



Editorial Experience and the Wrong Way of Retraction: Ethical and Bias Concerns in Retraction Decisions in Skin Research and Technology, American Journal of Transplantation, and the Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice

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Abstract

Retraction is a fundamental mechanism for protecting the integrity of the scientific record, but its misuse can itself create ethical harm. In recent years, heightened scrutiny of artificial intelligence (AI) use and post-publication reassessment of Letters to the Editor have led to retractions justified primarily by subjective evaluations of scholarly contribution rather than demonstrable misconduct. This article examines three retraction cases involving Skin Research and Technology, the American Journal of Transplantation, and the Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice. Drawing on editorial experience, the article highlights recurring problems, including retrospective editorial value judgments, speculative concerns about AI, and inadequate differentiation between editorial responsibility and author misconduct. Particular attention is given to ethical concerns and potential editorial bias, questioning whether responsibility for these cases should rest with authors or with editorial processes. The analysis argues that misapplied retraction practices risk undermining trust in peer review, chilling academic debate, and shifting blame from editorial decision-making to authors without sufficient ethical justification.

Keywords: Retraction ethics; Editorial bias; Editorial experience

Introduction

Retraction is intended to correct the scholarly record when published work is shown to be unreliable, unethical, or seriously flawed. According to guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), retraction should be reserved for cases involving research misconduct, honest error invalidating results, plagiarism, or unethical research practices.

Importantly, retraction is not designed to remedy editorial dissatisfaction or shortcomings in peer review.

However, recent editorial practices suggest a growing tendency to reassess already published Letters to the Editor using post hoc criteria. When retraction is applied in such circumstances, ethical questions arise regarding fairness, proportionality, and responsibility. This article reflects on three retraction cases as an editorial experience and examines whether editorial bias or ethical lapses within editorial decision-making itself may contribute to these outcomes.

Case 1: Skin Research and Technology

In Skin Research and Technology, a Letter to the Editor was retracted on the grounds that it lacked substantive value and relevance and that it may have been generated using artificial intelligence tools. The authors had disclosed AI use for language assistance, and no evidence of fabrication, plagiarism, or ethical misconduct was presented. Moreover, the retraction occurred without documented prior communication with the authors.

The retraction notice states that the Letter to the Editor “may have been generated using artificial intelligence tools,” yet this possibility alone was treated as sufficient to justify retraction. From an ethical and editorial perspective, this is deeply problematic. The use of the word “may” signals uncertainty rather than evidence. Retraction, however, is an irreversible and highly stigmatizing action that presupposes a clear and demonstrable breach of ethical or scientific standards. COPE guidance emphasizes that retraction decisions should be based on established facts, not conjecture or suspicion. Acting on a hypothetical possibility fundamentally undermines the principle of evidentiary threshold required for such a severe sanction.

From an ethical standpoint, this case raises concerns about bias introduced through speculative assumptions. The suggestion of AI generation, unsupported by concrete evidence, risks framing lawful and disclosed practices as unethical. The lack of author engagement further challenges principles of procedural justice and transparency.

Case 2: American Journal of Transplantation

The American Journal of Transplantation case followed a more formal investigative process after a reader raised concerns about potential AI use. The editorial team contacted the authors and requested clarification regarding AI assistance, affiliations, and motivation. Despite prior disclosure of AI-assisted language editing, the article was retracted because the editors were “no longer confident” that it meaningfully contributed to scientific discourse.

Although procedurally more robust, the ethical issue here lies in the criteria used to justify retraction. The decision ultimately rested on an editorial reassessment of scholarly value, not on evidence of misconduct or unreliability. Applying such subjective judgments retrospectively raises the possibility of editorial bias, particularly when standards appear to shift after publication.

Case 3: Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice

In the Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice, a Letter to the Editor was retracted because it allegedly lacked relevant scientific discussion and sufficient referencing. Again, no misconduct or ethical breach was alleged. These shortcomings are core elements of editorial and peer-review responsibility prior to acceptance.

Ethically, this case highlights a misallocation of responsibility. If inadequate discussion or referencing escaped peer review, the failure lies primarily with the editorial process. Retracting the article post-publication transfers blame to authors for deficiencies that were implicitly endorsed at acceptance.

Ethics, Editorial Bias, and Responsibility

Across all three cases, a common ethical concern emerges: retraction is used to correct perceived editorial errors rather than genuine threats to scientific integrity. This practice risks introducing editorial bias, whether conscious or unconscious, by allowing post-publication reinterpretation of standards.

Editors hold significant power over the scholarly record, and with that power comes ethical responsibility. When retraction decisions are driven by subjective assessments of contribution, relevance, or style, rather than by objective ethical breaches, the boundary between editorial judgment and ethical sanction becomes blurred. Such actions may disproportionately affect certain authors, viewpoints, or controversial topics, raising concerns about fairness and equity.

The critical ethical question, therefore, is who should bear responsibility. In these cases, the deficiencies cited were either disclosed (AI use) or inherent to editorial evaluation (scholarly depth, referencing). Assigning reputational harm to authors through retraction, while acknowledging peer-review oversight failures, represents a misdirection of accountability. Ethical editorial practice requires recognition that acceptance signifies editorial endorsement at a specific point in time.

Discussion: The Wrong Way of Retraction

Retraction carries a strong stigma and is widely interpreted as evidence of misconduct, regardless of the wording used. Employing it to address issues of scholarly quality or editorial regret is disproportionate and ethically problematic. Less severe mechanisms, such as editorial commentary, published rebuttal, expressions of concern, or corrections, preserve academic discourse without unjustly damaging author reputation.

In the context of AI-assisted writing, ethical editorial practice should encourage transparency rather than penalize disclosure. Treating openly declared AI use as grounds for suspicion undermines trust and may incentivize nondisclosure.

Editorial Instability and the Lack of Standardized Review: Lessons from the Three Retraction Cases

Taken together, the three retraction cases from *Skin Research and Technology*, the *American Journal of Transplantation*, and the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* reveal a deeper structural problem in contemporary editorial practice: the absence of standardized, evidence-based review criteria in the context of AI disclosure, leading to highly labile editorial decisions.

In all three cases, the authors disclosed the use of artificial intelligence, particularly for language editing. Despite this transparency, AI use later became an implicit or explicit source of suspicion rather than a neutral or accepted practice. This contradiction points to a fundamental weakness in review standardization. If AI disclosure is permitted at submission, then it should not later be reframed as a basis for ethical concern unless clear policy violations or deception are demonstrated. Accusing authors after disclosure reflects not author misconduct, but editorial inconsistency.

Furthermore, these cases suggest that peer review itself may have been inadequate or poorly defined. Issues cited as grounds for retraction—such as lack of substantive value, insufficient discussion, or weak referencing—are precisely the criteria that peer review and editorial screening are designed to address before publication. When such concerns are raised only after publication, responsibility necessarily shifts toward deficiencies in the review process. Retracting articles under these circumstances effectively externalizes editorial and reviewer failure onto authors.

A more concerning pattern is the apparent reliance on subjective editorial judgment rather than evidence-based assessment. In none of the cases was there strong, concrete evidence of misconduct, data fabrication, plagiarism, or unethical behavior. Instead, the decisions were justified by phrases such as “may have been generated using AI,” “no longer confident,” or “lacks relevant scientific discussion.” These expressions reflect editorial opinion, not factual determination. Retraction based on opinion rather than evidence undermines the credibility of editorial authority.

Equally problematic is the post-publication change in perceived value. Scholarly value is not an immutable property, but editorial acceptance represents a formal judgment at a specific time. Reversing that judgment without new factual findings suggests that editorial decisions are unstable and contingent on changing perspectives, reader complaints, or external pressures. Such volatility makes editorial decisions appear arbitrary and unpredictable.

Ultimately, these three cases demonstrate that when standardized criteria are absent, editors may rely excessively on personal judgment, retrospective dissatisfaction, or precautionary suspicion. This renders editorial decisions highly labile, weakens trust in peer review, and blurs the boundary between ethical correction and editorial regret. To preserve the integrity of scientific publishing, retraction decisions must be grounded in consistent standards,

transparent evidence, and clearly articulated policy violations, rather than subjective reassessment after publication.

Conclusion

The retraction cases from Skin Research and Technology, the American Journal of Transplantation, and the Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice illustrate a troubling ethical pattern in contemporary editorial practice. When retraction is used to compensate for editorial or peer-review shortcomings, responsibility is shifted unfairly onto authors. Editorial experience suggests that such misuse reflects not author misconduct, but failures in editorial judgment and potential bias. Upholding the integrity of the scientific record requires that editors apply retraction standards consistently, transparently, and ethically, reserving this severe measure for genuine violations rather than retrospective dissatisfaction with published work.

References

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