

Predatory Journals and Article Retractions in Knowledge Synthesis

When it comes to knowledge synthesis, the rule of thumb for what evidence is included in a review is ‘the best evidence available’ on a topic. This means that in some articles you may only use randomized controlled trials (RCTs), some may be dominated by grey literature, and some may include a broad range of many different forms of evidence.

The question of *how do predatory journals and retracted articles fit into that* is a murky one for which there isn’t really an answer. Currently, the best guidance we can offer is to understand the implications and realities of including or excluding such items, and to have a plan about how you are going to deal with them. Here, we provide some background information on retracted and predatory publications as well as some considerations that should be taken into account when deciding whether to include them in your review. You can also discuss this with the librarian on your team (or whom you’re consulting) and involve them in the creation and execution of your plan.

Retracted Articles

Retracted articles are publications that have been removed from the journal they were initially published in, resulting from the post-publications realization that the articles failed to meet one of the essential criteria of the journal. At first glance, it may seem to be a no-brainer that retracted articles should be excluded from your knowledge synthesis project, but there are many reasons for articles to be retracted, and many of them do not suggest that the results of an article are invalid or unreliable. [One study](#) lists and defines the reasons for retraction as (quoting directly from the article):

- *Plagiarism*: duplication of text from previously published articles;
- *Compromised peer review*: compromises in the independent assessment of the manuscript by a peer;
- *Data unreliable*: data has errors;
- *Data falsification/fabrication*: data has been manipulated or made up;
- *Published in error*: article was accidentally published twice as a result of publisher error;
- *Duplicate publication*: article was published twice (usually as a result of author misconduct);
- *Image duplication*: duplication of images from previously published articles;
- *Authors unaware of manuscript submission*: not all authors aware;
- *No ethical approval*: the study had no ethical approval;
- *No consent*: the study involved people who had not given consent;
- *No permission for data*: authors did not have permission to use the data reported;
- *Undeclared conflict of interest*: authors or reviewers did not declare a conflict of interest;
- *Breach of editorial policy*: the manuscript breached an editorial policy.

Options to consider in deciding whether to retain or exclude retracted articles:

- Article retractions are relatively rare, occurring in fewer than 1% of articles, so this may not be an issue in your review and, if it is, it may have little impact. However, it's always important to have an informed plan in case it comes up.
- Article retractions come with a written justification for the retraction. You can set inclusion criteria that allow for some retracted articles to be retained depending on the reason for their retraction.
- You may not always know that an article has been retracted. Some citation management software options will track retractions, but you have to be actively using one in order to benefit from it. You can also search the Retraction Watch [database](#) to see whether any articles you've selected for inclusion appear there, and also check bibliographic databases, or [PeerPub](#) to see if there have been any post-publication amendments regarding the studies (including Expressions of Concern, comments, or Letters to the Editor). However, an article may also become retracted after you've completed your review or even after it has been published. Unfortunately, you have little control over such scenarios.

Articles from Predatory Journals

Predatory – or bad faith – journals are most often journals that exploit open access mandates and article processing charges in order to dupe researchers into publishing with them, and then failing to provide some or all of the services involved in publishing research articles, including a robust peer-review, a stable platform for access, and indexing in significant databases.

However, a journal's bad faith practices do not necessarily extend to the articles published within it, or mean that the research in those articles is unreliable or invalid. There are many reasons that a researcher might publish in a bad faith journal, and they do not all imply poor research practices.

Most significantly, a researcher may simply not know that a journal is predatory. Even if the researcher is aware of the issues surrounding predatory journals, identifying predatory practices and journals is difficult and such identifications are unreliable. Some 'good' journals have mistakenly been labelled as predatory (to their loss), and some 'bad' journals have been missed. Even if an author is careful in his/her/their journal selection, they might mistakenly publish excellent research with a disreputable journal.

Options to consider in deciding whether to retain or exclude articles from predatory journals:

- As with article retractions, articles from predatory journals make up a very small percentage of the research that is likely to be included in your review. Depending on the number of items you end up selecting for inclusion, a single article from a predatory journal may have no significant impact on your findings.
- If you are performing critical appraisal of the items you're including in your review, this may be sufficient to clear articles from predatory journals for inclusion. The greatest risk with articles from predatory journals is that they have not been appropriately peer-reviewed; as an expert in your field, you may possess the skills to make quality determinations yourself. If your review includes non-peer-reviewed resources, the argument against including articles from predatory

journals is weakened. Again, the greatest risk of such articles is that they have not been peer reviewed; if you're including other non-peer-reviewed resources, there is no reason that these items cannot be included.

Guidances

Cochrane and JBI have issued preliminary guidance on how to address problematic studies:

- [Managing potentially problematic studies](#) (Cochrane Editorial Policies)
 - Cochrane [Policy for managing potentially problematic studies: implementation guidance](#)
 - Cochrane Handbook [Technical Supplement to Chapter 4, Page 70](#)
- Should I include studies from “predatory” journals in a systematic review? Interim guidance for systematic reviewers (JBI Evidence Synthesis DOI: [10.11124/JBIES-21-00138](#))