



Publishing and assessing the research of economists: Lessons from public health

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A B S T R A C T

We highlight a growing concern in the economics profession that young scholars face incentives that are misaligned with conducting research that furthers knowledge and addresses pressing policy problems. The premium given to publication in top journals leads to an emphasis on exhaustive treatment of narrow questions. Detailed, robustly identified studies of novel questions are of undeniable value; however, the opportunity cost of producing such studies is large in terms of research quantity and policy relevance. For economists who aim to achieve what we view as the ultimate goals of academic research (enhancing understanding of the world, solving social problems, and building foundational knowledge to enable future breakthroughs), we offer some insights from publication philosophy in the field of public health. We discuss how public health has developed norms around publishing that are more successful in meeting these ultimate goals. We then offer thoughts on potential lessons for young economists in China and the economics discipline.

1. Introduction

In this special issue of *China Economic Review*, the authors focus on how to address problems associated with helping young economists to develop their research agendas and to set standards for evaluating the record of publications of young faculty members in economics departments. The problem considered is whether, in the field today, the assessment of quality is based more on where papers are published than on their fundamental contribution to the development of knowledge of China's economy. More specifically, there is a growing belief by some in the field that, in many departments/colleges, there have been problems associated with discrimination in promotion and tenure decisions associated with overweighting the publication of research in Top-N journals rather than on giving credit for the work of researchers that makes impacts and does so efficiently (Heckman & Moktan, 2018). Interestingly, in their *Journal of Economic Literature* paper, Heckman and Moktan show that, despite the high credit given to those who publish in the top journals, the literature is clear that, in general, field journals have the most impactful papers. Although there are debates about the extent of this problem in the United States and Europe, in China, the potential problems in this regard are at least as severe as elsewhere in the world.

One of the main problems that arises is the intense competition for publishing in the limited number of journals with the associated issue of the criteria that need to be met before publication is considered. Moreover, due to the excessive influence of these top journals, these criteria for publication have been adopted by most economics journals. Although not exhaustive, these criteria include: (i) the need for the analysis to identify the causality of the factor that is being studied on the outcome of interest, (ii) that the paper's topic and/or methodology are novel, and (iii) the need for the paper to be comprehensive and subject to every conceivable robustness check. Further, although we do not focus on this here, there is another important issue that economists in China face—the added challenge of

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the sizeable premium given to research in the United States in Top-5 economics journals (Das, Do, Shaines, & Srikant, 2013).

What we would like to argue is that our ultimate objective is not to focus our efforts solely on writing papers that meet the three criteria (identification, novelty, and robustness). Indeed, the real objective of academics should be to try to conduct research that: (i) enhances our understanding of the world; (ii) helps to solve problems of society; and, most importantly, and, as such, the focus of this paper, (iii) contributes to knowledge that builds a foundation for even greater breakthroughs in the future on important issues. In the remainder of the paper, we call this set of three objective the *ultimate goals of academic research*. Moreover, we argue that it should be possible to do research and publish papers that: (i) are built around measuring correlations (instead of causation), (ii) are focused on replicating the research of others (e.g., in new samples or sample locations, with new measures of variables), and (iii) report novel data in a transparent, concise form that can lead to real contributions to our understanding of the world, help to solve problems, and contribute to knowledge building, i.e., be used to achieve the ultimate goals of academic research.

To support our arguments, we introduce the philosophy of publishing in another field: public health (although we could have chosen other fields, such as medicine, engineering, or hard sciences). We first show that the field of public health has developed a way of promoting publishing that is more successful in meeting the ultimate goals of academic research. We then describe some of the underlying principles that are accepted (expected, required) when one writes a paper for a public health journal. We then conclude with a discussion of lessons for economists.

2. Making an impact and efficient publication

We begin by asking which field makes a bigger impact (is more effective) and which field has a more efficient approach to publishing—economics or public health (or medicine or engineering). These are, of course, challenging questions to answer, as it is difficult to compare outcomes or impacts across these disparate fields of research. Therefore, we use two proxies. One metric that is available for both fields (economics and public health) is the impact factor of the journals in the respective fields (a measure closely related to citations in subsequent publications). The other is the lag in publishing time between submitting a manuscript to a journal and the paper's eventual publication (publication lag).

According to *Journal Citations Reports* (2010), when we compare the average impact factors of the economics field with those of public health (medicine/science), it is clear that, according to this metric, the impact of economic journals is lower than that of journals in a number of other selected fields. According to the *Journal Citations Reports*, the aggregate impact factor of economics journals was only 1.188 and the median impact factor, 0.750 in 2010. In contrast, the aggregate impact factor of public health journals in the same year was 2.312, more than twice as high, and the median impact factor was 1.512, again, twice as high as the same measure for economics journals. When looking at the aggregate impact factor of other fields, such as medicine (3.935), chemistry (4.299), or biotechnology (3.11), the impact factor scores are even higher. Beyond the *Journal of Citations Reports*, other observers also have documented the relatively low levels of citations for economists. *Althouse, West, Bergstrom, and Bergstrom* (2009) systematically review differences in impact factors across fields and found that citations in economics journals are almost always below those of public health, medicine, engineering, and the hard sciences.

Although impact factor scores can suggest a difference in overall impact, when these measures are combined with the time it takes for economists to take a paper from conception to submission to a journal to publication (publication lag), the efficiency of the economics field in terms of publishing appears even lower (*Guo, Li, & Yu, 2021*). Further, in terms of average times from submission to publication, the gap between economics and public health (and other fields) is even wider, with the publication lag for economics journals as much higher than those for public health journals.

Unfortunately, there is no single database of publication lags. A simple search on a journal-by-journal basis, however, supports the above findings. In the case of a public health paper submitted to *PLOS ONE*, for example, on average, the time from submission to acceptance is 43 days. In the case of a higher-tier public health journal (e.g., *Lancet Global Health*), the average time from submission to publication is only 35 days. Science journals (e.g., *Development*) have an even faster turnaround. Further, the time demands are not just on the journal editors and reviewers. Based on the authors' personal experience with a middle-level public health journal (i.e., *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*), when a revise-and-resubmit invitation is returned to the authorship team, we often are given only five days to make revisions and send it back. In the case of the most recent submission to the journal, the re-review (by the editors and reviewers) took only three days, and the paper was published three days after acceptance. This experience was not an outlier. There are slower public health journals, but all are much faster than are economics journals.

In the case of economics journals, the average time between submission and publication is much longer. On the website of Springer, a publisher of a number of economic journals (*Economic Theory*, *Experimental Economics*, *Journal of Economic Growth*, and many more), there is a message to potential authors that it takes reviewers and editors an average of four to eight months to review a paper during the first round, and, after resubmission, authors should expect another delay of two to four months. In the case of *American Economic Review*, the website says that the publication lag is between nine months and two years. *Ellison* (2000) claims that time lapses between submission and publication are similar for higher-, medium-, and lower-quality economic journals. We believe that most economists who are reading this paper would agree. As a result, it is clear that time spent on publishing papers per citation is much higher (that is, publishing is less efficient) for economists than for public health researchers (or for authors in the fields of science, medicine, and related areas).

More recently, *Brown and Whitton* (2019) used the database from 3ie, which focuses on development and international economic journals, including papers from *China Economic Review*, and found that the publication lag in economics are significantly longer than those in public health. In their work, their definition of publication lag is how long it takes for the findings to be publicly available after the end of data collection. Their findings indicate that the average publication lag for economics journals is 59 months, whereas for

public health journals, the average publication lag is 39 months.

3. Writing a public health paper: why do authors receive more citations

3.1. *And spend less time to get published?*

In this section, we explain the logic of how public health papers are designed and written and consider the breadth of allowable paper topics/methods that are considered publishable in public health journals. We include a discussion of (i) how these papers can be built around the measurement of correlations (instead of causation); (ii) how they can focus on repeating the research of others (albeit in new samples or sample locations, with new measures of variables; and (iii) how they report novel data in transparent and succinct forms that can produce a real contribution to our understanding of the world, help to solve problems, and contribute to knowledge building (i.e., how they can be used to achieve the ultimate goals of academic research).

3.2. *Writing a public health paper*

The writing of a public health paper is a fairly straightforward process. A typical paper has a four-part structure that is often mandated by journals. The sections include the introduction, data and methods, results, and discussion/conclusion.

The introduction begins like papers in most journals, but it is more limited in scope than is an economics paper. The first two to four (or so) paragraphs define the problem that is being addressed and present the literature on which the empirical work in the paper will focus (trying to confirm/illuminate/build on or overturn/negate). In many papers, there is a close correspondence between a paragraph in the introduction, one of the objectives of the paper (which are in the concluding paragraph of the introduction), and one of the main parts of the empirical analysis (which is empirically addressed in the results section and discussed in the discussion/conclusion section).

The data and methods section of a public health paper is often written in a formulaic way. In some journals, there will be a specific format that authors need to follow: sampling, data collection, variable definition, analytical methodology, ethical considerations, and internal review board approval—in that order. If the paper is based on a randomized controlled trial, there is also a section on the intervention, including the approach to randomization, balance, and attrition. In fact, there is nothing different here from economics papers, only that the data and methods sections are often more scripted and, as such, more predictable from a reader's point of view.

It is the results section that perhaps differs most when comparing a public health (medicine/science) paper with one in economics. In a public health paper, the results section is very short. The section moves from paragraph to paragraph in which the authors describe to the reader the main findings seen in each table. Moreover, a straightforward and simple description of the results in the paper's tables and figures are all that are allowed (often with strict limitations; e.g., some journals limit authors to a maximum of four tables and one figure; others might set a maximum of five or six tables or figures). Public health journals do not allow any interpretation of the results in the results section; nor is there comparison of reported results to the literature; there is no explanation of what the results may mean.

The results are explained and discussed in the next section: the discussion/conclusions. In public health papers, this section also has a predictable format. In the first paragraph (one or, at most, two), the main results of the previous section are summarized. The discussion then typically proceeds on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis from table to table. By referring to a corresponding paragraph that motivated the results presented in a table in the first place in the introduction, the authors tell the reader how their results should be interpreted vis-à-vis the rest of the literature that was cited in the introduction. In many cases, reviewers and editors will not let the authors cite new literature, i.e., literature that was not cited and motivated in the introduction. Hence, there is a close correspondence in the discussion with both the introduction and results.

Why do public health and medical papers take this approach? In several different interviews with public health and medical science researchers we have received the same explanation (although we cannot find it in written form). The underlying notion is that there are two subsets of readers that consume public health papers: medical personnel and public health practitioners, and public health research team members and other academics. The papers are organized to meet the needs of both types of readers.

In the case of doctors and public health practitioners, the format of public health papers is designed for those with busy schedules but for whom keeping up with the literature is important. Hence, these readers know that they can read the introduction, and, if the problem is of interest to them, they can jump to the discussion section (remember, the main results are always described in the first paragraph of the discussion section). This set of readers does not need to wade through the data and methods section or have to look at the details of the results. They will trust that the journal has ensured that the paper is scientifically sound. After reading the first paragraph of the discussion section, they can decide to read on and let the authors explain to them how the paper's findings build on and/or explain the literature that was cited in the introduction. These features enable medical and public health practitioners to keep up with the literature in a time-saving way, with the only assumption that the journal guarantees the quality of the work.

The other set of readers, interested researchers, use the paper in a different way (and in a way that is different from that of economists). Academic readers will read the paper's first three sections in order: introduction, data and methods, and results. Doing so allows the reader to understand the problem analyzed in the context of the previous literature, the approach of the authors, and the results, without having to read what the authors believe is the interpretation of the findings in the results section. The idea is that, given the introduction, data and methods, and results, the interested academic can stop (before reading the discussion section) and ask him or herself: "What is my interpretation of the results?" After thinking about how he or she might interpret the results, the reader can then continue to read the discussion to determine whether his or her interpretation was the same or different from that of the authors.

The second subsection of the last section of the paper is the conclusions. In this section, authors present what they believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of their papers. The final paragraph or two concerns the additional research needed and any lessons that might be useful for practitioners/policymakers.

One other prominent characteristic of public health papers is that they are often relatively short. As noted above, there are often limitations to the number of tables/figures. Paper length is often limited (e.g., to 3500, 5000, or 7500 words), and maximum limits are typically strictly enforced. Thus, paper topics need to be focused.

3.3. Nature of public health research

Although it is easy to see why delays between submission and publication are shorter (i.e., paper formatting is more uniform, and there are strict limits on paper length and the number of tables/figures), what is less clear is the reason that papers written in this way can have a higher impact factor. In this section, we discuss the different topics and approaches that are allowed in public health papers (some of which are discouraged in economics papers). Some of these insights are well accepted, while others are our own interpretation.

First, public health research welcomes studies that are able to identify causal links between independent and dependent variables, but the literature is equally willing to report correlations. In some cases, correlation-based studies have been influential and have had a positive effect on society. One of the canonical examples of this is the use of observed correlations between access to certain types of water sources and the outbreak of cholera. Snow did not understand the mechanism by which the disease was transmitted, but the evidence that he was observing in a crowded London neighborhood led him to believe that it was not due to breathing foul air. Based on the pattern of illness among residents, Snow hypothesized that cholera was spread by an agent in contaminated water. He first published his theory in 1849 in an essay, "On the Mode of Communication of Cholera" (Snow, 1849). Indeed, this not only led to the one of the first investments into a public clean water system (and a reduction in disease outbreaks), but it also was part of the evidence that Louis Pasteur relied on in his eventual discovery of germs (e.g., bacteria, viruses) more than a decade later (Feinstein, 2008).

Of course, public health researchers understand that there is a difference between correlation and causality. As long as papers make it clear that the measured relationship is an association and not a cause-effect linkage analysis, however, research that reports on correlative linkages can be published. The public health literature also often focuses on the strength of the relationship and compares the strength of correlations in their study (frequently reporting odds ratios instead of partial regression coefficients) against the strength observed in other studies.

So, of what use is information on correlative relationships if they are not causal? This is perhaps a question that would be asked by a student of economics. The answer is that, when correlations have been identified and are found in multiple studies in multiple sites and in multiple time periods, there is the belief that, knowledge about one factor provides knowledge about the other. Such information does not allow one to be able to necessarily control one factor by manipulating the other factor. Researchers in the field, however, agree that, in many cases, such information has brought an important relationship to light that can lead to the next step of research—deeper work that may be able to push the field forward and, in some cases, encourage researchers to try to identify causal relationships.

The focus on the importance of identifying a causal relationship in the economics literature has made it nearly impossible to publish papers that report only correlations. Thus, economists and students of economics often spend an enormous amount of time searching for, (sometimes) dreaming up, and (other times) inventing causal relationships that they can measure, and then use this strategy for publishing. Because there is such a large number of economists who are working on a limited set of topics, it is becoming increasingly difficult to develop an implementable dissertation topic that will have an identification strategy that is both doable and is deemed to be clever and competently executed by the field (that is, publishable).

Beyond increasing the time that it takes to publish, the strong focus on identification also may, in part, be an explanation for the low impact factors. Because many of the relationships that are being studied are not those that are prevalent in the world around us (the focus of a lot of public health papers), economists often are nudged into looking at less important (although identifiable) issues. Journals are full of papers based on experiments that examine an inherently unimportant issue, ingenious though the identification strategy may be. There also are a lot of clever economic papers that have found instrumental variables (IVs) that meet the criteria of identifying a causal relationship. In many cases, however, the IV and subsequent analysis can explain only an extremely small share of the dependent variable of interest. Thus the contribution of the research to knowledge building and/or formation of important policies is limited. Such papers are ends unto themselves and, hence, achieve low impact factors.

Another distinguishing characteristic of publishing in economic journals today is the emphasis on novelty, which, along with the limitations imposed by the need to identify causation, is also responsible for pushing forward a lot of low-impact research. If an important question has already been studied recently, economists today often discourage repetition. We ran into a prime example of this lately. We found an interesting paper that looks at how early populations grew and consolidated into nation-states (Allen, Bertazzini, & Heldring, 2020). Based on a series of natural experiments that spanned several thousand years, the authors conclude that there was a rise in the demand for government when the courses of major rivers shifted and populations were faced with a choice of migrating away or organizing to build and maintain systems of canals. The natural experiment in this case was one in which the natural (but unpredictable after centuries) change of the courses of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers led to the rise and fall of city-states in the lower reaches of the Euphrates Delta area. This was an innovative, natural experiment that provided insight into a number of early demographic/political economy phenomena. Of course, with an experiment that began thousands of years ago and lasted until 1950, years with a lot of poor-quality (although cleverly collected) data, there were many assumptions made in the telling of the story. To be clear, we describe this study in the spirit of taking nothing away from the authors of this groundbreaking paper.

How would researchers from different disciplines react if another similar dataset were discovered (or painstakingly constructed) from another country and another river system and set of cities but covered the same long time period (basically 3000 BCE to 1500 CE)? Public health researchers (and medical researchers and scientists) almost certainly would encourage the authors to try to replicate the results of the original paper, check the assumptions of the first research study, and compare correlative outcomes as well as cause-effect linkages. Two sets of observations are better than one. Notably, this might well be able to lay the foundation for the accumulation of knowledge in the future.

As it turns out, it came to one of our attention that a completely separate research team collected data of a similar phenomenon of the same historic time period but in a different setting (a different river in a different country). When one of the research team members who collected the second/new data, however, set reached out to an editor of a high-quality journal who was aware of the [Allen et al. \(2020\)](#) paper for advice on what might be of interest to the field, the person was told bluntly: “This is an interesting set of data. But you need to figure out another story and see if you can devise an alternative identification strategy. Nobody is interested in a replication.”

In other words, the view of economists (at least in the case of this editor) is most often to not replicate, as there is nothing novel. In contrast, the view of public health researchers is that replications are valuable and contribute knowledge to the field.

Of course, it has not always been like this in the field of economics, and there is still room for replication in some journals. For example, in considering the impact of the minimum wage on overall employment and hours worked, [Belman and Wolfson \(2014\)](#), based on a review of more than 200 papers (mostly from the 1990s and early 2000s), concluded that moderate increases in the minimum wage were a useful means of raising wages in the lower part of the wage distribution and had little or no effect on employment and hours. Given the importance of this topic in policy circles, only a body of work such as this could hope to be persuasive in pushing forward the minimum wage as a policy tool that provides solid benefits at a small cost. Clearly, at least in the past, having repeated studies that focus on a single economic question was a productive, impactful part of the field’s research strategy.

4. Lessons for economists

We do not criticize the efforts by economists to produce novel studies that evaluate issues that involve causality. Indeed, we run a group in China that is known for our in-the-field randomized controlled trials. We believe that the revolution in conducting in-the-field randomized controlled trials that was initiated by the Nobel Prize-winning work of the founders of the Poverty Action Lab at Harvard and MIT is immensely important. A large part of our annual budget and a significant share of the time of our group members and collaborators in China is spent on trying to conduct experiments that can definitively assign cause-and-effect relationships in the area of rural education, rural health, and early childhood education in rural environments. In other words, our research team and collaborators place immense value on high-quality economic studies that are novel and have strong identification strategies (especially when they are focused on issues of importance and have the ability to trigger policy change).

We publish only a share of our papers in economics journals, however. Particularly in the areas of rural health, public health, and early childhood development, we keep ourselves open to publishing in public health (and other related) journals. In fact, due to the nature of publishing in public health (or non-economics) journals, we publish more in journals outside of economics than we do in economics journals. As a result, our citation rates (and total citations) for our public health papers are much higher than those for our economics papers. From this perspective, it might be said that we are making a bigger impact through our public health papers than through our economics papers.

In fact, we believe that it is the combination of the two types of publications that is leading to the actual impacts. Over the past decade, our group has worked on a number of different issues and problems to which we have found solutions (or collaborated with those who are working on the same issues/problems). When you consider the body of work on a specific problem (e.g., malnutrition/anemia in rural schools and the positive impact of programs that provide iron supplements to students), we published five papers on the problem (in regard to five different provinces). We also initially published three papers that showed the *correlations* between anemia and poor grades in schools/poor standardized test scores. Once there appeared to be a problem, we then ran four large-scale randomized controlled trials to establish causation—in Northern Shaanxi, Southern Shaanxi, Ningxia, and Gansu provinces—that demonstrate the effects of vitamin supplements on falling anemia rates and rising test scores. So, what was the academic/publication impact? Not only did we publish 13 papers, several of which have received more than 50 citations, we also brought the research results to the attention of the government (who needed to see that this was a problem that appeared to affect learning in many different places and who discovered that there was a solution that would work). The real impact came shortly thereafter: In 2013, the national government launched a US \$3 billion/year national nutritious lunch program that covered 26 million rural students per day, which is still being implemented today.

Further policy-important results have come from such research in addition to that on nutrition in rural schools. We have run similar action programs (which produced a mix of public health and economic papers) on intestinal worms and learning, uncorrected myopia and learning, poor parenting practices and poor early childhood development, mental health issues in rural schools and learning, and more.

In the process of executing these research programs, the teams of collaborators in China put together packages of papers that were published in good public health journals and good economic journals. When these studies were described clearly, the promotion committees in the economics departments of some of the top schools in China (e.g., Peking University, Renmin University of China, China Agricultural University) promoted the young collaborators to associate and full professor positions with tenure.

To be clear, our research strategy is not something that our teams at Stanford and the University of North Carolina discovered and are doing on our own. In a recent Development Impact/World Bank blog by [McKenzie \(2018\)](#), there is a discussion about whether economists should put more emphasis on writing descriptive papers. Although there were differing opinions, quotes from the blog from

two distinguished social scientists, Chris Blattman (University of Chicago) and Karthik Muralidharan (University of California, San Diego), illustrated the need to emphasize impact over targeting publication of a cleverly identified paper. The main thrust of their comments were that the two types of studies (descriptive and cause-effect-analytical) are complements, not substitutes. Descriptive papers are often highly valued for the nature of the information that they can provide to the world in and of themselves. Beyond that, however, the facts in those papers can help to motivate a research program that will, for example, run experimental evaluations of promising approaches to improving service delivery to overcome social problems in developing countries.

The bottom line is that there are things that economists can learn from other disciplines. A research agenda should be about trying to make an impact and doing so efficiently. Traditional papers and their high standards are needed. Other types of papers, however, also should be considered. A good research program ultimately should be assessed on impact.

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