



Khan, S. K. (2011). Ethics and Publishing: Book reviews and conflicts of interests. *Workplace*, 18, 39-43.

Ethics and Publishing: Book Reviews and Conflicts of Interests¹

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In all scientific disciplines, professional communications are presumed to be based on objective interpretations of evidence and unbiased interpretation of fact. An author's economic and commercial interest in products or services used or discussed in a paper may color such objectivity...the integrity of the field requires disclosure of the possibilities of such potentially distorting influences where they may exist...the safest and most open course of action is to disclose in an author note activities and relationships that if known to others might be viewed as a conflict of interest, even if you do not believe that any conflict or bias exists. (APA, 2010, p. 17)

In May of 2011, Mary King, an economist, university lecturer, and Minister of Planning, Economic Restructuring and Gender Affairs in the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago had her Ministerial appointment revoked for failure to declare a conflict of interest in the award of a contract worth \$100,000 TTD (~15,800 USD) to a firm in which her family has an interest (Julien, 2011). Criminal charges may be forthcoming. It was a necessary act for a not yet one year old governmental partnership among several political parties who had campaigned on a platform of transparency, accountability, anti-nepotism, anti-corruption and the promise of 'new politics' in seeking a mandate from the people to govern, manage and lead more responsibly and ethically than the previous administration. The ethics of declaring

real or potential conflicts of interest, however, are not restricted to actors on the discursive stage of national or regional politics. Rather, political discourse models are at work in any social situation where scarce, valued, or valuable social goods are at risk (Gee, 2004). This holds true for the academy in general² and graduate education in particular.

Learning the economies and politics of academic publishing is part of the process of graduate education and launching a successful and sustainable academic career. Consider, for example, the academic publishing economy and the politics of publication and career advancement described by Lennard J. Davis (2011), professor of English, medical education, and disability and human development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, to his graduate students:

[t]o even get into the race, I tell students, you need three published articles, two or three book reviews...The turnaround from submitting an article to its publication can be a year or two, if you are lucky...I point out that book reviews, which don't count anywhere near as much as an article, are relatively easy to do and quicker to get published. (Davis, 2011)

While the exact numbers and types of publications probably vary from field to field this description is perhaps an untinctured description of the way the academic world (mostly) works at present. A very rough and now dated dollar-value estimate is that, “[a]n article published in a major journal early in a career could be worth about \$25,000 in pay and benefits” (Phillips, 1982, cited in Rocco, 2011, p.4). Taken together ‘friendly’ professorial reminders to publish, the potential for deferred financial and professional payoff in the now entrenched hypercompetitive “winner-take-all” (Frank & Cook, 1996) academic marketplace, anxieties about current finances and future job-prospects, coupled with the proliferation of online and open-access journals can, at times, lead to ethical lapses in judgement. Learning the ethical norms, practices and underlying principles of reasoning in one’s field, nevertheless, is as important a part of the responsibilities of becoming a published and hopefully well-respected scholar as is learning the economies and politics of academic publishing.

While ethical concerns tend to be heavily focused on citational (im)proprieties, i.e. proper attribution and avoiding the many forms of

plagiarism, or protecting and respecting (vulnerable) participants’ rights and desires, non-disclosure of (real or potential) conflicts of interest can have serious consequences for scholars and their communities. Medical, pharmaceutical, and psychological research have acknowledged the professional and personal dangers of unreported (real or perceptual) conflicts of interest in terms of patient safety, a perception of compromised integrity of the ‘field-as-a-whole’ by public consumers/translators of research, and risks to the quality of research in the field more generally (e.g. Sismondo, 2009). Such disclosures are part of the network of trust and are part of the duties of academic work in these disciplines. Thinking about these conflicts, issues, and the ethics of the situation must become part of first thoughts of writers in education and indeed be part of the preparation of students in these disciplines. It is the damage to the credibility of researchers and the integrity of their reputation and to the field as a whole that is the greater risk than any ‘compromised objectivity.’ With the possible exception of concerns about the ethics of too intimate relationships among researchers, professors, textbook writers, publishers and reviewers there is perhaps little in the way of public discussion or “complicated conversation” in the discipline of Curriculum Studies about potential situations in which conflicts of interest might arise in the publication process, especially in the curriculum of graduate student preparation. Such absence is telling, perhaps even irresponsible.

Book reviews, for example, are especially problematic from an ethical point of view because of their economic

positioning and political functions in the publication and promotion academic ecosystem with its material and discursive hierarchies of reserved privilege and rewards for certain types of academic activities over others and the differential power statuses and complexity of relationships of new scholars with respect to the authors they sometimes audit. As such, scholars in preparation may require explicit guidance not only on how to write book reviews, but also when to avoid writing them and how to recognize, assess and professionally address (real or potential) conflicts of interest that might be construed as compromising the integrity of the field and the credibility of the scholar on those occasions when they have need to review books by authors with whom they are connected by only a few degrees of separation.

The 6th edition of the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual*³ for example offers that, “[i]n general, one should not review a manuscript from a colleague or collaborator, a close personal friend, or a recent student” (APA, 2010, p.17). *In general*, this is good advice. However, in *specific* cases it may be necessary to deviate from this heuristic, but, on such occasions, it is the responsibility of scholar-reviewers to indicate to the community that they are aware of the possibility of conflicts of interests. Scholars-in-training are advised not to review the work of their supervisors and department colleagues for good reason, especially if their funding and futures might depend on the human dimension of the mentor-mentee relationship and the power relations in small closely-knit academic cultures. Indeed, such non-disclosure increases the probability of difficulty in maintaining sufficient

scholarly ‘distance’ from texts and their authors to render both the review and the reviewer credible and trustworthy. This can cast even benign renderings, representations and interpretations by a critic in a more skeptical light than otherwise.

Finally, I wish to comment on the academic publication economy in which book reviews count for ‘less’ than ‘peer-reviewed’ research articles. Book-reviews, especially those that proclaim to be critical are not, in my opinion, ‘lesser’ genres of scholarly publication. They are so positioned because of the academic valuation network in which peer-review, rejection rates, and time to publication, play a significant role in the present attention economies (Lanham, 2007). I would like to suggest that if scholarly book reviews were to require as much editorial oversight and ‘due diligence’ from reviewers in terms of their quality and attention to peer-review and conflicts of interests, then perhaps the ‘value’ of scholarly book reviews might increase. This will necessarily increase the time to publication and academic workloads of editors and peer-reviewers. But this is not necessarily a bad thing if the potential pay-offs of increased quality and utility of academic reviews-critiques for the community, improvement in the overall quality of the products of scholarly labour and perhaps a reduction in the numbers of badly written, or reasoned and published papers that scholars have to wade through are realised. The relatively rapid pace and turn-around of publication of book reviews (as compared to articles/essays) and reduced editorial oversight needs to be rethought. If book reviews continue to count for ‘less’ than academic articles, then perhaps graduate students concerned

with ‘getting in the race’ would probably be better advised to invest their time in working on developing a few papers of high quality for publication.

Conclusion

My goal in this essay has been to draw attention to an aspect of the ethics of publishing – conflicts of interest – towards an end of improving the quality, credibility and utility of published materials in the literature in curriculum and pedagogy and education more generally. I have suggested that ethical concerns with respect to academic publishing become a greater part of the graduate curriculum in Curriculum and

Pedagogy. The opening news story highlights the fact that in a public political life a failure to disclose conflicts of interest can (occasionally) have severe personal and professional consequences depending on what is at stake. The value of the stakes for new scholars in Curriculum and Pedagogy and our very public and politicized field of Education more generally, are perhaps quite high and deserve slow, reasoned, and cautiously elaborative, respectful and complicated conversations that remain mindful of the complexities of knowing, learning, teaching, being, and becoming.

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Endnotes

¹ The ideas developed in this essay are a partial response and working through of an actual situation of undeclared conflict of interest arising from a published comparative book-review-critique of a departmental student colleague.

² For Gee (2004), these include things like “power, status, or valued knowledge, positions, or possessions” (p.84). In the academy it might include every aspect of life in higher education ranging across admissions, teaching ‘loads’, parking spaces, office locations, and what ‘counts’ as/towards ‘service’, through securing external funding, research, publications, attracting graduate students, promotion, tenure and retirement.

³ I have also checked the 7th Edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (2009) but cannot locate any reference in there to conflicts of interests and publication.