroethics.' Obviously, biologically informed psychiatry falls within the purview of neuroethics. So too does the prescription of antidepressants, antipsychotics, and other psychopharmaceuticals [3]. Some distinction has been attempted between ethics of neuroscience and neuroscience of ethics. The ethics of neuroscience deal with ethical problems arising from advances in neuroimaging and other new forms of interventions into the brain, whereas the neuroscience of ethics investigates the neural mechanisms that may possibly underlie moral concepts and practices [4]. In any case, sensitivity is required in the design of psychiatric research [5]. To safeguard the adoption of ethical principles in research, various forms of

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national commissions, institutional review boards, research ethics committees, and hospital ethics committees have been developed. A number of international organizations, such as the World Association of Medical Editors, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and of course, COPE have also been established. They all cater to one and the same goal: to bring together different opinions, expectations, forms of expertise, social interests, and to practice the art of deliberation and confrontation in a tolerant and democratic spirit [6]. COPE has issued a number of important publications. These include a series of 'owcharts' to evaluate and respond to the most common questions of misconduct, 'Code of Conduct for Journal Editors,' to provide a set of minimum standards to which all COPE members are expected to adhere, and 'Best Practice Guidelines,' which is an extension of the Code as a gold standard to which to aspire. The two guidelines were revised in 2011 and combined into a single document but in which the mandatory Code of Conduct and the more aspirational Best Practice Guidelines remained distinguishable. Obviously, I cannot go into the details of these publications here. They can be freely obtained from the COPE's website (*http://www.publicationethics.org/*). This editorial, however, represents an opportunity to draw the attention of readers and contributors to some basic processes of research ethics that aim to ensure transparency and honesty of the scientific process.

Transparency

Sources of funding for research or publication should be totally disclosed.

Conflicts of interest

Editors, authors, and peer reviewers have a responsibility to disclose interests that might appear to affect their ability to present or review data objectively. These include relevant financial, personal, political, intellectual, or religious interests. Readers will benefit from transparency, including knowing authors' and contributors' affiliations and interests. Editors should strive to maintain transparent policies and procedures regarding authorship and disclosure of conflicts of interest.

Informed consent

As the use of human beings as a means to the ends of others without their knowledge and freely granted permission constitutes exploitation and is therefore unethical, informed consent is fundamental. People may submit themselves to possible risk or inconvenience or forego the certainty of specific treatments to participate in a study as an expression of their personal autonomy, individual rights, and humanitarian interest. However, this is only ethical if the research participants have been fully informed about the study and have signed the consent form to enter into the study voluntarily. Thus, informed consent is not a signed consent [7]. A signed consent is a documentary evidence of the consent process. To confuse them with each other may be a violation of the ethical intent of informed consent, which is an educational process to generate discussion, in an atmosphere of trust and respect, between researchers and prospective participants to ensure that the decision to participate is made voluntarily and knowingly. Voluntariness implies that the consent is obtained willingly without using force, threats, or coercion. The concept of knowledge means that the prospective participant is allowed to enquire about the needed details of the study and is given all of the relevant information, which must be complete and understandable, to make a decision on whether or not to participate. It is important to note that failure to disclose material facts when obtaining a patient's consent for research is fraud. Consent needs to be in writing. If verbal consent is used, one has to provide the rationale for doing so, for example, patient illiteracy or visual impairment, but still, in this case, a short form must be signed or fingerprinted by the patient and cosigned by an independent witness to what was said. Some researchers have advocated the documentation of the process of informed consent by audiorecording, videorecording, and photography when patients cannot read [8]. If the participant is not able to provide consent, as in some patients with psychiatric disorders, it should then be obtained from the participant's legally acceptable representative, for example, parent, guardian, or designated other, before involvement in any research-related activity. However, research has not supported the assumption that all psychiatric patients by virtue of their illness are not competent enough to understand the issues and to provide informed consent. Indeed, many of these patients are able to provide informed consent.

Research honesty

Research honesty or integrity is the maintenance of truthfulness and proper crediting of research sources. It encompasses a wide range of topics relating to the ethical conduct of research involving humans and animals.

Animal welfare concerns

It is essential that researchers do everything possible to promote and ensure the humane care and treatment of animals used in research. Animals to be used in the laboratory must be acquired lawfully, properly fed and sheltered and, under no circumstances, subjected to unnecessary pain or discomfort.

Human use concerns

The origin of advancing scientific knowledge through human experimentation using vulnerable groups can be traced back to ancient history, when Herophilus performed vivisections on prisoners. In recent times, the principles of conducting human research were first developed as the 'Nuremberg code' in 1947 to try 23 Nazi physicians and officials as war criminals for conducting 'studies' of prisoners. The three basic principles of the Nuremberg Code (voluntary informed consent, favorable risk/benefit analysis, and right to withdraw without repercussions) became the basis for subsequent ethical

codes and research regulations [9,10]. In 1964, the World Medical Association established the Declaration of Helsinki, which states that 'concern for the interests of the subject must always prevail over the interests of science and society.' The Declaration of Helsinki has since been amended six times in efforts to maintain relevance to current science. The current (2008) version is the only official one. For the psychiatric profession, the Declaration of Hawaii [11] was the first positional statement concerning ethical questions [12]. This was updated in 1996 by the Declaration of Madrid, which was enhanced by the World Psychiatric Association General Assemblies in Hamburg (Germany) in 1999, in Yokohama (Japan) in 2002, and in Cairo (Egypt) in 2005. The Declaration of Madrid includes seven guidelines that focus on the aims of psychiatry to treat mentally ill patients, prevent mental illness, promote mental health, and provide care and reinsertion for patients [13].

Authorship

The list of authors should accurately reflect who carried out the study. However, authorship relates more to the intellectual rather than to the practical implementation of the project. According to the ICMJE (*http://www.icmje.org*), authorship requires the fulfillment of three conditions: (a) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (c) final approval of the version to be published. All three conditions should be fulfilled for assigning authorship. Although the ICMJE criteria are clear, many authors are unaware of them or prefer to use their own ad-hoc criteria for deciding authorship [14]. Two forms of ethical problems concerning authorship have been frequently recognized: (a) Gift (guest or honorary) authorship, that is, inclusion of authors who did not contribute substantially to the study, for example, those who provide technical help only, writing assistance, or the head of the department who provides only general support. These people are relegated to the acknowledgments section. Another form of gift authorship occurs between colleagues and collaborators. In this case, a name of a colleague is unjustifiably added to the manuscript in the expectation that the favor will be returned. In this way, both authors unethically increase the number of their publications. (b) Ghost authorship, that is, exclusion of authors who did contribute significantly to the study. This usually involves people, such as postgraduate students, who are too junior to protest.

Listing individuals' contributions to the research and publication process provides greater transparency than the traditional listing of authors and may discourage inappropriate authorship practices such as 'ghost' authors and gift authors. A declaration should be made that all authors meet the journal's criteria for authorship and that nobody who meets these criteria has been excluded from the list. Authors should also declare that they have acknowledged all significant contributions made to their publication by individuals who did not meet the journal's criteria for authorship. If an authorship dispute or discrepancy comes to light before publication (for example, changes to the list of authors are proposed after submission), editors should take care to explain the journal's authorship policy to the corresponding author and to establish that all authors agree to the change before proceeding with publication. If an authorship dispute emerges after publication (for example, somebody contacts the editor claiming they should have been an author of a published paper or requesting that their name be withdrawn from a paper), the editor should contact the corresponding author and, where possible, the other authors to establish the veracity of the case. If authorship policies have been clearly set out and an explicit authorship declaration(s) has been received (stating that all authors meet the agreed criteria and that nobody deserving authorship has been excluded), then genuine errors are unlikely; however, editors should consider publishing a correction in the case of such errors.

Has the work been published before?

Duplicate publication

This is the publication of an article that is identical or overlaps substantially with an article already published elsewhere, with or without acknowledgment. Duplicate publication is considered misconduct because, aside from the obvious attempt to inflate one's own publication record, duplication (and redundant) publication has the potential to skew the evidence base (if the same data were counted more than once, the outcomes of meta-analysis used to establish the best practice would be invalid). Guidelines on good publication practice state that the authors can only submit their manuscript to a single journal at a time. However, there are some exceptions to the rule, for example, publication of results in an abstract form (and as a poster or oral communication) at a congress. Once a manuscript has been published, data should not then be submitted to a congress. Authors may resubmit the same or a revised version to another journal only if the first journal makes the decision not to publish it or it is withdrawn by the author.

Other research misconducts

The most important other forms of research misconduct include the trio 'FF&P': fabrification, falsification, and plagiarism.

(1) Fabrication: Fabrication of data refers to the invention or the making up of fictitious data, that is, data are made up or 'cooked' and then presented as research findings;
(2) Falsification: Falsification is the changing of data or exclusion of critical data to produce a desired outcome or to avoid a complicating or an inexplicable result;

(3) Plagiarism (from the Latin word plagiarius, meaning the theft of words as well as slaves): Plagiarism is the use of someone else's words, ideas, or results without appropriate attribution. It is a form of academic dishonesty and can be a criminal offense.

However, not all research misconduct allegations are true. A surprising number of plagiarism allegations turn out to be misunderstandings of exactly what constitutes plagiarism or proper citation procedure. On the basis of contemporary guidelines, I further discussed research misconduct elsewhere [15]. It is true that there are certain universal concepts, but it should be noted that the standards or the requirements of publishing, as other human endeavors, undergo a natural evolution, and standards acceptable even 10–20 years ago are no longer acceptable [16]. Moreover, these guidelines are western-oriented and although the problem of ensuring ethical practices in research on humans appears to be universal, the influence of traditional and hierarchical social norms of physician–patient relationships, in the developing world, adds yet another dimension to the difficulties in ensuring that research is conducted in an ethical manner. Some observers in the Western world noted that many of those found guilty of scientific misconduct were from foreign cultures. Applying theories from sociological criminology, Davis [17] posited that the culture brought to the West by some researchers may be at odds with the norms of academic science and may emphasize ends more than means. Nonetheless, in the developing world, the influence of traditional and hierarchical social norms of physician–patient relationships adds yet another dimension to the difficulties in ensuring that research is conducted in an ethical manner [18].

In some cultures, it is still customary for physicians to withhold certain information from patients. Clinicians may provide diagnoses (as well as prognoses) of some serious conditions to family members, but not to the patients. As a result, the patient's consent to certain procedures, if sought, may not be fully informed. Hence, valid informed consent (for either treatment or research participation) can be difficult. In some cultural contexts, the appropriateness of requiring information to be disclosed about the use of a placebo and the randomization of participants may also be queried. Some have recommended, therefore, that researchers should develop culturally appropriate ways to disclose information that is necessary for adherence to the ethical standard of informed consent, with particular attention to disclosures relating to diagnosis and risk, research design, and possible posttrial benefits. Researchers have to explain to the Ethics Review Committee(s) their plan for disclosing such information to participants [19]. Moreover, in some cultures where people may not understand or accept scientific explanations of health and disease, the challenge of obtaining informed consent can be daunting. Yet, researchers can devise innovative methods to surmount these obstacles and to ensure that potential participants do, in fact, comprehend the information contained in the consent process. In some countries, community education is performed before obtaining individual consent.

We should also bear in mind that in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the foundations of ethical principles can be found within the three major religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Egypt, the numerous ethical issues that are emerging as result of the technological advances tend to be addressed in accordance with Islamic principles [20]. Acknowledging the role of culture in the adherence to research ethics, however, underscores the importance of education and training of both researchers and administrators in the responsible conduct of research and cultural diversity [17].

Culture also has an impact on the definitions of scientific misconduct, which differ from country to country and from one institution or government agency to another [21]. However, the increasing globalization of scientific research calls for an international agreement on the definition of scientific misconduct. Universal spiritual and moral principles on which ethical standards are generally based indicate that it is possible to reach international agreement on the ethical principles underlying good scientific practice without creating unnecessary obstacles to research. This is very much needed for research, especially in developing countries. Ethical standards promote high-quality research. It is crucial, therefore, to draw attention to and follow such standards [16].

To conclude, I think one can see that getting a membership of COPE is a message signifying that this Journal will be taking part in the development of local and international research ethical standards. So, once more, congratulations!!

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Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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