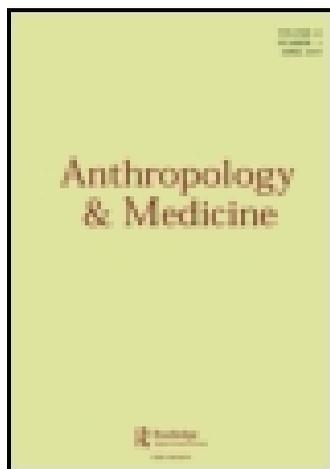


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Roberta Raffaetà^a & Tanja Ahlin^b

^a Department of Educational Human Sciences "Riccardo Massa", University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

^b Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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COMMENTARY

The politics of publishing: debating the value of impact factor in medical anthropology

Roberta Raffaetà^{a*} and Tanja Ahlin^b

^a*Department of Educational Human Sciences “Riccardo Massa”, University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy;* ^b*Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

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In times of increased competition for job positions, the pressure to publish or perish is building up. As is well known, every aspect of human life is imbued with politics, and publishing is not an exception. Where to publish is often a dilemma: how do scholars, especially those without a permanent academic position, resolve the paradox between the job market increasingly driven by various indexes and a less capitalistic understanding of intellectual expression? These issues appear especially urgent for medical anthropologists who often work at the crossroad between medical sciences, public health and anthropology. Since publishing is a significant part of our profession the authors wished to open the space for a public debate on the politics of publishing by organizing a round table discussion at the joint conference of the Medical Anthropology of European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and the Society of Medical Anthropology (SMA) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), which took place in June 2013 in Tarragona, Spain.

The nine speakers at the round table gave voice to the widest range of perspectives, taking into account national, generational and professional experiences in order to stimulate a productive dialogue among them and to avoid the imposition of ideological mantras of any kind. The speakers included Josep M. Comelles, Lenore Manderson, Ekkehard Schroeder, Susanne Ádahl, Sumeet Jain, Katerina V. Ferkov, Ainhoa Montoya, Eileen Moyer and Clarence Gravlee.

The discussion covered some of the most important changes that have been witnessed in recent years in the culture and management of publishing. With traditional monographs somewhat losing their prestige and impact, journals and especially international – English language – peer-reviewed journals have gained legitimacy with the alleged notions of rankings, impact factors and indexes. Moreover, open-access has started knocking on our door increasingly decisively, but so far few people really understand what it is and what consequences it entails.

The scope of the round table was broad, including discussion about writing in times of neo-liberal regimes, the impact factor, language variations and hierarchies, the role of publishing in scholar’s career paths and open access. This commentary only covers a part of that discussion and future reports will cover other aspects. The authors would like to use the space of this commentary to focus on the question of the quality of publications

*Corresponding author. Email: roberta.raffaeta@gmail.com

and the contested importance of the impact factor for medical anthropologists. The impact factor is a number assigned to journals which reflects the average number of citations of its published articles. This measurement is used as a proxy to determine a relative importance of a journal within a particular academic field. Neglecting the subtleties of such measurement might lead to poisonous consequences, as observed by Hall and Page (2015): ‘policymakers and university administrators confuse accounting and accountability. The present audit culture and systems of academic surveillance and control of government and, in some cases, institutional associations ... combines the neoliberal economic imperatives of competition and academic entrepreneurship with the technologies of public management and publishing.’

As a consequence, the value of the impact factor has generated much debate in recent years, notably in the 2012 San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), see <http://www.ascb.org/dora/>. In general, current debates tend to polarize opinions according to those who think the impact factor is a menace for intellectual growth and those who are convinced this kind of measurement is an efficient solution to determining the quality of a journal. It often seems difficult to find a negotiated solution between these two extremes.

While blind faith in the validity of the impact factor may lead to a simplified view of scholars and their work, this number attached to the details describing academic journals may in some cases indeed be useful as an indicator of quality when the value of a scholar’s work meets obstacles in becoming recognized. During the roundtable, a possible solution out of the incommunicability between the two extreme positions emerged. This is to acknowledge the impact factor for what it is: a tool, among others, for career advancement. Thus, each scholar should identify their career goals and choose where to publish accordingly. To publish in impact factor journals might be a good strategy in certain cases, though one may also decide to complement such publications by others in journals not indexed yet well in line with one’s research topics and/or professional perspectives. At the same time, raising the issue of the impact factor might give rise to shared strategies to promote publications and to contextualize the value of impact value within in the anthropological community.

The roundtable started with the provocative talk of Josep Comelles, professor of anthropology at Universiad Rovira I Virgili. He confessed that, despite having published extensively in over the last 40 years or so, his impact factor remains very low. According to Comelles, the impact factor is not an objective measure of quality but is relative to the discipline and to the age of the scholar: a young graduate student in physics would need just a couple of publications, realized in a much shorter time, to have a higher impact factor than a professor of anthropology after four decades of publishing. Comelles suggested a possible solution, namely to develop special metrics for the humanities, anthropology included. The actual metrics, indeed, have been developed essentially for experimental science but they cannot say much about the worth of a publication in other disciplines.

Lenore Manderson, professor at University of Witwatersrand and Brown University, a very productive writer and editor of *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness*, acknowledged that metrics and journal indexes have a value but she also noted the key challenge she thought scholars are faced with: how they are judged and how might others make judgment about what they are doing. Manderson proposed that publishing in indexed journals should not be the only element upon which to evaluate the quality of a scholar or of a project idea. The “metrication of individual value,” in her words, should not substitute an overall judgment of an individual’s career potential as well as the potential of a particular idea. Manderson affirmed that anthropology scholars

should argue and prove that it is worth disseminating knowledge in ways outside and in addition to the most conventional, such as publishing book reviews, editorials and in community-based editions. Moreover, publishing should not count as the only and primary criteria for appointments for university jobs or funding. Our community should agree on the value of doing community service and of teaching effectively and well. Finally, according to Manderson, the issue is not that of changing the metrics because it would be very complex to agree on how to develop a new metrics and, also, different metrics would limit exchanges among disciplines. She suggested instead that journals' editors have a key role and great responsibility in narrowing the various gaps (e.g. North-South and of English mastery) between scholars.

Ekkehard Schroeder, editor-in-chief of *Curare* (the journal of AGEM – *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ethnomedizin*), agreed with Manderson in considering the role of editors central in mediating between authors and reviewers in order to make the impact factor not an element of exclusion, but one of inclusion of different perspectives. Schroeder is, indeed, quite critical of the classical notion of the impact factor. Schroeder read the mission statement that accompanied the creation of the impact factor, about 40 years ago: 'Our mission is to update journals' coverage in Web of Science by identifying and evaluating promising journals and, whenever necessary, deleting journals that have become less useful' (Testa 2012). According to him, this rhetoric has a Darwinian connotation.

Susanne Ådahl of the University of Turku and a special issue editor of the Finnish journal *Suomen antropologi* called for the reduction of the importance given to publications in the evaluation of scholars' curricula. She emphasized the importance of endorsing a perspective of holistic knowledge production. In her view, publication is only a part of the body of knowledge produced by anthropologists. Teaching, tutoring, doing research, spending time in the field, having time for tinkering with our collected material as well as being involved in popular writing should all represent elements to be valued. Ådahl shared with the audience her manifesto to resist a world of efficiency in which scholars are asked 'to produce, produce and produce' by doing 'slow anthropology' and thereby celebrate the 'organic' nature of anthropology. According to Ådahl, slow anthropology means working in a manner where there is time to reflect, to go both deep and wide in the issues that are being researched; this kind of work is often directly connected with the quality of scholarly writing. Ådahl's considerations do not directly address the issue of the impact factor, but they are useful suggestions in order for the anthropological community to start a discussion about the relative value to give to the impact factor.

In describing the process of transforming an academic journal from a printed to an online version, Eileen Moyer of the University of Amsterdam, a co-editor of a new open-access journal, *Medicine Anthropology Theory* (MAT), also touched on the effects of journal indexing. She expressed the intention of *Medische Anthropologie's* editorial board to become indexed, also to meet the needs of junior scholars who are increasingly reluctant to publish in non-indexed journals because this makes them less competitive in the newly emerging dynamics of the 'academic market.' She underlined, however, the difficulties and the somehow paradoxical nature of this endeavor, for in order for a journal to become listed, it needs to have published at least some work by respected senior scholars. For this reason, Moyer explained, the strategy of their editorial board was first to find the 'right kind of people' – 'big names' – and ask them to have their work published in their journal, despite the fact the journal has not yet been indexed.

In the final round of questions and comments from the audience, a suggestion arose to consider some kind of permanent committee across EASA and SMA to share views, opinions and strategies about academic publishing, including the impact factor, in order to

engage with the future developments in publishing within our community rather than simply endure global trends.

It is hoped that this roundtable might be used as a minimal background from which to build an open discussion around this topic and find an agreement on how to deal with and challenge the evaluation of scholarly work by the impact factor in our community.

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Conflict of interests

None.

Ethics

The authors followed the American Anthropological Association ethics guidelines. Oral consent for interviews was obtained from each individual study participant.

Notes on contributors

Roberta Raffaetà is lecturer in medical anthropology at the University of Milan-Bicocca (Italy). In her doctoral work (Lausanne University, Switzerland) she explored how different actors in Italy make sense of allergy, dealing with issues of medical pluralism, medicalization, embodiment and identity. In her post-doctoral research she pursued an ecological understanding of the migratory experience, exploring how the body and place matter in health governance and biopolitics. She conducted research on the Chinese settlement in the city of Prato (Italy – Monash University) and, thanks to a Marie Curie Fellowship (Trento University, Italy), on Moroccan and Ecuadorian parenting in Italy.

Tanja Ahlin is a doctoral candidate in medical anthropology and science and technology studies (STS) at the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam. She is a recipient of the Trans Global Health fellowship, which is a part of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate Program. Her current research is on elderly care at a distance by means of everyday information and communication technologies (ICT) in Indian transnational families.

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