

The SRCD Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form should not include questions about personal beliefs, activities or life-style

Last week I was required to sign a *Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form* for an accepted paper to be published in *Child Development*.

I have difficulty to understand why the following is included in the COI form and why it would be relevant for scientific integrity:

'Other non-financial sources of conflict or bias, such as personal or political beliefs in direct conflict with the topic being researched'

This requirement is operationalized in questions 8 and 9 of the disclosure form:

'8. Other conflicts: Please identify any political or other personal beliefs or affiliations that may contribute to a perception of bias regarding the topic of the work.

9. Other relationships: Please list other activities and relationships that an editor or reader could perceive to be a potential influence on the research you directly or indirectly referenced in this manuscript.'

I do not see why my political or personal beliefs or (non-financial) affiliations might in any way be relevant to the evaluation of my scientific work on whatever topic. This type of questions on so-called non-financial conflict of interest seem to me to infringe on my right to have a personal life, with private political or religious beliefs and related activities.

Scientific work should be evaluated on its own merits as it is reported in manuscripts, not in light of whether the author would be living together with a partner without being married, or having political ideas considered to be extremely liberal or socialist in the Trump era. Voting behavior is a personal choice that should not be required to be communicated to scientific editors or made public in any way, and the same is true for religious, anti-religious, or humanist persuasions. Scientific authors should not allow to be screened for such beliefs or the absence thereof during the process of evaluating their scientific work as publishable or in the process to be published. This is at the core of *academic freedom* and more broadly freedom of speech or freedom to be silent about personal beliefs.

Newton believed in astrology, Einstein was a pacifist during war-time, Heidegger was a Nazi, Sartre a Maoist, Darwin has been accused of being an atheist and an anti-feminist, Watson (discoverer of the double helix) a sexist like Trivers, and many other scientists who did great work: whatever we feel about such beliefs, as scientists (authors, reviewers, editors) we should try to evaluate their work as part of *World 3* in the sense of Karl Popper, without ties to the person who conducted a study and wrote a paper: not the author but the text and the data reported in the text are the only important object of scrutiny. Otherwise there is a risk of a new kind of McCarthyism of which Linus Pauling like many other scientists did suffer in the fifties, or closer to modern times: a risk of Erdogan-type of persecution experienced by our scientific colleagues in Turkey, dismissed without due process from their tenured positions because of their political ideas.

When I reported this issue to Lisa Braverman, Managing Editor of the SRCD, she responded: *"If an author is publishing a paper on political engagement and has made it his/her lifelong*

goal to promote political activism, that is something that should be disclosed. We want to support the transparency of readers having all available information, not police and judge researchers.” I disagree --and at the same time I greatly appreciate Lisa’s invitation to bring my issue to the task force, the SRCDD Publication Committee and other relevant committees!

Why do I disagree? To draw a parallel: if an author is an active but ‘hidden’ homosexual and submits a paper to one of the SRCDD journals on parental homosexuality and how this (positively) affects child development, he or she should admit his or her homosexuality on the Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form —even though he or she originally came from a country (to which he or she might want to return) in which such a personal orientation is forbidden by law (in some African and Arabic countries death penalties have been sentenced to homosexuals). Even in some Western countries individuals do not go public with their homosexual orientation because they are afraid of explicit or implicit discrimination: should they be forced to come out on the Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form? If not admitting to be homosexual on the form he or she would sign a lie, wouldn’t it? One could think of numerous examples of a similar kind which all infringe on basic privacy rights, e.g. being abused in childhood and studying the prevalence of child abuse, or having AIDS and reporting on a study on HIV-infected children’s development, or being active in Amnesty International and presenting a scientific critique on a flawed study on Black Peter (one of my own sources of inspiration for this commentary –even though I do not consider it to be an example of a potential conflict of interest).

Requiring to declare potential non-financial conflicts of interest concerning private beliefs and practices in case of scientific publishing might be in conflict with Article 12 (“No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation...”), Article 18 (“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ...”), and Article 19 (“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference...”) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Furthermore, the admission of such personal beliefs and activities is a useless requirement for a disclosure form because these potential conflicts of interest cannot be defined in any concrete way, be reliably identified in self or others, or sanctioned consistently, because standards for non-financial conflict of interest are way too vague.

Ten years ago the *PLoS Medicine* Editors acknowledged this problem in their paper Making Sense of Non-Financial Competing Interests (*PLoS Med* (2008)5(9): e199. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0050199>) when they wrote: “Establishing such a standard is by no means easy. The *BMJ* abandoned attempts to require declarations of non-financial competing interests (it now simply encourages disclosure) because the definitions were disputed and the policy unworkable ... Neither *JAMA*, *Nature Medicine*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, nor *Science* require disclosure of private interests. A recent discussion on the listserv of the *World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)*, whose editorial policy committee ... is currently updating its conflict of interest policy, affirms how difficult it is to define and regulate private interests. In the end, because WAME members felt that non-financial conflicts were so nebulous and unquantifiable, WAME decided that the policy should remain focused on financial interests.”

Despite these reservations however, in recent years journals and scientific societies seem to change course, and to move into the opposite direction of an ever more important place for disclosure of possible non-financial conflicts of interest in their publication guidelines. What

seems to happen here is that we try to solve the transparency and reproducibility crisis in science with transparency about the authors' personal life and beliefs. This might be the reason that recently the *WAME* "has also included non-financial conflicts of interest (or the appearance of one) related to scholarly commitment: "intellectual passion," ...; personal relationships ...; political or religious beliefs ...; and institutional affiliations" (<http://www.wame.org/about/wame-editorial-on-coi>).

In an Editorial of 31 January 2018, the *Nature* journals are announced to 'tighten rules on non-financial conflicts' as authors 'will be asked to declare any interests that might cloud objectivity.' The reasoning points explicitly to the transparency and reproducibility crisis: "Numerous studies have demonstrated that financial competing interests in industry-sponsored research have the potential to introduce bias into study design, analysis and reporting; by comparison, the impact of non-financial competing interests has been much less well studied. Nevertheless, it is fair to expect that these associations could colour study design, interpretation and the subsequent reception of published findings; to guard against that, a number of clinical and biomedical journals have required disclosures of non-financial interests for several years. *At a time when there is increasing scrutiny of the scientific process, transparent disclosures that allow readers to form their own conclusions about the published work are the best way to maintain public trust.*" (italics added by me) (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-01420-8>)

Public trust instead of scientific progress seems to be the main goal even for the prestigious *Nature* journals. However, the only solution for reproducibility is detailed description of research design and procedures, and on that basis the independent conduct of *replication after replication after replication*, to establish whether we have a real, reproducible finding or a false-positive. In this context of bold conjectures and tenacious refutation efforts (*Popper*) we do not need confessions about the authors' private life styles and belief systems. Should we now feel that Darwin's evolutionary theory is suspicious because he had Victorian beliefs about women? I hope not, as his theory deserves to be critically scientifically evaluated totally independent of his (admirably courageous) personality and personal life. Whether such evaluation is conducted by atheists or creationists should not matter for the final scientific verdict resulting from scientific research and debate.

More importantly maybe is the problem of not knowing what exactly influential belief systems are in the production and reproduction of scientific knowledge, especially when we have to assume -on empirical grounds—that *implicit biases* might influence our behavior and that at the same time we are unable to report on them. We might have outgrown explicit Victorian ideas about women (although locker-room banter tells another story), but there might still be more covert and implicit prejudices that we are unaware of. If it is impossible to report potential non-financial conflicts of interest objectively and exhaustively we better make our science independent of such necessarily failing efforts to list these conflicts in disclosure forms, and we better rely on systematic replication efforts to enhance transparency and reproducibility of our research.

Although PLOSOne threatens with the strongest sanctions ("*Failure to declare competing interests can result in immediate rejection of a manuscript*") the PLOSOne editors seem to acknowledge the problem of self-disclosure: "Everyone has competing interests; financial or private, or both. The main problem with competing interests is nondisclosure.... As with all competing interests, it is not possible to reliably judge our own biases. Instead, declaring them allows others to make informed judgments about whether the competing interests are

relevant or not.” This latter part of the reasoning is a classic non-sequitur: if we cannot disclose all our potentially conflicts of interest because the cultural or political context makes it too dangerous to disclose, or because we have implicit biases that we are unable to recognize, the readers will not be able to make informed judgments. The only way out of this dilemma is to scrutinize and replicate the study to find out whether findings are reproducible. Thus, *papers should only be evaluated on basis of the coherence of the theories involved, the validity of the data collected, and the logic of the reasoning used to connect theories and data*. In World 3 the authors’ personal beliefs have become obsolete, and critical debate and replication become essential. The SRCD Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form should therefore not include questions about personal beliefs, activities or life-style.

I hope the current *Full Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form* can be considered part of World 3, and be subjected to the critical debate and scrutiny that such an important document deserves. Academic freedom is at stake.

I am grateful to have been given the chance to express my thoughts about this issue to the relevant SRCD fora and committees, even without explicit disclosure of my potential conflicts of interest.

Marinus van IJzendoorn
March 2018