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On the Plagues and Pleasures of Academic Publishing

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I knew I was in a world of trouble the first week of my Ph.D. program. The head of our program, a well-known researcher in organization theory, asked us why we chose to pursue a doctorate.

The first student, who was from an impoverished African country, explained, "I hope to use the skills obtained in this program to alleviate poverty amongst my people." The second student, who was from Asia, bragged, "I am already a professor and I want to learn additional methods to improve my

teaching." The third student was European, and said, "I dream that a Ph.D. after my name will catapult my consulting career."

At this point, the head of the program became furious and shouted at all of us. Using a colorful combination of words that could be called "swear bingo," he explained that he was paying us to be future researchers. We were not here to feed the hungry or become better teachers. He certainly wasn't paying us to enrich ourselves in a consulting career.

He then looked at me and asked why I was there. I smiled and said, "I want to become a world class researcher."

When is enough? At what point do we say that publishing seems to be less about advancing the frontiers of knowledge and more about gate keeping? Does chasing impact factors override the creation of articles that create value for practitioners? Does the relentless "publish or perish" culture improve society, or strengthen our character as academicians? I would like to share a few more of my experiences that provide some insight into my frustrations with the processes of writing, revising, and publishing in top academic journals.

I had an inkling the system was broken in the summer of 2019. The summer before, I had presented a paper at a top European conference about the debilitating impact that burn pits have had on the health of U.S. service members, and I explored the role of the military, politicians, and contractors in covering up the health dangers of burn pit exposure. My paper was a finalist (or top three out of roughly 70 papers) for two of the conference's awards. I did not receive either award, but I was the first person in the history of that conference to have two "top three" papers. I submitted that paper to the journal affiliated with the conference, which was desk rejected due to "no contribution." I submitted a different paper with the same theoretical framework, but a different empirical setting the next summer, which was also rejected with no feedback.

One of my favorite autoethnographies describes a *Lord of the Flies* type of atmosphere in my Ph.D. program. I decided to submit the paper to a top management learning journal. After three revisions with the journal, I was thrilled that two of my reviewers were ready to see the paper printed. The

third reviewer then decided that the theory was all wrong. This was the same theory I had been using since the initial submission. The field editor then decided to reject the paper. I spoke to one of the editors who told me, "The paper was rejected because it threatened to expose academia. You scared the shit out of us."

It was simply too controversial to imply that perhaps academicians should be held to the same ethical standards as found in other professions. I have since resubmitted the paper, which was desk rejected at a lower-level journal – the reason was that the editor believed "the paper would cause a lawsuit." This was "academic freedom" at its finest.

I could recount many other vignettes, but as academic writers, I am positive you have similar stories. The cost of publishing in its current form is very high. Think of the time spent, the man hours wasted, and the tuition dollars allocated on articles that in the best-case scenario are nothing more than mathematical masturbation fetishized by no more than ten people. In the worst case scenario the paper is rejected – leading to yet another faculty member feeling the pressure of the tenure clock or being ridiculed by colleagues.

This is a gate keeping process where individuals from prestigious universities have an advantage, not necessarily because of the quality of the work, but because journals want to have top institutions listed in their tables of contents (Pelly, & Boje, 2019a, 2019b). All of these top journals publish in English, which further excludes individuals from other countries who want to become part of the conversation.

Another voice that is regularly excluded is that of the practitioner (Pelly, & Fayolle, 2020; Pelly, 2017; Frandsen, & Pelly, 2020). How many times has an executive, a lower-level manager, or a blue-collar worker been given the opportunity for their voice to be heard? When is the last time they had the chance to write in academia? Evidently, only someone with a doctorate and extensive research training can tell the stories of the people they observe (assuming they observed their empirical settings in the first place). We have drifted so far away from introducing new phenomena and ideas that publishing itself has become an end, not a means to an end.

How much knowledge is lost in the process? How many revolutionary and useful manuscripts inevitably sit for years on someone's desktop, unable to find a home? Everyone at top conferences explains that we must do better, but few are willing to take that plunge. It is for this reason that I am grateful to the editors and reviewers of *Discourses on Culture* who enable us to have these conversations.

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