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### The Literature of EOH. V. Multiple Publication: High Crime or Just Making Knowledge Accessible?

Tee L. Guidotti<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Archives of Environmental & Occupational Health

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## Expected & Observed

# The Literature of EOH. V. Multiple Publication: High Crime or Just Making Knowledge Accessible?

Misbehavior in scientific publishing, apart from outright fraud, is mostly about making it pointlessly difficult to connect the dots. Two common editorial problems with scientific research paper give rise to ethical issues. They are dual publication and “salami” publications (where the author divides what ought to be one paper into the thinnest “slices”, in order to get more publications out of it).

Dual publication is, properly, the redundant publication of papers describing the same work. An example would be two or more papers submitted by an author to different journals that are rewritten to obscure that the methods or results are the same. The purpose of dual publication is to inflate the number of publications an author can cite as his or her own and the main objection is that this behavior fraudulently misrepresents the authors’ contributions to science and productivity. As a practical matter, it is also condemned because it places a wholly unnecessary burden on the already overextended journal system. The hallmark of intentional dual publication is that the papers are written to obscure their relationship, pretending to be separate contributions.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to get away with dual publication in an age of indexing and easy literature searches, especially in small fields where the same reviewers are likely to spot the submission. Although no reliable figures are available, it is likely that dual publication is both declining and becoming increasingly restricted to investigators early in academic careers who are naïve about the system and either desperate or unscrupulous.

Salami publishing is more subtle. Here the author chooses to highlight particular aspects of the work in each of the derivative publications. The worst form of salami publication is to split into separate papers results and conclusions that should be kept together in order to properly interpret the findings. This impedes the readers’ ability to connect the dots. Other forms of salami publishing are a matter of degree:

how thin are the slices (can one see through them)? Do the papers put up too many disconnected dots?

There are often good reasons to prepare multiple papers based on a single study. While a research paper should strive to be as comprehensive as possible, important interpretations or conclusions may be overlooked in the first instance or unappreciated by the readership of the journal where the report is first published. It is therefore entirely, ethically justifiable to publish second reports when important additional conclusions are based on the same data or have different implications for another, well-defined readership. The authors, in preparing the second publication, should always cite the initial publication and make clear that the present paper is derivative, and may abbreviate the presentation of methods or data in general while providing enough detail to validate the new point to be made.

True “salami” publishing is bad because the readership cannot easily put the picture together to understand the total work and because gratuitous salami publishing overloads the publication system, wasting resources, print or electrons, and reviewer time. However, dividing a salami into a small number of thick pieces, appropriate to the readership, is being responsive to the fields in which the work holds interest, not just clever marketing (although it is also that).

In the future, the improving information technologies applied to electronic publishing, abstracting and indexing will favor a relational reading of the literature. One methodological source document will underpin several outcome reports or databases and the implications for different fields may be “pushed out” to users and interested parties in interpretive abstracts based on an integrative function drawing on multiple sources.

Then again, maybe not. What seems clear is that, at least in terms of communications theory, salami publication in thick slices favors the current reader, publication in thin slices

favors the author, and comprehensive, archival publication favors the future reader, looking back for perspective.

Whenever possible, the single original contribution with comprehensive data on a single study or experiment remains the ideal, for reasons of efficiency, coherence, and accessibility. However there are many legitimate reasons to depart from this ideal. When a derivative research publication is justified on the basis of major findings or to elaborate on implications

for a special readership, it should always be clear why the second paper is required and where the data can be found in the original source paper.

Tee L. Guidotti  
Editor-in-Chief

*Archives of Environmental & Occupational Health*