

Scholarship, Disciplinary Hegemony and Power in Academic Publishing¹

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This paper seeks to illuminate the relationship between academic publishing, scholarship and power, by reporting on a recent UK-based study of academic journals in education, sociology and psychology. It takes as main focus, the various individuals and groups involved in the creation and production of academic journals and their perceptions about what is going on.

It first describes the distinctive nature of academic journals, the groups involved and the development of a theoretical framework for the project. Then it briefly touches on key debates about academic journals, for example, their use as indicators of scholarship. The main part of this article, however, is devoted to describing and reporting the *Getting Published Project*, ending with a discussion of the implications of its findings.

The World of Academic Journals

The original conception of the academic journal as central to a discipline's professionalism and the principal means of communicating knowledge among scholars (Steig, 1986) has diminished in recent years in some countries as pressures to publish deriving from various research and funding pressures have grown. Thus, academic journals have been used in the US, and more recently in the UK in three main ways in addition to the production and exchange of academic knowledge. These are to rank research and scholarly work, to aid the distribution of research funds and to inform decisions concerning appointment and promotion. In this context, the editorial practices of journals have become increasingly important to individual writers and academics, and their institutions, particularly where research activity has been highly prioritised.

An academic journal is distinctive from other forms of publishing with certain key features. It is likely to be university-based, to involve academics as editors and consultants, to use conventional forms and styles of binding, type-setting and publishing, and to be published at regular intervals (McDermott, 1994). Furthermore, all the academic journals involved in the project used referees, that is experts in specific fields, who make recommendations as to whether submitted manuscripts merit publication.

Though academic journals have been generally viewed as mainly concerned with creation and exchange of academic knowledge, they also lie at the centre of a set of social, economic and academic relationships involving a variety of actors or stake-holders. These include:

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Editors/Editorial Boards

who confirm overall policy, choose reviewers and decide if papers are to be reviewed and/or published.

Publishers

who are more concerned with publicity, marketing and sales, and less, with the day-to-day management of the journal. Publishers intervene rarely, except when a journal becomes unprofitable or nonviable in some other way.

Reviewers

who generally recommend whether or not a manuscript merits publication.

Members of Learned Societies

who make recommendations on overall policy and procedures for their society journals, and require accountability from their editors, editorial boards and publishers.

Readers

who take out regular subscriptions. Corporate subscribers i.e. libraries, pay higher subscription rates and are more consistent than individual subscribers. Nevertheless individual academics are critical to the success of journals, both as subscribers and because they can make recommendations to libraries.

Writers/Authors

who are necessary to ensure a continuing stream of high quality manuscripts. They are particularly important for new journals, struggling to survive, which need good quality submissions and good 'names', especially for the first few years of their existence.

Other stake-holders

which may include government agencies, industry and commerce.

Discipline and hegemony: towards a theoretical framework

The development of a theoretical framework for the research was important because we sought to move beyond the descriptive or speculative, to accommodate the different processes by which academic journals contribute to the production, legitimation and distribution of scholarship and scholars. Foucault's work on the legitimation and dominance of certain forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1980) and Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Forgacs, 1988) were particularly appropriate in this context. Drawing on these two concepts, Agger (1991) has developed the term 'disciplinary hegemony' to analyse sociology textbooks. He found hegemonic features of sociology to include dominance of quantitative research methods, complex statistical analysis, positivism, emphasis on research rather than theory, and preference for applied and policy research - findings that our research to some extent corroborate. Agger argues that it is not sufficient to take research at face value; we need to

identify its underlying philosophy and assumptions. He is highly critical of a more superficial approach:

because it accepts the research apparatus (surveys, computers, grants) and epistemological assumptions of the reigning positivism, facilitates the impression of journals' openness and reinforces the hegemony of positivist quantitative methods, making it that much harder to publish genuinely heterodox work of a kind that seriously challenges the literary production of disciplines. (Agger, 1991:24)

Foucault also uses the term 'legitimation' to show the power of certain groups ('experts') to shape and confirm the production of certain kinds of knowledge. Thus, the academic community exerts power by the control and legitimation of knowledge in publication. By such power/knowledge configurations, 'outsider' or unofficial knowledge may be disqualified and dismissed as non-rigorous, undisciplined, and unprofessional. Significantly, Foucault (1980) specifically identifies research as a mechanism of control as well as of knowledge-generation. Where oppositional viewpoints compete for journal space, these not only confirm academics' espoused commitment to freedom of speech and respect for diversity of opinion, but provide strong indications of the boundaries and limitations of what may be said and written. Thus, as Apple states, 'reproduction and contestation go hand in hand' (Apple, 1982:8)

Academic journals thus provide a means of legitimating knowledge within the academic community, by conferring the stamp of approval on academic work. In the UK, Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) have strengthened this role and in such contexts, journal editors and reviewers have become powerful gatekeepers in judging quality of scholarship. They are enmeshed in discourses of hierarchy, knowledge legitimation and power with editors and publishers mainly in control. However, we know from Foucault and others that power relations are fluid and relational. Other potential sources of power and influence emerge from within the academic community (authors, members of learned societies) and from without (e.g. government or commerce). Hence, one of the main tasks of the project was to explore the distinctive perceptions and practices of the groups which together produce what we know as academic journals.

Publishing as Performance Indicator

One of the main interests in academic journals in recent years has been their use as indicators for identifying high quality scholarship: in particular, in providing criteria for academic performance against which scholarly work can be measured. Institutional investment and research levels are key factors in this context. According to Colman et al (1992) 'the most important input variables are the number of departmental staff members, the number of research assistants, the size of equipments and recurrent grants, and the amount of research income' (p. 97).

Other factors have emerged relating to the role of academic journals in evaluating scholarship. These include the number of times authors' work is cited, number of publications, reputation of journals, individual characteristics of authors, disciplinary traditions and institutional factors. Thus the following claims have been made.

- The higher the *number of citations* of an academic's work, the greater the peer esteem and therefore the higher the quality of scholarship (e.g. Field et al, 1992);

- The higher the *number of publications* of an academic, the higher the quality of scholarship (e.g. Furnham, 1990; Colman et al, 1992);
- The greater the *eminence of the journal*, the higher the quality of scholarship (e.g. Smith & Gough, 1984);
- Specific *individual characteristics* of an academic are predictive of high quality scholarship, in particular, aptitude and ability, gender, achievement orientation, competitiveness (see below);
- Different *disciplinary traditions* have an influence on academic publishing profiles (e.g. Zuckermann & Merton, 1991; Agger, 1991);
- *Institutional factors* such as the rating/prestige of the institution and/or department have an impact on individual publishing output (e.g. Smedley, 1989).

Disagreements have occurred, however, about the effectiveness of particular indicators. For example, some advocates of the use of citations condemn peer review as an 'old boy' network which is unfair to outsiders and newcomers. According to Furnham (1990:104) a more 'open, objective method would help prevent random praise or punishment, "old-boy" networks or corruption'. However, Field et al (1991) claim that citations too merely reflect the status quo, because of the frequency of self-citation and citation of friends.

As research becomes a higher priority for many academics, a range of advice has emerged for new researchers about how to get published, for example, the recently produced *500 Tips for Getting Published* (Brown et al, 1998). Would-be writers are advised, for example, about how to tailor structure and content of writing to suit specific publications, how to develop an appropriately 'academic' writing style, and variations in requirements of different forms of publication (see also, Luey, 1987; Sussman & Hanks, 1992).

Authors in academic journals: patterns of productivity

Who writes in academic journals has been less discussed. Sociologists of science have suggested that certain characteristics of writers, for example, where they were educated and are presently employed, influence reviewers' recommendations and editors' decisions about whether or not to publish. Further, that this influence is frequently greater than the merits of the manuscript under consideration (Bakanic et al, 1987). Thus a 'big' name may well gain the advantage in the competition for journal space in various ways:

Judgement may be systematically skewed by deference, by less careful appraisals involving exacting criteria, by self-doubts of one's own sufficient competence to criticise a great [scholar] or by fear of affronting influential persons in the field (Zuckermann and Merton, 1971:82)

Zuckermann and Merton also found that high status academics (in this case scientists) submitted more manuscripts, received quicker turnaround from reviewers and were more likely to be reviewed by peers of equivalent status; and also that younger authors were more likely to have their manuscripts accepted for publication. However, they concluded that overall, the status of reviewer and author 'has no perceptible influence on patterns of [manuscript] evaluation' (p. 95). In contrast, Bakanic et al's more recent study of manuscript

submission to, and publication in *American Sociological Review*, noted that prestigious institutions provided better environments, resources, time and encouragement for authors to publish, 'all of which increase the likelihood that more and higher quality manuscripts will be generated and submitted' (Bakanic et al, 1987:637)

Following feminist activity in other areas of academia, gender has recently received attention as a factor in academic authorship. A key claim is that men have generally higher profiles and higher productivity than women. For example, Helmreich et al (1980) found that male authors were cited more and also were more likely to self-cite and Ward et al (1992), that male authors were more likely to be cited by men. Field et al's (1991) study found only one woman among the top 10 cited authors in *Studies in the Education of Adults* and *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, and then, only in tenth position.

In contrast, Over (1982) showed that article-for-article, women were as likely as men to be cited, but their proportion of citations was lower because of their lower overall publication levels. Also, Ward et al found that women were more likely than men to cite women's work. Wennerås and Wold (1997) identify three main theories used to explain women's relatively low publishing profile compared with men: *time lag* i.e. women have not yet quite caught up with men but they will, in time; *low productivity* of women due to lack of ambition and competitiveness, and their domestic responsibilities; and *sex discrimination*. In their own study of Swedish biochemists, Wennerås and Wold found that sex discrimination best explained the relatively poor performance of female scientists and that peer reviewers were strongly biased against women researchers.

Discussion of other social patterns of authorship, for example, ethnic origin or colour, has not been prominent although a variety of factors have been put forward to explain the general under-representation of black authors in academic journals. Thus, at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in New York in 1996, the AERA publications committee noted that some inequalities lay outside its control and that perfect representation of authorship and content was impossible to achieve, despite strategies to increase diversity of authorship. In particular, the 'struggle over hiring' in the US (the outcome of which is fewer female and minority ethnic academic staff) has created preconditions which mitigate against greater inclusiveness in journals. The response of mainly young, graduate students on this occasion, however, was to be highly critical of existing publishing practices, in particular, what were seen as the lack of openness in the appointment of journal editors, lack of encouragement to new authors, and predominance of white/male networks of power.

The Publishing Project

The project entitled *Getting Published: a study of writing, refereeing and editing practices 2* took place between April 1996 and April 1998 and was based jointly at South Bank and Warwick Universities in the UK. 30 journals constituted the research base for the project, 20 of which were drawn from education, and five each, from sociology and psychology. These included the main journals for the learned societies for each of the three disciplines involved. Other journals were selected to represent journals within each discipline. A variety of research methods were employed, chosen on the basis of their suitability for specific target groups within the study. Four key tasks underpinned the work of the project:

- a. identification of trends in authorship, content, and methodology of selected journal articles in three disciplinary areas: education, psychology and sociology;
- b. investigation of the different stages of text production i.e. writing, refereeing, editing;
- c. consideration of the role of publishing in the construction and dissemination of knowledge within a discipline;
- d. exploration of the impact of technological change on the production of journals.

Five sub-studies were carried out, focusing respectively on publishers, editors and editorial boards, members of learned societies, authors and content. The next sections describe each sub-study and report on its main findings.

1. Publishers

14 publishers of the journals involved in the study were contacted either by interview or questionnaire between March and June 1997. Five responses were received (36% of those approached). Specific but open-ended questions were asked about publications policy, audience, role of the academic journal and the publisher, support and advice provided for editors and editorial boards, and any new challenges including that of electronic publishing.

The publishers were enthusiastic about their journals, in particular, about their high quality, usefulness and value to academic research and scholarship. Overall, the aims for their journals were largely similar to those of the editors, for example, to exchange information and provide good quality papers and up-to-date research. Publishers supported the academic work of their journals in a number of ways: by providing guidance on publishing, business cards and stationery, and by arranging and funding launches and editorial board meetings. They were more circumspect about their role in marketing, publicity, sales and profit-making but seemed more aware than editors, for example, about possible threats to journals' financial viability from electronic publishing. Their main concerns about electronic publishing centred round how to protect their subscriptions. Other 'challenges' of academic publishing mentioned included: cutbacks in university library budgets; legal action concerning copyright infringement, plagiarism, and claims of misrepresentation; and escalating costs of production.

2. Editors and Editorial Boards

30 editors of the journals involved in the study were contacted either by interview or questionnaire between February and April 1997. Twenty responded (67% of target group): 16 were editors of education journals, 2 of sociology journals and two of psychology journals. The questions asked of the journal editors paralleled to some extent those asked of the publishers, but concerned more detail about the day-to-day procedures of refereed journals.

There was consensus among editors regarding the role and responsibilities of editors and editorial boards - which was to take main policy decisions on which manuscripts to publish so as to provide up-to-date thinking and 'cutting edge' research in a particular field or discipline. There was clearly much personal and professional satisfaction and prestige gained from association with an academic journal, though increased work pressures were seen as eroding benefits. Other areas of agreement included: how referees were chosen (mainly through personal and professional networks); criteria for assessment of manuscripts (clarity of exposition and writing, originality, and relevance to the field); feedback to authors (a copy of the referees' reports plus a covering letter from the editor); and use of 'blind' refereeing system (removal of authors' name).

There were however considerable differences in approach to method and level of record-keeping of submission and publication; in advice to prospective authors; and in degree of communication with authors after acceptance or rejection of a paper. Target turnaround times for papers also varied substantially, ranging from three weeks to 6-9 months.

3. Members of Learned Societies

Semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to members of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British Sociological Association (BSA) in a variety of ways (email, newsletter, postal questionnaire) during June 1997. Thus an opportunity sample of 135 completed responses were received: 42 from BERA, 38 from BPS, and 55 from BSA members.

The survey revealed shared perceptions with publishers and editors regarding some aspects of academic journals, for example, the necessity for accessible, jargon-free writing on up-to-date and relevant research issues. However, most comments were highly critical, and only four of the 135 respondents conveyed satisfaction with current journal practices. Criticisms were strongest over length of time taken to review and publish articles, and on what was described as insensitive, ill-informed or contradictory referees' comments and lack of objectivity of the reviewing process as a whole.

As might be expected, a wide variety of suggestions were put forward for improving the working of journals. These included: making the review process more transparent; training and monitoring referees; clearer guidelines to authors; constructive feedback to authors; using referees who are likely to be sympathetic ('or at least not hostile') to an author's standpoint; allowing appeals; and removing 'cosy networks' and 'editors who publish their own or their friends' work'.

The view from this group on electronic publishing differed from other, more negative perspectives found in the project. The general feeling was of cautious optimism, as respondents acknowledged the importance of electronic journals as supplementary rather than replacing paper journals - hence the comment, 'can't read an electronic journal in bed'. The main advantage of electronic publishing was seen to be the potential speeding up of the publication process, though disadvantages mentioned were lack of access to the appropriate technology and low prestige associated with electronic publishing.

4. Authors

A postal survey was carried out (May to August 1997) of 300 successfully published authors (150 male, 150 female) of selected articles from the project journals. 180 responses (60% of those contacted) were received, of which 40% were from women and 60% from men. Questions covered individual details such as gender, status, institution, length of time engaged in academic writing, number of articles published, type of journal etc.; perspective on the writing process; and experience of academic journals and how they work.

Of the 1013 articles published by this group in the previous two years, professors reported authoring the largest number, followed by lecturers and senior lecturers. Significantly, male authors were more highly represented at the professor, reader and senior lecturer levels, and female authors, at the (lower) lecturer level. Reasons given for why academics write were to disseminate the results of their research and enter into a debate about a key topic within their

chosen field. Additional, more practical and career-orientated motives included professional expectation and enhanced career prospects and status. Authors also professed a high emotional investment in their writing. Exposure of themselves and their work to often hostile judgements through the peer review process, on occasions they maintained, could be exceedingly painful. Again (as above) some referred to gratuitously destructive comments from referees.

5. Journal Characteristics and Content

Two issues per year of each of the 30 project journals were randomly selected, for the period 1986-1995. The survey provided a data base of 4254 articles from 600 issues which provided information on author's title, sex, and status; institutional base and country of origin; type of article; method of data collection and analysis; research findings, reference and footnote details, and level of self-citation. (See appendix for journal titles and number of articles selected from each.). Included here are findings covering disciplinary research trends and author characteristics.

i. Disciplinary Research Trends

Specific patterns and shifts in content were evident for all three disciplines. For example, education journals between 1986 and 1995 were largely focused on current government education policy concerns. Thus there was a concentration on applied research, and on aspects of behaviour and development, school management and the impact of change, curriculum and assessment, evaluation of the impact of policy, equal opportunities and teachers lives and experiences. Psychology journals concentrated on memory, language acquisition and development, less so for cognition, conditioning and learning. Sociology journals showed greatest interest in social policy, for example, relating to employment, economic and market issues, and to health and education. Additional key sociological themes were meta-theory and the re-evaluation of classic theories and theorists.

In all three disciplines, there was an emphasis on reporting empirical research particularly for psychology journals. Sociology journals focused more on theory, and education journals, on practitioner 'action research'. In terms of research approach taken, psychology relied heavily on tests, experiments and surveys, and similarly education also showed a marked bias towards larger scale studies. Sociology however showed a more even balance of quantitative and qualitative research method. All three disciplines contained a substantial proportion of non-empirically based articles.

ii. Author Characteristics

Overall patterns of authorship were fairly consistent across the three disciplines, despite some differences between individual journals. The several journals that showed an exception to overall trends had marked practitioner or vocational orientations.

Key findings were that regarding the status of authors, professors were the most prominent author category, more so for psychology and education than for sociology journals. Journal authors were mainly university-based, though several education journals with a practice-focus, attracted more contributors from schools, local education authorities and other non-university contexts. Most articles were written by UK-based authors, with psychology having

the strongest international authorship, and education journals with a practice-focus having the highest proportion of UK-based authors.

The under-representation of women as authors emerged strongly in this sub-study. Overall there were fewer female authors in the journals surveyed for the project, although gender ratios varied between individual journals. However, not one journal had either equal proportions of males and females as authors, or a predominance of female authors, and in fact, the gender ratio of authors was generally around two-thirds/three quarters male to one third/quarter female.

A word of caution

A problem for the project team was a certain unevenness in the data due to differences in the professional orientations of journals and in their organisational practices. Thus while provision of some information was standard, e.g. on editors, editorial boards and authors, other information was less reliable, e.g. guidance to prospective authors or on refereeing procedures. Also, gaining access to some publishers and editors of academic journals was, to some extent problematic, perhaps because of their suspicions of what the research might uncover. Thus, though the overall project database was considerably larger than for other comparable studies (e.g. Bakanic et al, 1987; Colman et al, 1992; Field et al, 1991; Noble, 1989), any conclusions drawn need to be seen in this context. 3

Conclusions, discussion and changing practices

A number of key themes emerge from the research which, it is to be hoped, will have an impact on how academic journals are developed and organised in the future.

First, it has become clear that the various groups involved in academic publishing have different perspectives on the fairness and quality of the process, depending on their status and positioning. For example, editors and publishers have much more positive views of their journals, in particular, with regard to their quality, fairness and accessibility. Authors and would-be authors are far more critical, however, particularly of the peer review process and lack of accountability of journal editors and editorial boards.

Second, academic journals appear to be shaped by three key factors

(i) Disciplinary norms and research traditions - 'disciplinary hegemony' - which dictate and legitimate what is acceptable content, often rather conservatively. Government (and commercial) policy and emphasis are also influential on development of aspects of research, particularly, in sociology and education.

(ii) Actions, orientation and prejudices of individual editors and members of editorial boards who come to hold their positions largely through informal networks and personal contacts. The few obvious demands for accountability, except from editors and editorial boards of learned society journals, suggest journal cultures which are in a position to promote exclusivity and elitism.

(iii) Under-representation of women, and minority groups. This is illustrative of patterns found in higher education as a whole, but apart from the learned society societies such as

AERA (see above) there is little evidence of awareness of such inequalities or under-representation or of any strategies to overcome them.

Third, findings from the project suggested that conceptions of 'excellence' or 'good quality scholarship' are fluid and susceptible to a range of pressures and influences, as are judgements made by referees. Thus acceptance or rejection of work for publication may not be based purely on objective, commonly-agreed criteria. Such 'fluidity' needs to be communicated to would-be authors and acknowledged in RAEs and other research quality exercises.

Finally, findings from the project suggest a need for a change in practice on the part of academic editors, editorial boards and publishers, particularly as journals have become so important for research assessment exercises and for career advancement. Those involved in the production of academic journals need urgently to review organisation and methods of communication. In particular, specific efforts need to be made to:

- shorten the refereeing process
- reduce bias and unhelpful comments from referees
- make the review process more transparent
- provide training for referees
- introduce an appeals procedure for rejected authors.

The AERA Publishing Committee has started to address issues of power and inequality in publications which might well be utilised by journals more widely: for example, by proactively commissioning articles from under-represented groups, widening discussion of representation issues and creating a more inclusive academic publishing milieu. British learned societies such as BERA, BSA and BPS have produced ethical guidelines on writing and research, and anecdotal evidence suggests that these and other strategies are currently being utilised by some newly established journals. 4

What the research points to is recognition that individual talent may be but one factor affecting whether an academic is regarded as a good scholar or whether a piece of writing is considered publishable. Other factors are equally, if not more important: for example, whether an author is male or female, his or her professional status or subject discipline, and the culture and expectations of individual journals. Thus, if publication in academic journals is to be used *fairly* as an indicator of academic worth, account needs to be taken of other 'micropolitical' features of academic publishing as outlined above, in addition to conventional evaluations of content and quality which currently prevail.

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Appendix: Journals and Articles Selected for the Study

Title of Journal No. of articles selected

Education Journals

British Educational Research Journal 148

British Journal of Educational Psychology 221

British Journal of Educational Studies 106

British Journal of Sociology of Education 116

British Journal of Special Education 182

Cambridge Journal of Education 164

Comparative Education 145

Education 3-13 198

Educational Management and Administration 136

Educational Research 162

Educational Review 151

Educational Studies 152

Evaluation and Research in Education 78

History of Education 93

Journal of Curriculum Studies 117

Journal of Education for Teachers 136

Journal of Education Policy 126

Journal of Philosophy of Education 223

Oxford Review of Education 144

Research Papers in Education 86

Total Education Journals 20

Total Education Articles 2884

Sociology Journals

British Journal of Sociology 143

Sociological Review 126

Sociology 154

Sociology of Health and Illness 100

Theory, Culture and Society 116

Total Sociology Journals 5

Total Sociology Articles 639

Psychology Journals

British Journal of Clinical Psychology 172

British Journal of Psychology 167

British Journal of Social Psychology 155

Cognition 58

Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology 179

Total Psychology Journals 5

Total Psychology Articles 731

Overall number of journals 30

Overall number of articles 4254

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2. The research team consisted of Angela Packwood (Warwick University) and Margaret Scanlon and Gaby Weiner (both at South Bank University) The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (award no. R000236291)
3. The five project substudies have yielded a large quantity of data which cannot be fully reported here. Further information on the project can be found in *Interim Reports 1, 2 & 3* (available from Gaby Weiner, Umeå University, Sweden, and *Education On-Line*) and in a forthcoming book, provisionally entitled *The Editing Practices of Academic Journals*, Open University Press, 1999.
4. Only journals established before 1986 were selected for the project because of the scrutiny of articles over a 10-year span

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