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The ethics pipeline to academic publishing

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to respond to Curno's piece on the *Challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era*.

Design/methodology/approach – In this response, the author argues that a focus on "publication ethics" may perpetuate the problem of unethical conduct because such a focus ignores the influences of the educational ethics pipeline.

Findings – As a result, the author issues two calls for action: we must cease operating in our ethical silos and educational leaders must publicly recognize the problem of unethical conduct and fully commit to addressing it.

Originality/value – This response challenges the notions of ethical silos and the inaction by educational institutions to properly train ethical professionals, authors and researchers.

Keywords Culture, Ethics, Ethics education

Paper type Viewpoint

Observations about the impact of technology on ethics have been made for some time now. Kidder (1995), citing the Chernobyl disaster as evidence, noted the magnifying impact that technology can have on ethical decision-making. And in 2008, I noted that changing digital age conceptions of information as public (rather than private) and knowledge as communally (rather than individually) constructed were influencing notions of academic ethics. In "Challenges to Ethical Publishing in the Digital Age", Mirjam J. Curno focuses on the ways in which technology has exacerbated the complexity of ethics in the field of academic publishing. In particular, Curno notes that journal editors now have an expanding and intentional role to play in fettering out unethical publishing practices and implementing practices to ensure the integrity of scholarly literature.

Curno is right to emphasize the intentional role that leadership (i.e. journal editors) must play in ensuring integrity in academic publishing. However, her focus on "publication ethics" may be perpetuating the problem of unethical conduct rather than resolving it. If we truly want to resolve the problem of unethical publishing, then we must understand that neither its causes nor its solutions are unique.

The causes of unethical conduct

It has been well documented in social science research that even good people will make bad decisions when under stress or pressure, when they are tired or when it benefits them just a little bit. Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist, has perhaps provided the most interesting studies of late to demonstrate this fact. We know that people are more likely to cheat if they can cheat just enough to gain some benefit without sacrificing their sense

of self as a good person (Mazar *et al.*, 2008). Think about your propensity for speeding. You are likely willing to speed "just a little bit" but think it is unethical if someone speeds "too much". We also know that people are more likely to cheat if those within their social group cheat (Gino *et al.*, 2009). And we know that people are more likely to cheat if, right before they are given an opportunity to cheat, they are able to dissociate their actions from their identity (Bryan *et al.*, 2012; Shu *et al.*, 2012). This research informs us that the individual causes of cheating are the same, whether the individual is a student, an author or a researcher.

This research also tells us that the environment in which a person works, studies, conducts research or writes has a tremendous influence on the individual's propensity to act unethically (Bertram Gallant, 2015). However, Curno's call for the implementation of structures and procedures will have little impact on behaviors unless there is also sufficient redress of the culture shaping the problem (Bertram Gallant and Kalichman, 2011; Bertram Gallant *et al.*, 2009). Culture is:

> […] a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems […]
> that has worked well enough to be considered valid and [is] […] taught to new members as the
> correct way to perceive, think and feel (Schein, 1992, p. 12).

This is not to say that structures and procedures are not important, impactful and necessary. In fact, they can be powerful artifacts of the culture. But it is to say that they are insufficient in and of themselves if we do not simultaneously address previously successful behaviors and if we do not alter "shared basic assumptions". The culture of academic publishing, like the culture of the academy itself, is shaped by competition, messages that quantity matters more than quality, and the basic assumption that the method matters less than the results (Bertram Gallant *et al.*, 2009). A strong ethical culture is needed to counter these messages, and such a culture requires "articulated norms and rules, transparent procedures, distributed power, fair and strong incentive systems, ethical infrastructures, and strong [ethical] leadership" (Bertram Gallant and Kalichman, 2011, p. 39). The creation of such a culture goes beyond what journal editors can do; the universities and institutions which employ journal authors and researchers, as well as push them to "publish or perish", have a significant role to play.

This leads to a final point about the causes of unethical conduct in academic publishing. I contend that the problem has been created, in large part, by an insufficient approach to ethics within the educational pipeline. Curno concedes that ethics education is necessary for researchers and authors, but she makes the erroneous assumption that they come to the publication world already well trained. To be sure, most high schools, colleges and universities tell students not to cheat and plagiarize. However, prohibiting undesirable behaviors is not as effective as creating strong ethical cultures, educating students on ethical decision-making and responding when students cheat regardless. Without such additional efforts, the message of "do not cheat" is not reinforced and cheating and plagiarism proliferate. Donald McCabe, one of the most prolific survey researchers in the field, has repeatedly found that while a high rate of university students admit to cheating once per year (as many as 42 per cent), a high percentage of faculty (42 per cent) admit to ignoring incidents of suspected cheating (McCabe, 2005). Faculty cite too much effort or time needed as the reason for not responding to cheating and students cite

too "little or no effort 'by faculty' to prevent or respond to cheating" as the reason for their unethical conduct (McCabe, 2005, p. 9). It is true that many educational institutions have purchased technology to help faculty detect and respond to plagiarism, but most leave its use up to the discretion of the individual faculty member. It is also true that many institutions have honor codes or academic integrity policies and that students are informed of them upon matriculation, but we know that such structures are less effective than the environment created and the integrity messages sent by individual faculty members (Bing *et al.*, 2012).

This, then, takes us back to the earlier point – people will cheat when tempted and have the opportunity unless there is an ethical culture supporting ethical choices, they are reminded of their own morality right before the opportunity to cheat and they are taught the ethical decision-making skills needed to identify and ethically resolve ethical issues.

The solution
Of course, there is no one solution to the problem of unethical conduct in the academy or in the field of academic publishing, and I have covered the multitude of solutions in a variety of other forums (Bertram Gallant, 2011). Here, though, I would like to address two significant calls to action that must be heeded if we hope to make any progress.

First, I am convinced that we are losing ethical ground in the twenty-first century because those of us shaping the conversations and leading institutional actions continue to operate within our own silos. We talk about "academic ethics", "publication ethics", "medical ethics", "engineering ethics" and so on, as if they are discreet and unique fields of study with particular causes and solutions. In the academy, we have separate offices to deal with student conduct, academic integrity, research ethics, employee ethics and so on. And outside of the academy, we have different ethics organizations which perpetuate this siloing effect and sustain the perception that the actions of authors, researchers and professionals are disconnected from the actions of students and apprentices. To make progress, we must join together in a realization that ethical conduct and ethical decision-making are not phenomena unique to one particular field or another. We must eliminate the silos that allow unethical conduct to take root and flourish. We must address the ethical abyss with systemic, intentional and collaborative efforts (Bertram Gallant, 2011).

But before we can do that, university and college leaders must recognize that unethical conduct is a problem. And they must commit to addressing it by infusing ethical decision-making into the curriculum and creating strong ethical cultures. After 20 years, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) is a global organization with over 10,000 members and serves as the "internationally-recognized authority on publication ethics". On the other hand, the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), the organization recognized as the authority on student academic integrity, is 23 years old but has less than 300 member institutions. The difference in the import of these two organizations can, in part, be attributed to the difference between publishing and educational leadership. While journal editors are stepping up and giving voice to the problem and pushing for solutions, college and university presidents are not. To be sure, stepping up and speaking out on the topic of cheating and misconduct takes courage because it brings to the forefront the "negative

symbols" that most institutions would otherwise like to downplay (Bertram Gallant and Drinan, 2006). However, as the International Center for Academic Integrity (2014, p. 9) argues:

> […] to develop and sustain communities of integrity, it takes more than simply believing in fundamental values. Translating the values from talking points into action – standing up for them in the face of adversity – requires determination, commitment, and courage.

If the leaders of our educational institutions cannot translate values into action, then perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that those who were intellectually raised in those institutions will be able to do so.

To truly resolve, then, the problem of unethical conduct in academic publishing, we must first resolve the systemic failure to create ethical cultures and implement ethical decision-making training within our educational institutions.

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Further reading

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