



COVID-19 pandemic may fuel academic bullying

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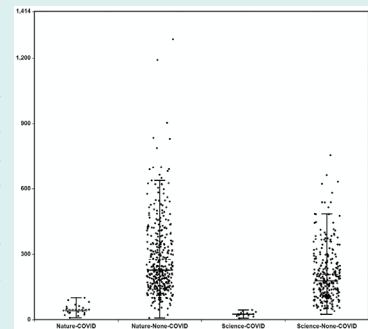
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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate factors influencing abusive workplace behaviors in general such as psychological health, economic and social inequities. This is true in academic and research environments where we can expect to see an increase in the incidence of academic bullying. Research and experience shows that academic bullying will have significant and enduring negative effects on scientific integrity and academic health. In this perspective piece we will explore the potential facilitative influence of COVID-19 and specifically responses to it, on bullying behaviors in academic and research environments.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Academic bullying, Abusive behaviors



Further complications associated with infection by COVID-19 continue to be reported. In addition to the serious physical side effects, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns regarding a wide spectrum of psychological side effects. Because the pandemic has exacerbated so many of the issues underlying abusive behaviors in general (e.g., psychological health, economic and social inequalities), one may expect to see a significant uptick in the incidence of academic bullying as well. The main focus of this perspective piece is to draw the attention of stakeholders to the potential facilitative influence of COVID-19 on bullying behaviors, which experience tells us will have long-lasting effects on scientific integrity, academic health, and sound medical decisions.

Bullying and life/work balance are increasingly the subjects of discussion in academic circles^{1,2}; and academic stakeholders (e.g., universities and funding agencies) play crucial roles in addressing bullying behaviors.^{3,4} The current COVID-19 pandemic is causing a panoply of unprecedented negative effects among all academic stakeholders, including fundamental changes in their basic functions, priorities, and of course their financial situation. There is therefore reasonable concern about how and to what extent this pandemic could exacerbate inappropriate academic behavior. Some sources of concern include i) monitoring/investigating abusive

behaviors may not be a high priority during the pandemic for institutional authorities; ii) many former providers of institutional support to targets of abusive behaviors (including ombudsmen's offices and grant agencies) have necessarily shifted their attention to COVID-19-related issues; and iii) mounting pressure on lab leaders to maintain their scientific output (e.g., publishing papers and winning grants) even under current conditions. When such conditions are present, the environment is ripe for abusive behaviors. These behaviors and adverse effects are not limited to research settings, and when extended to hospitals and medical communities, may seriously affect medical decision making.

The current fast-track development of vaccines and drugs for prevention and treatment of COVID-19 may result in the loosening of standard protocols that are essential for safeguarding health.⁵ Similar concerns may be valid for the academic environment, as existing behavioral and safety protocols may lose institutional emphasis. This is, at least in part, due to the high-demands of non-virology experts to work on the COVID-19 related projects who are less familiar with the safety regulations. Besides, the financial side effects of the current pandemic on institutions and the significant shift of grant opportunities to the COVID-19 related proposals may affect the rigorous protocols/approval-process of institutions. Therefore, institutions



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should provide newly developed and detailed protocols and safety regulations for their research communities that plan to work with the virus and/or biological specimens that might have been affected by the current pandemic. For example, the University of California, San Francisco⁶ and John Hopkins⁷ put in place revised safety and research guidelines for biospecimens during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Many investigators have altered their research focus to include COVID-19-related projects for a variety of reasons, including i) supporting current efforts to prevent and/or treat the coronavirus and ii) adapting to significant shifts in priority toward COVID-19 related studies by funding agencies [e.g., American Heart Association⁸ and National Institutes of Health (allowing scientists to shift their existing/renewal grants for use in COVID-19-related research)⁹] and by journals. Figure 1 illustrates the significant reduction in manuscript processing time by Nature and Science for COVID-19 work. If lab members lack suitable experience in working with viruses, it may be difficult to maintain a rigorous safety environment; also, some lab members may be forced to work on higher-risk virus projects. This concern might be relevant, as we witness a huge number of COVID-19 related published papers from non-virology experts since January 2020. In fact, as of May 31, 2020, over 17,500 COVID-19 related papers have been published (Access date: May 31, 2020; PUBMED; keyword "COVID 19"). Almost 70% of COVID-related publications are Research Articles and Letters. The drive for rapid results and publication, in the

absence of well-developed safety and research guidelines for COVID-19 related projects by institutions, may create unsafe/insecure lab environments, which in turn may lead to the increased reluctance of lab members to work on COVID-19 related projects due to heightened sense of risk. These conditions set the stage for conflicts between lab leaders and lab members which, if not constructively managed, can fuel abusive behaviors.

Since academic stakeholders are expected to continue efficient management and enhanced productivity in this utterly unprecedented situation, the creation of interdisciplinary committees tasked with addressing the possible effects of the pandemic on academic behavior and scientific integrity is essential. Such committees working collaboratively could create protocols to be followed by all stakeholders that recognize the potential for academic bullying during the pandemic and actively manage conditions that could exacerbate it. Without such preventive action, we may expect to see higher incidence and greater severity of abusive behaviors, which experience tells us will have long-lasting effects on scientific integrity, academic health, and sound medical decisions.

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Ethical statement

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Morteza Mahmoudi has a non-financial interest with the Academic Parity Movement, a non-profit organization (<http://paritymovement.org>).

Authors' contribution

The authors contributed equally in this work.

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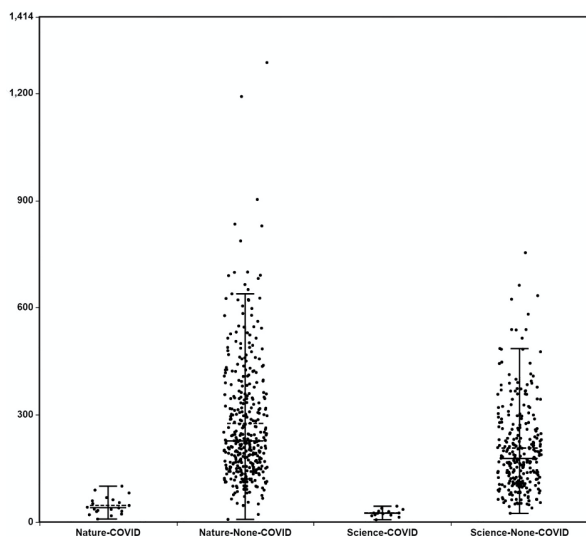


Figure 1. Scatter plots showing the days between manuscript submission and acceptance dates (Y-axis) for COVID related and all non-COVID research papers published by Nature and Science in 2020 (until May 2020 issues). Each dot represents a manuscript's processing time (details are available in the Supplementary Excel file). The outcomes suggest that COVID-19 related papers are being considered as "fast-track" by journals with processing times significantly shorter than the non-COVID papers (i.e., average manuscript processing days, from submission to acceptance, for Nature and Science for non-COVID papers are 276 and 208 days, respectively. The numbers are 47 and 26 for COVID-related papers).