AJS Ethics Policy

In this statement, we outline four types of ethical issues that may arise, and how we treat them.

1. **Concern about a Submitted Manuscript**
   Reviewers may believe that a manuscript that they are asked to review shows signs of unethical behavior, such as…
   (a) **Plagiarism**—the reproduction of the work of others as one’s own;
   (b) **Fabrication**—the reporting of data that are fictitious;
   (c) **Harm**—violation of the implicit rights of human subjects;
   (d) **Slander**—the mischaracterization of the position of others.

   When appropriate, we forward these concerns to relevant institutions; on our side, we consider these issues as issues related to the worth of a paper and hope that reviewers will bring them to our attention. We may not be able to communicate them to authors with the degree of force that reviewers might like without entangling the journal in potential legal matters. We do not want to make accusations that cannot be fully substantiated, and the opinion of an expert reviewer is not enough to justify making a potentially damaging remark in such a way that other reviewers would see it; likewise, communicating the concern privately might be interpreted as colluding with the offending author by helping them better disguise their malfeasance.

2. **Concern about a Reviewer**
   Reviewers of course may make mistakes, or even have interpretive tendencies that might strike others as bias; this does not constitute an ethical violation. Authors may suspect that a reviewer is biased when it appears to them that a reviewer:
   (a) **Has an undisclosed conflict of interest**—for example, the reviewer has a personal animosity (e.g., a past romantic relationship, rivalry for a particular institutional position), which manifests in a review that is tainted by the desire to harm the author;
   (b) **Has deliberately made false statements**—for example, the reviewer has claimed that it is well known that the data being used by the author are faulty, that certain methods are known to yield biased results, and so on.
   (c) **Has deliberately mischaracterized the paper**—for example, the reviewer has claimed that the author(s) make arguments that they do not actually make and may, in fact, explicitly disclaim.

   These concerns can be brought to the editorial board. It is important to note that it appears to us that the clear majority of cases in which authors believe that a reviewer is being deliberately “unfair” are not cases of ethical violation, but fall within the normal pull-and-tug of intellectual interchange, and that the board is well able to contextualize what might strike authors as extreme and one-sided reviews. Further, we are heartened to find that many reviewers preface their remarks to us with explanations of their relationships to the suspected author, including potential conflicts, and that they tend to err on the side of treating as “conflicts of interest” issues that are more straightforward differences of opinion. If an author thinks that a reviewer has made a grave mistake in the reading of a paper (e.g., misinterpreting the sort of statistical model being used) and has reason to think that it affected editorial judgment (e.g., this misinterpretation is cited in
the editorial letter as a reason for the decision*), this is grounds for a conventional appeal to the editor for reconsideration. (Here, one can see the document, “Further Guides for Submission.”)

**Concern about the Editorial Board and/or Editor**

On the one hand, the board system is unusual in that the associate editors and the editor meet together, as opposed to associate editors making independent decisions later confirmed or overruled by the editor-in-chief (working alone). This means that we lack some levels of hierarchy that would normally be used for the pursuit of an ethics complaint. On the other hand, the nature of the board means that unethical behavior is less likely than it might be in a system in which persons make decisions singly, out of the sight of others. To think that the editor has made an unethical decision is to think that all of the other associate editors either concurred with this unethical behavior or were too timid to speak up against the misuse of editorial authority. That does not mean that such behavior is a priori impossible, but it does mean that the scenario that would support a charge of unethical behavior is a strong one.

If a reviewer or author believes that an associate editor has engaged in unethical behavior, influencing a board decision, please communicate this to the editor. If a reviewer or an author believes that the board as whole, or the editor-in-chief against the better judgment of the other board members, has engaged in unethical behavior, one should make this charge to ajs@uchicago.edu. The managing editor and the editor will then share this with the Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago; they will not notify the associate editors. The chair will then determine whether the complaint is coherent: that is, if true, it would constitute unethical behavior (there is no need to investigate charges that, if substantiated, would not imply unethical behavior, such as “they published a piece with no numbers”). If so, the chair will ask a previous editor of the AJS to inquire of the other board members whether any of them felt that there was anything ethically questionable about the treatment of the case. (If no past editor is available, a past associate editor will be asked.)

If any of the associate editors indicate ethical concerns, this previous editor will conduct a more substantial discussion with all the board members, the managing editor, and the editor-in-chief. If this does not reveal the matter to be a misunderstanding of some sort, one in which all board members now agree that there was no unethical behavior, the past editor will be given access to the complete files on the case: manuscripts, reviews, and all correspondence to and from the editor, on whatever email accounts used. If the conclusion was that there was in fact unethical behavior, the board will be asked to rectify the matter in a manner determined by the past editor. If there is a second ethical violation, at the end of the process, the past editor will report to the chair, and the chair

*Note, however, that the mere fact that the editors have not explicitly drawn attention to an erroneous or questionable claim made by a reviewer does not mean that we were not aware of its erroneous/questionable nature when making our overall determination; we may have believed there were other grounds for our judgment.
will determine whether to ask for the resignation of the editor, the expectation being that this will occur unless there is strong reason to think the violations will not happen again.

If an associate editor has a concern, and does not feel comfortable going to the editor, he/she should go directly to the Chair of the Department of Sociology; in all such cases, the chair will find a past editor to begin a full investigation.

3. **Concern about a Published Manuscript**

Readers may believe that they have found errors in a published paper serious enough to warrant a retraction; such retractions are a normal part of a healthy scientific or intellectual community and in no way should be understood to imply ethical concerns. But readers may also believe that they have found evidence of ethical violations in a published paper (plagiarism or fabrication in particular). Given that we have no capacity to discipline authors, we treat this as an issue regarding the merit of the paper. Such a reader may assemble the argument for such a reinterpretation of the paper and send it to the editorial board. If the board believes that the arguments are sufficiently credible, they will ask the author for a response. If no response is forthcoming in a reasonable amount of time (6 weeks), or if the author admits that the problems are as articulated in the complaint, or if the author(s) cannot respond to issues in a satisfactory manner, the editorial board will publish a statement (with or without the participation of the reader who brought this to our attention) outlining which parts of the paper have been brought into serious question; it will not make any specific charges. If the author(s) effectively respond to the complaints, we will apologize to the author(s) for wasting their time and close the matter. Where there are more typical issues of honest error or difference of opinion, the *AJS* may believe it in the interests of the readership to print a comment and reply.

Of course there may well times when reasonable ethical concerns may arise, but in our long years of experience, these are dwarfed by the times that honest disagreements about merit are mistaken as deliberate malfeasance. Most seemingly ethical issues are thus better handled by the normal appeals process.

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† An example might be that an author has used data supposedly collected by someone else that are suspect of being partially or wholly fabricated, and the source of the data does not respond to queries.