



Perspectives:

Be brave, make a real impact: Why the MEJPP should be one of your top publishing choices

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Abstract: In this opinion piece, we explore the pressures of publishing in peer-reviewed journals and the challenges faced by non-Western scholars. While publishing in Western journals is appealing, we discuss the complexities of the academic publishing industry. In particular, journal impact factor largely influences the decisions of what and with whom scholars ultimately publish. We argue that such a narrow pursuit influences scholars to publish topics of Western relevance – at the expense of local knowledge development – and unwittingly deprives communities of their own scientific discoveries, which are often funded by them to begin with. We make the case for why researchers should purposefully investigate topics of local importance, for local audiences, and make a local journal, like the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology one of their top publishing choices.

About the Authors: Dr. Louise Lambert is the Editor of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology (MEJPP), as well as researcher, professor and consultant in positive education and positive organizational psychology. She has lived in the UAE for almost 10 years. Dr. Meg A. Warren is a Board Member of the MEJPP, Professor of Management at Western Washington University, USA, as well as Past-President of the Work & Organizations Division of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), and Co-Founder and Associate Director of the Western Positive Psychology Association (WPPA). Her research includes positive approaches to diversity and inclusion, empowering work relationships, organizational virtuousness, as well as cultural influences on wellbeing.

The idea of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology (MEJPP) was born in 2014 at a Dubai café. It was created out of a love for positive psychology research and the Middle East region and a deep desire to spread the word regionally and internationally. At the time, there was no dedicated academic platform and voice for positive psychology in the Middle East. So we published our first issue in 2015 and continue to be the only journal in the region for positive psychology. The primary aim of the MEJPP is the development of an indigenous positive psychology in the Middle East/North Africa region and is focused on life satisfaction, subjective wellbeing and culture and its applications in the subdomains of positive education, positive media, positive clinical psychology, positive community development, positive health, as well as positive



organizational/workplace development and other related fields. We are especially interested in the development of an indigenous positive psychology whereby local constructs, measures, and theories, as well as novel findings that may go against the grain of mainstream psychology can claim a home of their own. We publish theoretical, conceptual, applied, empirical, quantitative, and qualitative research in any domain of positive psychology. The aim of the journal is to encourage critical analysis of issues relating to happiness, wellbeing, and culture in the region.

Since the journal's launch, we have published five years' worth of academic research articles, interviews, conference proceedings, perspectives, and regional updates in all or partial Arabic and English language. The journal's activities have also spurred the development of the first regional textbook in positive psychology (Lambert & Pasha-Zaidi, 2019) with the help of many of the best authors and editors featured in the journal (a perk of being part of this small but active community). Due to the energy generated by the journal, positive psychology in the Middle East has been the subject of regional and international conferences, and Board members have been invited to speak in universities and other platforms about the journal's contributions. The journal has spurred many conversations and debates, as well as new interest in what was previously an unknown field of psychology; all of which help build a groundswell of awareness about the science of wellbeing and its intellectual inquiry in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Kuwait and beyond.

Further, the MEJPP is an open-access online medium that is entirely free and charges neither publication nor access fees to readers or authors. Authors retain 100% copyright over their own work. We do not subscribe to a paywall or for-profit system. Its open-access platform is paid for by the Chief Editor personally to absolve others of the charge and which allows it to operate completely independently of any university, institution, or association. As such, we depend entirely on the dedication of volunteer reviewers, international and regional editors, and authors. Every email is answered, every submission given extensive feedback (whether it is accepted or not) and peer-reviewed by at least three scholars, every sentence and reference is checked manually. Because of this extensive personal support, sometimes even resulting in lengthy WhatsApp calls for more guidance, we give new researchers the confidence to submit their work and improve their research capability, something to which larger journals (and even institutions) do not dedicate resources. If scholars come forward with the need and desire to excel and learn, we embrace the challenge and support them to the best of our ability and resources.

In 2019, 72 new readers registered on our website (despite zero advertising) and a dozen new editors and reviewers came on board. We are also one of the few journals to have a 'feedback' feature where registered readers can communicate with authors directly. We add tremendous value to the positive psychology community and are looked to for regional academic and thought leadership in this regard; we have created research momentum and ignited a spirit of inquiry in researchers - regionally and internationally - and students alike. Further, the regional positive psychology community has quickly built itself around the journal adding further value in terms of partnerships and networking. Despite all of this, you might guess that operating a journal has its challenges beyond merely working late nights when everyone else is having fun. We work alongside larger journals and within an international publishing system that is tied to journal and



institutional ranking systems, which put tremendous pressure on researchers to make difficult publishing choices.

Language of Choice

Despite Arabic being the dominant language of discourse across the MENA region, English is considered the default, universal language and standard for excellence across scientific and professional pursuits (Bornmann, Leydesdorff, & Krampen, 2012; Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, de Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015). In fact, more than 90% of indexed social science journals use all or some English (Bornmann et al., 2012). In a globalized and technologically connected world, there are viable reasons for the dominance of English in research pursuits and the production of knowledge. A unilingual research ecosystem reduces the unnecessary duplication of efforts and settles territorial disputes over who discovers and develops findings first, allowing the focus to remain on the production of knowledge (Gordin, 2015). However, the unified simplicity of this international English-dominant system comes at a cost. English is not the language of the majority of researchers in the MENA region (nor around the world) and this is a problem in the successful publication and production of the work of local scholars (Lages, Pfajfar, & Shosham, 2015). Non-English research is ignored, dismissed or downgraded (Arnett, 2008); conversely, much English research is often misunderstood by non-English scholars. Yet, the burden of learning English in terms of effort and time falls to the non-English majority and the odds are stacked against non-English researchers from the start.

At the MEJPP, we are keenly aware of this issue and it is why we solicit and publish both Arabic and English submissions. Yet, because the language of science is English, and English-language publications are encouraged by most educational institutions (it boosts their rankings), researchers are dissuaded from publishing in Arabic. This may explain why we receive so few submissions in Arabic. Instead, Arabic researchers opt to publish in English which may be a second or even third language, and although there are many stellar researchers in the region, because of the struggle to publish in English, they are deterred from publishing at all. When we receive such submissions, we devote significant time and attention to them, not only providing developmental feedback to improve the quality of the writing, but also pointing to (sometimes even finding, listing, and citing) relevant theories and constructs that can strengthen their contributions and increase the impact. We also help to build capacity in the use of statistical methods and offer extensive feedback on how to shape and structure studies. This is far beyond what most academic peer-reviewed journals offer; we know this from our own experience publishing in and serving on editorial boards of other journals.

Many journals regularly reject even high-quality submissions in order to boost journal rankings (because high rejection rates are viewed as indicators of journal prestige). In contrast, rather than summarily rejecting papers that hold promise but need some work, MEJPP goes above and beyond to provide the support and feedback necessary to transform the paper into a high-quality publication. Other journals often direct international scholars to third party language editing services prior to submission which places a significant financial burden on the researcher without any indication of whether this would lead to acceptance of their manuscript. In contrast, we offer



feedback and assistance as part of the review process, which is therefore, free to authors and accompanied by the assurance that if authors satisfactorily addressed all revisions, their paper would be accepted for publication. Although this kind of support is invaluable for developing regional scholars, it is also one of the reasons why we were rejected for inclusion in SCOPUS (an indexing standard that depends on Journal Impact Factor) this year. Still, we stand by our primary commitments and vision for positive psychology research in MENA - by providing an accessible and supportive platform, and strengthening the research “muscle” of regional scholars. So, we will continue to forge ahead undeterred.

The Truth About Impact Factor: What Is It, How It Works, and Should You Care?

As journals are a forum for the dissemination of knowledge and serve a key role in the evaluation of research, certain criteria exist to help determine their quality, usually measured via Journal Impact Factor (JIF). Created in the 1960s by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), the JIF was a way to determine which journals were most important in their respective disciplines. The JIF is the ratio of the number of citations received by an article published in a particular journal in one year to the number of articles published by that journal in the preceding two years. Simply, if the MEJPP had a JIF of 36, it would mean in the past two years, our articles were cited approximately 36 times each. We heartily agree with other scholars that this is a flimsy standard of excellence (see Lariviere et al., 2016 for a thorough critique and proposal for a new system, which was rejected by for-profit Thompson Reuters which bases their business model on rankings). Yet, this system contributes to the higher status of larger journals and increases with the number of journals published in a particular discipline and the number of articles published in a specific journal (Cameron, 2005).

Recalculated annually, articles that are highly cited can raise the JIF of a journal in any given year. The result is that journals may nudge or even pressure authors to cite other papers published in their journal, or authors may self-cite excessively, contributing to an inflated JIF for the journal in which their article appears (Bartneck & Kokklemans, 2011). Chorus and Waltman (2016) suggest that journals often request that authors frame their submissions in relation to recently published papers from that journal, or accept manuscripts upon the condition that authors cite them. Seasoned authors themselves often pre-emptively and gratuitously include published papers from that journal to increase their chances of publication. Not surprisingly, Chorus and Waltman (2016) found that since 2000, a significant increase in journal self-citation malpractice has been observed.

Although the JIF serves as an indicator for the quality of the journal in which research is published, it does nothing to evaluate the quality of the research itself, and the scientific or social impact of a publication. JIF conflates article quality with journal name. In effect, we judge the brand of the journal and not the study design, significance, or impact of the article itself; we are prey to luxury marketing. If vanity were the only issue, it would not be such a problem. Unfortunately, JIFs are used in academia for decisions related to hiring, tenure, contractual decisions, salaries, and research funding (Lehmann et al., 2006; Ravenscroft, Liakata, Clare, & Duma, 2017). As a result, there has been a steady rise in the obsession with JIFs, affectionately



called ‘impact factor mania’ globally (Casadevall & Fang, 2014), which is now spreading to the MENA region as institutions climb their own ranking schemes.

Journals create the illusion of scarcity by rejecting 80% or more of the submissions they receive, increasing their sense of exclusivity. This, in turn, elevates their status as a privileged golden club (Reich, 2013) to which we and our institutions aspire to belong and towards which we exert effort to freely offer our labour. In fact, researchers waste months, sometimes years, as they submit their work to top tier journals one at a time (as required and monitored), making their way down the JIF list until a paper is accepted, robbing science and their communities of their findings and making science less timely, relevant, and effective overall (Ioannidis, 2016; Sekercioglu, 2013). These voluntary publication delays hinder the progression of science and make every publication a never-ending job as the literature review must be periodically updated for every new resubmission, and the risk of being beaten to publication of a finding by others increases as time goes on. This low acceptance rate is confused with merit and distinction, hitting us particularly hard when we are rejected, and artificially inflating our sense of self when we are accepted, as the payoffs to one’s career are very real (Franzoni, Scellato, & Stephan, 2011; Young, Ioannidis, & Al-Ubaydli, 2008).

Being researchers ourselves, we understand the hesitation around publishing in a non-SCOPUS journal that does not have a high JIF. A lot of work goes into planning, conducting, analyzing, and writing up a study. In studies like mine (Lambert), where it can take up to two years (or more) to collect a big enough sample size and see the effects of interventions over time, I am not very excited about the prospect of handing over my work to a journal, where my publication may not “count.” But we also believe that academics see the value of smaller journals as outlets for publishing research on topics they are interested in, rather than popular topics that are likely to get published. Scholars probably would not mind submitting their work to smaller journals if university faculty promotion systems were more oriented towards social impact and the advancement of real scientific knowledge rather than institutional rankings and professional status.

Another key drawback of overemphasizing JIF is that it prevents researchers from taking risks and investigating topics of local relevance as these are generally not topics that bigger journals (by virtue of being American, European or international) are interested in or reward. The JIF robs local hubs of knowledge production as researchers self-select away from understanding local phenomena, and designing and testing relevant interventions. MEJPP and others like it provide tremendous value for communities by rewarding researchers who take a chance and investigate concepts from within the culture and/or nation with the intent that the information produced will be relevant to the region (Bornmann et al., 2012; Crotty, 2018). It is one of the few outlets in which local communities can see research about themselves.

Publishing Open-Access



The MEJPP is an open-access journal, which can be accessed, downloaded, and widely shared, whereas for-profit pay-for-access journals¹ block such accessibility (van Noorden, 2017). Through ‘paywalls,’ for-profit journals block access by charging a significant fee per article (usually around \$40US per article), which prevents non-university affiliated researchers, practitioners and even government officials who rely on research to direct and make policy, from accessing these journals. It also means that unless someone is willing to pay to access research, the work of researchers goes unnoticed, particularly by those who could benefit from it. This further creates a situation where access to information is a possibility only for the elite. Many universities themselves such as the University of California (Office of the President, February 28, 2019) are terminating their subscription fees to these publishers as the costs have become exorbitant even for them. It is especially galling for institutions to pay such fees when it is the universities that directly fund the work of researchers who, in turn, freely contribute their work to such journals.

In contrast, open-access journals democratize the industry as they are independent and accountable to communities, readers and authors, i.e., stakeholders, rather than publishers, Boards of Directors, and owners, i.e., stockholders. Researchers have a vested interest in supporting such journals as they are the most accessible and sometimes, the only platforms for the publication of local work in a particular domain, ensuring their work will be seen and used. In the GCC region, not only national researchers but also expatriate researchers have a vested interest in developing and producing local knowledge. The nations that expatriates have called home for so long have supported their careers; their academic contributions should help stimulate the growth of a regional positive psychology.

The rise of smaller journals is also shifting the dominant focus of research production to smaller regional points of interest around the world and away from singular poles of influence, like the USA and Europe. This decentralization is also happening as a result of the Internet’s democratizing effects in terms of who holds the right to produce and disseminate information. Consequently, the number of open-access journals is increasing (Laakso et al., 2011), many of which were started as a response to local work being judged as unrepresentative and irrelevant to the Western mainstream. I (Lambert) am reminded of a rejection I received when submitting a UAE based study years ago; the rejection was based on nothing else but, “the U. S. E. is of no relevance to our readers” (the typo was the reviewers’ and meant to be U. A. E.). I mentally replied, “well, your stuff is of no relevance to us either!”, but said thanks instead. The MEJPP was born not long after. While more than 90% of the published research emerges from the US, it only accounts for 5% of the world’s population (Arnett, 2008, 2009; Bermant, Talwar, & Rozin, 2011). It is absurd that the task of showing relevance falls on non-Western based researchers, rather than obliging Western localized researchers to demonstrate their relevance for non-Western audiences. It is further ludicrous that we are forced to compete in the same pool when our nations differ culturally, developmentally, historically, religiously, politically, and practically.

¹ Researchers may want to understand how their work, undertaken for free to journals, is used to turn billions in profits for publishers and then sold back to institutions which funded it to begin with through library database subscriptions; see Buranyi, 2017; MacDonald & Eva, 2018).



Making a Social Impact

The move away from academic impact towards a demonstration of how one's work has social impact is also growing (Bornmann, 2012; Donovan, 2008; Park, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The Leiden Manifesto (see Hicks et al., 2015) and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) are two examples. Frustrated by the mania of metrics, the Manifesto puts forward ten principles, one of which includes measuring the performance of the researcher against the tasks or goals set forth for social development, policy, or industry need. So far, the UK and Australia have made concrete moves for research to help advance social goals (Hicks et al., 2015). Similarly, the DORA declaration (www.ascb.org/dora/), that a number of high profile US organizations and individuals have adopted, invites researchers to reject JIFs as the sole criterion for the evaluation of academic success. This may allow valuing of quality research on a diverse range of topics otherwise overlooked due to its non-inclusion in high-impact journals. Thus, it can deepen, broaden, and boost the relevance of research, not only in positive psychology, but all disciplines worldwide (Schmid, 2013). Researchers should be aware that such movements are underway and advocate for their adoption, particularly when it comes to institutions making decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion, which affect the livelihoods of all academics.

Vision for the Future of the Science

As the first journal in the MENA region dedicated to the science of subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction, quality of life, flourishing, and social impact, we would like to put forth a vision, not only for us as a journal, but for research and researchers in the MENA. We envision a future in which regional academic institutions could incentivize researchers to produce at least a single annual paper derived from real social need and which contributes to local science and knowledge production. We encourage institutions, industry, business, government, non-profits, as well as stakeholders to put their minds and resources together to identify the most complex challenges they are facing, and enlist researchers to help solve them. Although theory and conceptual work is a necessary first step, through the MEJPP, we want to nudge researchers to push themselves further and develop concrete solutions that improve lives, change the world (and more importantly, the region), and the state of science. We hope that this would limit the present practice of researchers undertaking topics of little interest or value to community stakeholders, and encourage better use of research capacity, institutional funds, and public finances (Chalmers, Essali, Rezk, & Crowe, 2012; Moriarty, 2016). This would also have a positive effect on the competitive climate that reigns in universities as a result of the "publish or perish" culture that is having a disastrous effect on the mental health and happiness of academics.

Toward a Meaningful and Happy Scientific Career

While considerable research now focuses on the mental health of students in academia (see Bira, Evans, & Vanderford, 2019; Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Rawlins, 2019 for a quick view), the mental health of faculty members is rarely discussed. Just like the fashion and music industry, and the entrepreneurial world is opening up about suicide,



depression, and anxiety, a recent spate of articles is exploring the mental health toll of academic publishing (and related academic work). Working in hyper-competitive environments where the dollar figure of one's grants and the number of publications overrides and defines one's career entirely, does not bode well for productivity itself or career longevity. Bullying, unethical and cut-throat practises, and lack of managerial support or collegial camaraderie erode workplace wellbeing at a rapid rate (Anonymous, 2018a, 2018b; Ryan & Daly, 2019; Woolston, 2018), while stress, burnout, disengagement, and turnover seem to be the norm in many institutions.

The pressure to publish, as well as the fear of becoming irrelevant and overlooked in one's field can be crippling as career promotions, job security, and salaries depend on it. Unlike other industries, academics not only have to do their jobs, they must also compete with others in their field internationally, as publications are used to rank the prestige and status of researchers as well as their institutions. Being asked, "What's your impact factor?" at conferences, akin to how many "Followers" one has on Instagram, does little for one's professional or personal self-esteem (DePellgrin & Johnston, 2015). Unsurprisingly, a study (Tijdkink, Vergouwen, & Smulders, 2013) in the Netherlands with 400 professors showed that 54% felt the pressure to publish had become excessive, with almost a quarter showing signs of burnout, physical and emotional exhaustion as well as negative work attitudes and social alienation, which affected their ability to publish and teach. In contrast, the authors noted the rate of burnout in the average population to be 8 to 10%.

Beyond the obsession with JIFs, grown professionals, similar to youth, are not immune to the pressures of "likes." Altmetrics, an alternative score tracking the attention aimed towards research output, counts how many times an article is mentioned on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, other social media outlets, the nightly news, or print media. Not replacing JIFs, the Almetric score is nevertheless an additional symbol of academic worth based on "Likes." While not an indicator of quality or comprehension, Altmetrics nonetheless reveals whether research is downloaded, posted, re-tweeted, or commented on and has generated interest. Where Altmetrics scores become harmful is when, like JIFs, they are the sole measure of whether work is of high quality, and adds one more competitive layer under which academics must remain relevant. In Reichel's 2017 interview with the 2008 Chemistry Nobel Laureate winner, Dr. Martin Chalfie was adamant that what matters is a love of science. He implored researchers, especially junior scholars, to worry less about publishing the "right" or "best" paper; instead, to pursue topics of personal interest and social value rather than only those that will get published and produce no innate joy. We join Chalfie in encouraging you, our scientific readers, to be a little braver and remember why we do what we do; to contribute to local knowledge and advance the cause of humanity. Impact factors may influence hiring, tenure and promotion, but if you want to make social impact, find meaning, and change the world, consider the MEJPP your intellectual home.

*For more on the background of the publishing industry and its effects on research overall, read the whole chapter (excerpts of which have appeared here): Lambert, L., Pasha-Zaidi, N., & Crookes, A. E. (2019). Because a citation and a contribution are not the same: A path for (positive) psychology research. In L. Lambert & N. Pasha-Zaidi (Eds.), *Positive psychology in the Middle East/North Africa: Research, policy, and practise* (pp. 183-205). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.



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