

Would Adopting Triple-Blind Review Increase Female Authorship in Interdisciplinary Journals?

A Comment on Hassoun et al.*

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In the article “The Past 110 Years: Historical Data on the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy Journals,” Hassoun et al. claim that there is a connection between triple anonymous review and the proportion of women authors in interdisciplinary journals. However, the sample size of interdisciplinary journals using triple-blind review practice in the analysis is 1. In addition, the sole interdisciplinary journal claimed to be triple-blind, the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, is not and has not been triple-blind. The finding that interdisciplinary journals publish the greatest proportion of women authorship when practicing triple anonymous review is thus unwarranted.

In their important article, Nicole Hassoun et al. considered publication rates by gender in philosophy journals.¹ The authors claimed, among other things, that “Interdisciplinary journals publish the greatest proportion of women authorships when practicing Triple Anonymous review (at 39 percent).”² Later in the article, they also say that “our new analysis revealed the surprising result that Interdisciplinary journals utilizing Triple Anonymous review . . . publish the greatest proportion of women authors overall.”³

* We would like to thank anonymous associate editors of *Ethics* for their useful comments on this article.

1. Nicole Hassoun et al., “The Past 110 Years: Historical Data on the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy Journals,” *Ethics* 132 (2022): 680–729.

2. *Ibid.*, 684.

3. *Ibid.*, 705.

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However, their analysis does not warrant such claims. According to table B1 in their article, the authors' findings regarding the authorship of women in interdisciplinary journals are based on a single journal: the *Journal of Medical Ethics* (hereafter referred to as *JME*). There are two problems. First, the sample size of interdisciplinary triple-blind journals is 1; thus, it is misleading to use the plural in this context. Second, and more importantly, the characterization of the *JME* as a triple-blind journal is mistaken.

In the pages of the *JME*, it is stated that the journal's current review practice (during the editorship of Professor John McMillan) is double-blind; both the reviewer and the author are anonymous to each other. To confirm the journal's previous review practices, we contacted former editors in chief of the *JME*. Professor Søren Holm, who coedited the journal with Professor John Harris during 2004–11, confirmed in a personal correspondence that the journal was using double-blind review practice during their editorship. Professor Julian Savulescu, the other author of this commentary, edited the *JME* during 2001–4 and again in 2011–18. The journal was using double-blind review practice during his tenure as the editor in chief of the *JME*.

However, during the last years of Savulescu's tenure, there were discussions among the editors of the *JME* regarding whether the journal should adopt triple-blind review practice. In 2014, Savulescu, the editor in chief of the *JME* at the time, stated in an article published in *JME*,

Two articles address issues my team and I personally face. Wendler and Miller in "The ethics of peer review in bioethics" argue, in addition to an obligation to peer review, that peer review in bioethics ought to be double blind (see page 697). This is the current approach of the *JME*, though it is against the policy of our parent journal, the *BMJ*. In fact, the editorial team of the *JME* has been debating, and is divided over, whether our policy should be triple-blinded, that is, editors blinded to the identity of contributors. There are arguments for and against; at present, editorial meetings and discussion of papers are generally conducted without knowledge of the author's identity.⁴

Around 2014, the editors of the *JME* were discussing whether they should move to the practice of triple-blind review. Some of the associate editors were in favor of moving to triple-blind review, but some were against it. The draft discussion was never published, and officially the journal remained double-blind.⁵

4. Julian Savulescu, "Why Philosophy Is Important to Medical Ethics," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40 (2014): 649–50, 650.

5. The authors have reported that they contacted the journals to ask about their blinding practices rather than relying on the information available online. The respondent of the

Be that as it may, the editors in chief of the *JME* during 2000–2009 confirmed that the journal was not triple-blinded during those years. Since the *JME* was not using triple anonymous review during that time, the claim of Hassoun et al. that interdisciplinary journals using triple-blind review publish the greatest proportion of women authorship is unwarranted because the *JME* was the only interdisciplinary journal in their study that was listed as using triple-blind review.

Therefore, further research is needed to confirm or refute the claim that triple-blind review increases female authorship in (philosophy-related) interdisciplinary journals. This task might be difficult since there are only a few, if any, interdisciplinary journals that use triple-blinding. At least in the field of medical ethics and bioethics, we are not aware of a single journal that uses triple-blind review. For instance, none of the twenty bioethical journals with the highest h5-index use triple-blinded review practice. Of course, bioethics is not the only interdisciplinary field that covers philosophical topics and methods; however, it is hard to find a journal at the intersection of philosophy and other disciplines that uses triple-blind review. For example, top journals in philosophy and technology (e.g., *Ethics and Information Technology* and *Philosophy and Technology*) and business ethics (e.g., *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business Ethics Quarterly*) use double-blind review practice. Therefore, while more research on this topic is pressing and important, and while new data could shed some light on the publication rates by review types in interdisciplinary journals, we have not gathered such data since we could not find philosophy-related interdisciplinary journals using triple-blind review practices.

Hassoun et al. might deny having explicitly drawn any causal claims between triple-blind review practice and number of female authors, that is, they might deny having actually claimed that triple anonymous review has the effect of increasing female authorship in interdisciplinary journals. Hassoun et al. write, “We should emphasize that these results are descriptive, not causal. We do not claim causal connections between the response variables and the predictor variables.”⁶ But even if this reading is correct, it is still misleading to refer to interdisciplinary journals (plural) where there was a sample size of just 1. Second, their finding that “Interdisciplinary journals publish the greatest proportion of women authorships when practicing Triple Anonymous review” is unwarranted since the only interdisciplinary journal was mistakenly classified as using triple-blind review practice.

However, the authors also say that they “find the results suggestive and important for further discussions around this topic.”⁷ They continue,

JME (whoever he or she may have been) may have been confused by these discussions and failed to give accurate information to the authors.

6. Hassoun et al., “Past 110 Years,” 702.

7. *Ibid.*

“In light of these results [top philosophy journals practicing triple anonymous review publish a lower proportion of women authors than those with other forms of anonymity or those that do not rely on anonymous submission processes], some might argue that we should give up Triple Anonymous review to increase representation (a contentious suggestion, to say the least!), but our new analysis revealed the surprising result that Interdisciplinary journals utilizing Triple Anonymous review and Nontop Philosophy journals utilizing Double Anonymous review publish the greatest proportion of women authors overall.”⁸ This quote seems to suggest precisely that the authors think that the findings constitute evidence that triple-blind review practice is beneficial in increasing rates of female authorship in interdisciplinary journals. If the authors were suggesting that their data support a causal connection between the triple anonymous review practice and the number of female authors in interdisciplinary journals, this is problematic for the reasons we have presented: the sample size was just 1, and the characterization of that sole journal as triple-blind was mistaken to begin with.

8. *Ibid.*, 705.