

Editorial

Five (bad) reasons to publish your research in predatory journals

Predatory journals are out to get you and your work. Awareness of predatory publishers and their practices is now much higher than even three years ago: predatory being defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘preying naturally on’ and ‘seeking to exploit’ others. It has also never been easier to identify which journals and publishers are predatory – such as through Beall’s list of predatory publishers (Beall 2016). Why then are so many nursing academic papers still published in predatory journals? As behavioural economists and evolutionary biologists would conclude: there must be reasons? Here we speculate on five (bad) reasons for so many nursing authors to ignore scholarly peer-reviewed journals, like *JAN* or its open access sister journal *Nursing Open*, and publish work in a predatory journal.

I do not care about my external reputation

Predatory journals, like most hunters, exploit the weaknesses of their prey. Academics express a rich variety of values in, but also through their work. This contributes welcome diversity to academic work and its settings. Yet, publication in peer-reviewed journals remains the most common currency of academic work and our main means to communicate with academic peers. Accordingly, jobs, progression and promotion depend heavily on the ability to continue to share research via journals.

Predatory publishers particularly target inexperienced authors and researchers from poorer countries where higher education is less established (Xia *et al.* 2015). Such authors may assume that merely publishing will bring credibility and reputation to themselves and their employers. However, the worthiness of a publication is no longer inherent. The journal where your paper is published matters, and matters a lot. Vastly different levels of credibility can be accorded to a publication in a well-regarded and influential mainstream peer-reviewed journal vs. a publication in a predatory journal. By definition, these predatory journals lack adequate peer-review procedures, do not have active

editorial boards, and prioritize profit (via substantial and sometimes hidden author ‘open access’ fees) over quality and fit in the papers they publish (Pickler *et al.* 2015). Papers published in predatory journals – irrespective of their individual merits – should also be viewed with skepticism by readers.

As such, attaining a publication in a predatory journal is not neutral on a CV or résumé but an active demerit that harms the external reputations of all those involved. This may be less damaging to senior academics with many publications to counter this impression – but is very damaging to those seeking to establish their credibility, such as masters and doctoral students and early career researchers. Awareness of the perils of predatory publishers should not be assumed. Recent research identified that the majority of researchers retain misconceptions about the characteristics of predatory journals (Christopher & Young 2015).

To counter the risk of credible research being published in predatory journals, open discussions about publishing decisions should occur more often in academic settings. Students and/or new researchers, in particular, should develop skills and abilities around selecting optimal journals for their work. This could occur via open discussions with senior colleagues, mentors, supervisors and peers regarding the various criteria to reconcile when making decisions about where to publish particular manuscripts.

I do not believe in myself or my work

Predatory journals exploit the fears many academics have about personal failure (Clark & Sousa 2015). Frequently, through our careers, our manuscripts and grant applications are rejected. Students get negative feedback. Our research does not produce the findings we expect. Our inputs do not lead to the outputs we want for career progression. Deeper still, a scholar’s journey, from the PhD onwards is more than a series of practical work-related tasks. Over their careers, scholars establish and refine their sense of what they and their work should ‘stand for’—their so-called scholarly identities (Kamler & Thomson 2006). This deeper ‘why’ provides sustaining motivation, a useful criterion for decision-making, and an important ethical and moral

compass. However, in the face of ongoing failure, it feels so much like ‘I get rejected each time.

With frequent failure, this confidence and the scholar’s sense of competence in research may be at risk. Faced with regular failures in response to manuscript submissions to influential journals, publishing in predatory journals provides an antidote to the unpredictability and lack of quick payoff experienced in academic publishing. It provides an important counterweight to underlying fears of failure.

We do not talk about these many failures enough in academic settings and consequently failure remains too loaded, feared and stigmatized (Clark & Sousa 2015). A healthy level of confidence is required to write and submit a credible and authoritative paper to a well-established journal. The higher risk of rejection is associated with a loss of precious time and effort. Yet, publishing a paper in a predatory journal begs the question as to why the authors did not have sufficient faith in their work for it to fail or flourish in the peer review processes of a reputable journal.

Nursing culture here also does not help. Although nursing is now firmly established in academic settings, its status as an academic discipline remains less steadfast. Working across many different fields in cardiac care, we believe it is comparatively easier to be ‘big fish’ in nursing than other disciplines. Too many nurse academics buttress their personal ‘success’ narratives and identities within the discipline paradoxically by avoiding failure. This occurs by nurses submitting work to journals, where their success is relatively well assured rather than using this as an impetus for submissions to mainstream journals that have far higher and wider readerships but attendant higher rejection rates. This occurs in its most extreme forms in relation to predatory journals.

It is important for support to be given to researchers to grow and develop their confidence throughout their careers. Continuous mentorship, encouragement and reward of aspiration in selecting target journals, and more open acknowledgement and discussion of ongoing career failures foster working cultures built on confidence not fear. Senior or established researchers can play an especially influential role in fostering such a culture – these researchers should: role-model by being highly aspirational in the selection of journal for their papers; share more about their own publishing decisions and failures; and publish themselves only in credible journals in and beyond nursing.

Publication numbers count most

Predators exploit their prey’s distraction. While it may be alluring for established researchers to exclaim that they

‘had 20 publications this year’, chasing ready paper acceptances (such as predatory journals provide) provides a guaranteed means to chalk up another rapid resume entry, but at what cost? Counting your publications was valid when all publications counted, but not every publication counts anymore (Clark & Thompson 2012). Academic reputation is built mostly on what is published and where it is published, not how much is published (Clark & Thompson 2012). While few internal disincentives may exist for publishing in predatory journals and some department processes may still reward chalking up ever more publications irrespective, this comes at considerable external cost to external academic reputation of the individual, their department, and nursing.

Focusing predominantly on number of publications not only speaks to the success narratives researchers establish or seek for themselves but also what they are rewarded for in their workplaces. Academic leaders charged with assessing scholarly outputs and being responsible for these should not only know the publications their colleagues are attaining but also demonstrate leadership by encouraging, incentivizing and rewarding colleagues for publishing in more credible, influential places. This is particularly important for newer academic disciplines, such as nursing, seeking to increase credibility in the interdisciplinary world. Internal hiring and promotion committees often lack the awareness of the journal landscape to distinguish journals’ reputations – particularly in sub-specialties within disciplines. However, many useful and more context-responsive metrics now exist to capture the relative credibility of a publication within a discipline that are more sensitive and useful than traditional impact factors – such as the Source Normalized Impact per Paper metric (SNIP) or Eigenfactor. These metrics can directly and systematically inform decisions about performance, promotion and hiring by providing an important objective indicator of the likely difficulty of successfully attaining a publication in a particular journal. Moreover, praise from colleagues for publishing in top tier journals form a vital cultural behaviour which acknowledges that publications in some journals count more than others – and not everything is or should be praised the same.

I cannot be bothered to read

Predators exploit careless, apathetic or lazy practices. Predatory journals cleverly camouflage themselves by closely approximating the forms of existing credible journals via having similar titles as very well-established or -credible journals. They catch some authors unawares with this confusion. Sometimes the journals are not fully transparent

about the fees involved in publishing. The journals also tap into (or possibly exploit) well-intentioned but vague enthusiasm for the 'open access' publishing movement. In short, it is vital for authors to proceed to submission with care and diligence.

Authors should ascertain the probable costs of publishing open access papers – notably article processing charges – before they make their submission. Information over the processes for applying for waivers to these charges (such as for students or the unsalaried) should be provided on journal websites and queried with editors where appropriate or unclear. Remember: most established journals, including *JAN*, offer affordable open access options and many have processes to reduce or waive fees for authors in difficult circumstances.

Academic leaders, supervisors and mentors have a vital role to play in raising awareness of the practices and perils of predatory journals, the risks of publishing papers in them, and the tools that with a small amount of effort can identify journals as predatory. A small amount of effort prior to submission can address or avoid many problems.

I have given up

Do some academics willingly sacrifice themselves to predatory journals? Aware of the long-term harm they are doing themselves, their employer and their discipline, they continue to publish in predatory journals. This prioritizes ever-long resumes, places expedience before quality, and favours internal recognition from ill-informed colleagues before external national and international credibility. Often cloaked in weak criticisms of 'the impact agenda', this sad state of affairs effectively abdicates a serious responsibility to and for scholarship. Ultimately, only the individual can control their publishing conduct and as long as workplace cultures reward publishing for publishing's sake, predatory publishers will continue to thrive. If nursing is to be part of true academe, publishing in predatory journals is a practice

that must be challenged, questioned and disincentivised at every turn by everyone.

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