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Editorial: Open Access – An Ethical Alternative to Use of Impact Factor When Making Decisions About Journal Selection

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In 2020, Dr. Stephen Marson, the Editor of the Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, invited readers to express their views about the use of impact factor (IF) for promotion and tenure decisions. In his editorial on the use of IF, Marson (2020) concluded that the IF is such a weak measure of scholarly impact that it is unethical to employ it in decision-making. He criticized both the reliability and validity of the IF based on his own analysis as well as the empirical work done by Greenwood (2007). Marson (2020) concluded that universities that use IF in promotion and tenure decisions are subject to legal liability given that linkage of this metric to actual professional impact.

Despite the concerns raised, use of IF is still widely encouraged for faculty making publication choices (McKiernan et al., 2019). Citations of papers are greater in high-IF journals, perhaps because they are more often purchased by libraries, and are therefore more readily available to researchers, than low-IF journals. Having their work cited is important to faculty as they aim to boost their h-index, a measure devised in 2005, to

indicate scholars' impact and productivity (Hirsch, 2005). H-index is calculated using faculties' most cited papers and the number of citations that they have received in other publications. The h-index is not universally accepted without criticism (Bornmann et al., 2008) but is widely used in important and career-determining ways, with particularly important consequences for emerging scholars.

H-index correlates with success indicators such as winning the Nobel Prize, being accepted for research fellowships, and holding positions at top universities (Bornmann & Daniel, 2007). Tokar et al. (2012) argue that h-index is useful for comparing overall professional impact between faculty in the same or similar fields. Additionally, h-index is used in faculty hiring decisions to assess future scholarship potential as h-indexes should increase linearly over time. Thus, getting articles published in journals that yield a high number of citations is a priority for faculty as their h-index is an important metric used to assess their current and future productivity and influence within the academy. "Publish or perish," coined in 1932 (Coolidge, 1932), is still a harsh reality and way of life for today's faculty. Unfortunately, the pressure to publish can give rise to unethical research practices including salami slicing, plagiarism, duplicate publication, fraud, ghost authors, etc. (Rawat & Meena, 2014).

Into this mix has come the potential of open access as a means of increasing visibility; open access journals publish articles without a subscription barrier so anyone can access them. Such journals serve as an important outlet for faculty who want to increase their h-index as empirical data indicates that open access journals have significantly more citations overall compared to non-open access journals. In a landmark study conducted more than two decades ago, Lawrence (2001) found that, in computer science and related fields, the mean number of citations of non-open access articles is 2.74 while the mean number of citations of open access articles is 7.03, a disparity attributable to enhanced accessibility. A more recent study by Chua et al. (2017), encompassing multiple disciplines, found that open access journals have significantly more citations overall

compared to those that are non-open access (median 15.5 vs 12, $p=0.039$), supporting the original work of Lawrence (2001). Interesting, however, was that IF did not correlate with citation frequency for open access journals in the Chua et al. study (2017). In contrast, IF did show moderate correlation with the number of citations for articles published in non-open access journals. Based on their empirical analysis, Chua et al. (2017) advised faculty to publish in open access journals, only considering those with high IFs when choosing to submit to non-open access journals.

Free online availability facilitates access in many ways and offers substantial benefits to science and society. The advent of open access publishing has allowed for unrestricted and rapid knowledge dissemination. For example, Lee and Haupt (2021) found that journals increased their open access publications, especially about research pertaining to COVID-19, during the pandemic. For researchers, open access dramatically reduces the hassle of obtaining permission to view the full text and dramatically extends the reach of journals beyond researchers in Western countries with well-funded libraries, to researchers working in low- and middle-income countries, and to people who are not researchers at all (Wyatt, 2019).

Dramatically expanding the reach of articles, through open access, beyond academics/researchers and to countries with fewer economic resources is consistent with the ethical mandate of the social work profession (NASW, 2018) and helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Having articles sit behind a paywall limits accessibility to those with institutional access and inhibits using the research to make continuing quality improvement in a timely manner.

While open access generates higher citation levels, use by faculty researchers to increase their h-indexes is not without ethical challenges. Beall (2016) highlights that the existence of 'predatory publishers' exploits faculty desire to get their research reviewed quickly and make it more accessible through open access. Unfortunately, individuals and companies use open access solicitations and venues to defraud authors and readers by

promising reputable publishing platforms but delivering poor quality, non-peer reviewed work. Predatory journals frequently have imaginary editorial boards, require substantial author payments, and are unclear about ownership of material and publication venues. Emerging scholars who feel the most pressure to publish and may be naïve to sound publication practices may be at increased risk for these unethical ‘pay to play’ practices. Unfortunately, the existence of predatory publishers undermines a legitimate trend toward open access by promulgating poor quality articles and studies, often published on temporary sites solely as a way to generate revenue from those pressured to publish.

Publication in open access journals should be considered by scholars who want to increase the impact of their work, to either assist with tenure and promotion or reach a broader audience. While open access journals also have IFs, these metrics are less relevant as they are not significantly related to citations. However, scholars choosing open access publication need to be discerning given the predatory practices mentioned. Faculty receiving email solicitations about open access opportunities should be wary, especially if they are unprofessional or contain grammatical errors. Faculty should choose to publish in known journals, seeking consultation from colleagues when writing for new venues or suspecting predatory practices.

Prior to the widespread use of the internet, IF served an important function as an indicator of quality. However, in an era where societal impact is driven by ‘influencers’ who use highly accessible online content to affect norms and attitudes, the saliency of the IF metric now appears artificial. The academy must consider changes in the ways in which people obtain and use information. While most scholars support making news and data more accessible, there appears to be some hesitancy to reexamine how impact is defined. Open access publication provides a means by which faculty can become ‘scholarly influencers’ independent of IF, with access to a larger audience and the power that comes with swaying the views of more readers who can significantly affect their chosen fields.