



Letter to Editor

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Personal Argumentation in the Scholarly Publication

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Abstract

Currently, the journals in the field of social sciences seem to emphasize the preference that authors submit for evaluation and publication manuscripts in the form of research articles with empirical data, following the model of exact sciences and, preferably, with the possibility of research replication. The scholarly publication based on reasoned logical argumentation seems to be increasingly relegated to the sidelines. This letter argues that questioning preconceived ideas and contributing to thinking is critical and that its publication, after the quality and relevance of personal argumentation is assessed, should take place even without respecting the replication of the research model.

Keywords: *personal argumentation; research replication; scholarly publication*

In the academic environment, there is increasing pressure to publish as a central dimension of the academic profession (Chien, 2019; Espinoza, 2019; Harremoës, 2019; Kortabarria, 2019; McCuen, 2017), in a context in which “The toxic ‘publish or perish’ environment can cause both authors and editors to err on the side of caution; writing papers likely to get published, with low liability for backlash due to ‘informed opinions’ being seen as diametrically opposed to ‘empirical rigour’ — an age-old

conflation between objectivity and subjectivity that humans struggle to get past” (Sawrikar, & McAuliffe, 2019, p. 4).

Scholarly communication is, currently, facing several challenges: in terms of the form, with the possibility of digital, Internet dissemination and open access, and in terms of content (Weilenmann, 2018). Currently, the journals in the field of social sciences seem to emphasize the preference that authors submit for evaluation and publication manuscripts in the form of research articles with empirical data, following the model of the exact sciences and, preferably, with the possibility of research replication, or, at most, a literature review of a current synthesis of information on a given topic through document collection and analysis. In a very pertinent recent illustration mentioned and felt by Sawrikar, “I called this Special Issue because three of my own personal essays [...] were rejected 18 times between them by scholarly journals. Yet, I was a 41 year old academic with nothing but academic experience — having gone straight from school, to undergrad, to postgrad, to teaching and research in higher education. [...] When we speak with our voice, we are dismissed. In this way, we are not seen to be true knowledge-bearers” (Sawrikar, & McAuliffe, 2019, p. 1).

The scholarly publication based on logical and grounded argumentation materialized in various forms, such as essay, perspective, viewpoint, communication, commentary or opinion piece, which has often been a central element for the social sciences, seems to be increasingly relegated to the sidelines as non-scientific. This is a trend to be confirmed, but which seems to us to be growing and taking root.

The essay is one of those forms of an argumentative paper (Kantesaria, & P, 2018), by counterpoint to the research article, which directly mobilizes empirical information. An essay may be “a text usually presented in the form of a nonfiction literary exercise. It is elaborated in an authorial voice that presents as authentic a subjective mode of expression, or narrated personal experience, and may range from the stylistically disordered to the very structured” (Mercadal, 2019); “You will consult and refer to a range of literature, which should be presented in a logical manner to develop and defend your argument. Indeed, presenting a structured argument, reinforced and developed through literature, is the fundamental goal of writing an essay” (West, Malcolm, Keywood, & Hill, 2019, p. 609).

Since journals (McCuen, 2017) and their editors are, currently, true gatekeepers (Primack et al, 2019) of scientific dissemination, the fact is that in the exploratory research scholars undertake, there seems to be a growing trend towards a preference for scientific research articles, in which replication is possible, aiming for the “detection of erroneous reporting of work only surface when other researchers try to duplicate the reported results and cannot get the same general result. Then the original work undergoes thorough scrutiny, at which time the reason may be determined” (McCuen, 2017, p. 3).

Notwithstanding the deep discussions around this concept of replication research (Harremoës, 2019; Anvari, & Lakens, 2018; LaPlante, 2019; Romero, 2019; França, & Monserrat, 2019; August, & Osrecki, 2019; Penders, Holbrook, & de Rijcke, 2019), we will define it as those “studies that put published empirical results to an additional empirical test” (Block, & Kuckertz, 2018, p. 355). In these studies, transparency is critical to the confidence that the scientific community, but also the whole society, may have of scientific knowledge (Romero, 2019; França, & Monserrat, 2019; Block, & Kuckertz, 2018; Bakken, 2019). On this, Romero (2019) states: “We trust scientific findings because experiments repeated under the same conditions produce the same results. Or so one would expect. However, in recent years, important published findings in the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences have failed to replicate (i.e., when independent researchers repeat the original experiment, they do not obtain the original result)” (p. 1).

But what about social sciences? This replication is much more difficult or even impossible to achieve in social sciences (Harremoës, 2019; Romero, 2019; Peels, & Bouter, 2018; Silva, 2019; Castro, 1986), due to their specificities. In an excellent analysis of replication in social sciences by Freese and Peterson (2017), the authors sustain that “First, replication contains a series of unavoidable interpretive ambiguities. Second, these ambiguities are partially rooted in a tension between the

epistemic values of similarity and difference in replication. Third, scientific communities develop rules and conventions around replication that are meant to alleviate these ambiguities but can themselves become objects of epistemic debate. Finally, because these rules and conventions develop in path-dependent response to both internal and external pressures, it is important to recognize the particular challenges that each epistemic culture faces rather than accept a universal theory of scientific replication” (pp. 148 and 149).

This letter, focusing on the relationship between the essay as an example of argumentative scholarly publication and research replication, seeks to highlight the importance of the essay for scientific progress itself, as well as its potential relevance for discussion and reflection on some social, political, scientific elements, which need to be (re)thought from a critical standpoint and, if necessary, be challenged by contributing to their trans(formation). It is concluded that this work of disorder, which the model of essay allows to carry out by questioning ideas made and contribute to thinking, is critical and, therefore, its publication, after the quality and relevance of the personal argumentative discourse is duly assessed, should take place, even without respecting research replication.

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