

NEWS

Prolific autism researcher has two dozen papers retracted

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An autism researcher lost **two dozen papers to retraction** in January, eight years after the publisher was made aware of potentially troubling editorial practices. Elsevier, the publisher, cited **undisclosed conflicts of interest**, duplicated methodology and a “compromised” peer-review process as reasons for the retractions.

The papers were published in *Research in Developmental Disabilities* and *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* between 2013 and 2014 — a period when **Johnny Matson**, then professor of psychology at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge and an author on all of the papers, was editor-in-chief of both journals.

Long delay: Years after they started an investigation, Elsevier journals retracted 24 papers by researcher Johnny Matson.

Elsevier included the same explanation in 23 of the 24 retractions, saying the papers were being retracted because they “did not include a declaration of a conflict of interest of one author in relation to diagnostic tools which the paper endorses.” The statement also says that the same author was editor-in-chief of the journal at the time of publication, and that there was no evidence of independent peer review by external reviewers. One paper was not cited for a conflict of interest but instead was retracted for “lack of original methodology,” along with the same peer-review issue.

Dorothy Bishop, a developmental neuropsychologist at University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, who played a part in spurring the journals to investigate Matson's papers eight years ago, was surprised to finally see it happen. "I never thought they'd get around to doing anything, but there you go," she says.

Matson is now retired but was still publishing papers as recently as **last month**. He has more than **800 publications** and is highly cited, with an h-index of 75. His research at LSU focused on methods to assess and treat autism and intellectual disability, and he developed diagnostic tools for the conditions. Many of his publications, including most of those that were retracted, include the use of diagnostic measures he developed, such as the Autism Spectrum Disorders-Diagnostic for Children and the Baby and Infant Screen for Children with Autism Traits (BISCUIT).

Elsevier began its investigation in 2015, based on a tip. The publisher convened a 12-person panel to review a number of publications in 2016 and assess whether papers submitted to these two journals between 1 January 2012 and 31 December 2014 had been published "without external, independent peer review." In 2017 it published an update, noting that the peer-review policies of the journals in question had been adjusted, and new editors-in-chief had been appointed in early 2015.

"I have over 900 publications, and this only applies to a small handful of articles." Johnny Matson

A spokesperson for Elsevier told *Spectrum* that the panel examined 136 papers submitted and accepted during that two-year time frame and determined that 24 of them had not been sent to external reviewers. Papers published before 2012 were not included because 2012 is when the journals switched to an online management system for manuscripts.

The conflict-of-interest claims stem from the retracted papers using assessment batteries that Matson developed, which are sold by **Disability Consultants, LLC**, a business registered in the state of Louisiana to Matson's wife, Deann Matson. This tie was not revealed in any of the 23 papers.

Matson says that at the time, he was not aware he needed the conflict-of-interest statement. As soon as he knew, he says, he "did that moving forward for all submissions to all journals."

Regarding peer-review policy, Matson says the journal's old policy allowed him to send papers only to associate editors — skipping external review — in an attempt to help speed up the processing of papers. Elsevier's current policy no longer allows this, Matson acknowledges.

Autism researcher **Michelle Dawson** first flagged Matson's work on Twitter in 2010, tweeting her suspicions that Matson had a penchant for self-citation and publishing in his own journals. In 2014,

Dawson learned that Bishop was on the editorial board of *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* and alerted her. This was news to Bishop, and she approached Matson to be removed. (Matson says he asked Bishop to be on the board, and she accepted — Bishop says she does not remember this but concedes it is possible.)

Bishop then began looking into Matson's apparent self-publishing and wrote **a blog post** on her findings in 2015. Bishop's data analysis of Matson's publications focused on two main points: self-citation and the share of his own publications in the journals he edited. Bishop calculated that more than half of Matson's citations were self-citations — an outlier compared with the self-citation rates of other well-known researchers in the field at the time, which were under 10 percent. One example: A paper of Matson's from 2012 meant to show the success of one of his evaluation scales, BISCUIT, published in *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, has 65 self-citations out of a total of 86 references.

Self-citation is a **relatively common and well-studied practice**. When asked about it, Matson admits that 65 self-citations in one paper is high. "But let's put this in perspective. I have over 900 publications, and this only applies to a small handful of articles," Matson says, adding, "There is no rule about self-citations."

"I think it's just this factory for churning out fairly trivial papers." Dorothy Bishop

The second issue Bishop raised in her analysis deals with Matson's own publications in these two journals. Bishop found that his publication rate increased from about 15 to more than 30 per year after he became editor-in-chief of *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* in 2007. And between 2007 and 2015, Matson was an author on more than 10 percent of the papers published in *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. The fact that many of Matson's papers appeared in journals he edited is also not wholly unusual. A **recent review** of the publication practices of Elsevier editors found that 24 percent of journal editors publish at least 10 percent of their own papers in the journal they edit.

Matson feels Bishop's blog, the **press coverage** and the online discourse on social media influenced Elsevier's decision to retract. "I have published in over 100 different journals, and these are the only two that took this approach," Matson says. Foremost on his mind, he says, are the other authors on the papers. "At this point I am retired, so this has little effect on me, but I am concerned about the former Ph.D. students who were also included," he says.

"I doubt that he's fraudulent," Bishop says of Matson. "I think it's just this factory for churning out fairly trivial papers."

She still spends time scraping publication data from various databases to find others who fit the same patterns she detected back in 2015 with Matson's publications, and she continues to find

more editors who publish in their own journals with fast turnarounds. That, Bishop says, is “using your role as an editor to boost your publications. And it’s just unethical.”

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