

## *Playing By the Rules: Multiple Abstract Submissions*

It isn't terribly unusual for investigators to submit the same abstract for poster presentation to more than one conference. That way, the investigator, especially if he or she is a junior person, not only has a better chance of getting it accepted and enjoying the prestige of showing the poster in the exhibit hall, but also has an excuse for wangling some travel funds from his or her PI or lab director: "I can't entirely afford to go to the conference, so I won't be able to show this poster, which has been accepted and which has your name on it as a co-author incidentally. So, can you underwrite some of the costs?"

The problem with this not unfamiliar practice of multiple submissions of the same abstract is that it virtually always violates the submission rules of conferences, which make authors promise that they have not submitted the material elsewhere (since the idea of poster presentation is that the material is novel and that conference attendees are learning it for the first time).

But submitters know that because some of these conferences are so large, it is extremely unlikely that the same people will be refereeing posters for multiple conferences so that multiple submitters will be caught. Moreover, even if the same poster is accepted at two conferences, presenters can choose which one they want to go to and forego the other (so they remain in compliance with rules of never having or not planning to present the data elsewhere).

Perhaps the most common strategy for making sure you don't get caught is simply to vary the contents of each abstract submission a little. If both submissions are accepted, the author can plead that he believed they were essentially different from one another and that no violation of the program submission rules occurred. What is usually the case, though, is that the abstracts differ very modestly and are largely look-alikes.

The practice is unfortunate, but the competition for presenting at the largest national conferences is keen. Submitters know that the likelihood of their getting caught with multiple submissions is very low; they also believe that the acceptance of abstracts is often very capricious and arbitrary and, therefore, they feel victimized by an unfair review process; and they believe that because a sufficiently large number of persons do it (or so they believe), the practice of multiple submissions is necessitated by the cut-throat competitiveness of science.

But I suppose it's not very ethical, right?

### *Expert Opinion*

Conference planners and directors have the right to insist that submitted abstracts not be sent to multiple conferences. Presumably, the rule of exclusive submission insures that the abstract material will not have been presented elsewhere such that attendees will find value in learning it. Obviously, conference planners hope that presenting cutting edge, never-before-presented material will incentivize persons to register for their conference.

Because an individual has submitted an abstract, conference planners have the right to assume that the submitter has read, understood, and is abiding by the exclusive submission rule. Consequently, when researchers submit the same abstract to multiple conferences, they

violate this implicit promise and thus commit moral turpitude. The practice of multiple submissions, of course, places additional burdens on conference planners as they must recruit extra reviewers to handle the (morally tainted) surplus of abstracts.

Justifying the submission of multiple abstracts on the basis that they are claimed to be essentially different from one another merits discussion, however. What criteria would count in justifying the claim that multiple abstracts are sufficiently different from one another? Some criteria would be if the content of each abstract confirms an hypothesis that is reasonably different from other hypotheses; or if the data and conclusions reflect the results of different experiments; or if the data reasonably appear to be answering different research questions; or if there are multiple sets or subsets of data that reflect or respond to either different research questions or that better inform or complement other data sets. This last example of inter-related data, however, invites the conundrum of the “least publishable unit,” where investigators sometimes segregate their into minimalist sets with each set intended for a separate publication (thus aiming for the maximum number of papers for the investigators).

Determining when an instance of this practice is unreasonable seems to involve expert judgments that are too nuanced (especially because they are so context dependent) for moral discourse to say much about. On the one hand, investigators certainly have the prima facie right to maximize their publishing opportunities; on the other hand, if they do so by publishing data that are so repetitious or similar that one can discern nothing that reasonably differentiates one publication from another, these redundant publications by definition waste the pages of professional journals.

In conclusion, it might be very easy for an investigator to convince himself, as reflected in the scenario above, that the practice of multiple abstract submissions is acceptable. Professional ethics would demand, however, that investigators not break their promises, which they do when they submit the same abstract to multiple conferences. Also, conference planners and staff should not be needlessly burdened by having to review abstracts whose submission violated program rules. However, when those abstracts are reasonably, essentially, or substantially different from one another, multiple submissions seem entirely acceptable (conference rules permitting). Perhaps the above criteria can be helpful in distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable multiple submissions.