

A Perspective on Publishing Justice: Navigating Ethics, Bias and Accountability in Philippine Social Science Review

¹Jeanne Alejo Abitago and ²Nestor Calis Nabe

¹Asian Council of Science Editors, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

²University of Mindanao, Davao, Philippines

Corresponding Author: Jeanne Alejo Abitago (j.alejo.473380@umindanao.edu.ph)

ABSTRACT

Peer review is the cornerstone of credible scientific publishing and a vital mechanism for ensuring evidence-based public safety policies in the Philippines. However, the current state of the peer review process in the country is undermined by systemic challenges, including resource scarcity, ethical vulnerabilities, entrenched biases, and weak accountability mechanisms. These issues not only diminish the quality and credibility of research but also widen the gap between academic knowledge and its practical application in policy-making. This paper critically examines these challenges through a review of the literature and a contextual analysis of the Philippine academic environment. It proposes actionable strategies to achieve publishing justice, including institutional capacity-building, ethical reform, and responsible integration of emerging technologies such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). A key recommendation is the establishment of a Centralized Board for Justice Research Publishing to enforce standards, promote ethical scholarship, and ensure that social science research remains impact, inclusive, and aligned with national development priorities.

KEYWORDS

Peer review, publishing justice, Philippine social science, research ethics, accountability

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INTRODUCTION

In fields of public safety, where evidence-based policy is essential for advancement, social science research requires rigorous scrutiny. In a country like the Philippines, relevant research is of great value and importance. Peer review is a human process in which scholars submit their original work or research discoveries to other educated individuals who are experts in the same academic field¹. This pillar of contemporary science fundamentally relies on evaluating submitted works against established standards; an absence of rigor in this evaluation would undeniably compromise quality, the field, and integrity².

This critical process is widely accepted as an irreplaceable and fundamental aspect of modern scientific publishing, underpinning essential quality control by aiming to elevate scientific literature to the highest standards, preventing the publication of unsound or misleading information³. However, despite its crucial role, recent studies highlight that peer review is "far from perfect", with a "troubling gap" in its efficacy, as evidenced by a small fraction of reviewers recommending rejection for papers later retracted.



Beyond its fundamental definition, peer review serves two primary objectives: First, to screen and maintain the quality of original research articles published in international journals, and second, to enhance manuscripts via scholarly input, error detection, and error correction⁴. This system is critical quality control, ensuring reviewers meticulously critique submitted data, methods, and arguments to establish validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. This process identifies the type and source of errors for resolution. Reviewers also determine if authors have provided adequate evidence to back their claims. This is crucial, especially in evidence-based policy-making; policies developed on weak evidence can lead to adverse effects. Ultimately, the peer review process safeguards the scholarly information system by ensuring research rigor and enhancing its trustworthiness⁵.

The vital role of evidence-based policy in public safety necessitates robust social science research. The Philippine context illustrates how a country's culture and resources shape its scrutiny system. The lack of funding for Philippine journals and individual researchers hinders the extensive scrutiny essential for producing quality studies and peer reviews⁶. This is a well-documented problem, where faculty research is underfunded and many local journals have limited financial resources⁷.

In essence, the 2015 study entitled "Factors Leading to Limited Faculty Publications in Philippine Higher Education Institutions" provides a clear framework for understanding the systemic challenges hindering academic output in the country. The study, which surveyed 173 faculty members from three HEIs in Luzon, Philippines, identified seven primary obstacles. It found that the core issue behind low publication rates is a systemic problem rooted in heavy workloads and a lack of training, rather than solely a shortage of funds. These factors lead to a fear of rejection and a general lack of interest in research⁸.

Moreover, the Philippine academic and research community has several pressing issues related to ethics, bias, and accountability in publishing justice research. One of the most pressing concerns is the rise of predatory journals and fake conferences and ingrained "publish-or-perish" culture, prioritizing the number of publications over their quality. Institutional incentives, whether for promotion, CHED recognition, accreditation requirements, or access to funding, can lead researchers to submit work to low-quality journals or resort to unethical practices like plagiarism or data fabrication, which can create moral hazards for both faculty and students⁹.

This phenomenon is global, with institutional incentives for promotion, CHED recognition, and access to funding placing immense pressure on researchers. This, in turn, can lead them to seek out predatory venues. This emphasis on speed and quantity can also encourage academics to engage in unethical practices, such as manipulating data, cutting corners, and getting involved in fraudulent peer-review rings¹⁰.

Further, access to research opportunities remains unequal for scholars in underfunded institutions, particularly those outside of Metro Manila, who struggle to obtain research grants, equipment, and publication support, contributing to their marginalization. While a study about HEIs in Cebu City reveals a systemic problem within local academic research, institutions are generally capable. However, a lack of institutional support, including inadequate facilities, equipment, and research incentives, hinders their full potential. This is compounded by a lack of oversight, as few universities have ethics committees, leaving accountability to individual integrity. This environment also contributes to unethical authorship practices and a lack of clear policies in local journals, leading to favoritism and eroding confidence in the peer-review process¹¹.

Language barriers further limit Filipino scholars' global visibility¹². With English dominating academic publishing, researchers more proficient in Filipino or regional languages may find it difficult to express their ideas clearly in high-impact international journals, affecting their chances of being cited or recognized.

This is well-documented by the study, "English Language Proficiency in the Philippines: An overview", which shows a gradual deterioration in English skills among Filipinos based on metrics from the EF English Proficiency Index and standardized tests like the TOEIC and IELTS. This decline is attributed to several factors, including learners' motivation, teaching strategies, and the learning environment¹³. This linguistic barrier makes it difficult for Filipino scholars to express their complex ideas with the precision required by journals indexed in major databases like Web of Science or Scopus, which, in turn, affects their chances of being globally recognized.

Additionally, many published social science studies never reach policymakers or the communities they are meant to serve. Weak knowledge translation mechanisms and dense academic jargon often prevent these findings from having a real-world impact. This is supported by HEI showing that research utilization is primarily conceptual, failing to translate into direct policy changes due to a lack of proper leadership, management, and dissemination tools. This is seen as some journals still rely on manual processes, slowing publication and reducing efficiency¹⁴.

This serious gap at the interface of research and practice, where most researchers and practitioners operate in completely parallel domains and often use different languages (e.g., academic theories versus operational terminology), carries significant consequences¹⁵. As a result, invaluable research often does not effectively aid vital decisions regarding crime prevention and public safety, such as developing evidence-based policing strategies or effective rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, the perceived absence or challenges in applying sound and up-to-date research methodologies further contributes to the already low trust in academic work, offering limited useful guidance for these critical endeavors¹⁶. The objective of this study is to critically examine the ethical dimensions, inherent biases, and mechanisms of accountability in the publication practices of Philippine social science journals. It aims to highlight existing challenges in research integrity, peer review, and editorial decision-making, while also proposing strategies to strengthen transparency, fairness, and justice in scholarly publishing within the local academic context.

SYSTEMIC AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN PEER REVIEW

The academic landscape of a nation is compiled with numerous ethics-related challenges that, in turn, affect the efficacy of peer-reviewing the work of scholars and researchers. While the confidentiality of the peer-review process tends to evoke concerns regarding persistent reviewer prejudice¹⁷, empirical studies, particularly those employing qualitative interviews, further document the profound impact of entrenched favoritism, inconsistent scoring, and pervasive biases on the integrity of the review process¹⁸. These global shortcomings, manifesting within a country's educational sphere, devastate the core of the review process. This directly undermines the quality of social science academic research, especially in critical areas like public safety.

A significant and recurring impediment to robust peer review and high-quality research in the Philippines is the pervasive constraint of limited financial support. These limited budgets impede dedicated editorial staff and adherence to best practices for journals. Further, the absence of financial incentives for reviewers leads to insufficient time for rigorous evaluation, fostering fatigue and reluctance for additional assignments. A 2024 survey on factors influencing reviewers' decisions found that 'time available for reviewing' was the top reason for rejecting a review invitation (79%), highlighting reviewers' practical limitations. This contributes significantly to the widely documented problem of 'reviewer fatigue,' leading to insufficient time for rigorous evaluation and an increasing reluctance for additional assignments, as evidenced by rising invitation-to-acceptance ratios in global reports. In contrast, the survey indicated that most respondents (82%) favored rewarding reviewers, with cash and credits for future publications being the most preferred compensations⁷.

In addition, insufficient funding creates practical limitations, such as reduced access to international databases and specialized tools, constrained sample sizes, and hindered complex or longitudinal studies¹⁹. These resource deficiencies contribute to various recognized research limitations, including shortcomings in data collection, population or sample constraints, and compromises in study design²⁰. Ultimately, such resource deficiencies directly compromise the sophistication of methodologies employed and the overall quality and depth of the research output submitted for review.

Beyond the resource constraints, the peer-review system is susceptible to several ethical dilemmas and biases, which can seriously undermine the system's integrity²¹. A primary ethical concern revolves around conflicts of interest (COI). While journals typically require COI disclosure, the effectiveness of such policies can be challenged, especially within smaller academic communities where professional networks are often highly interconnected and identities might be easily inferred. Non-financial conflicts and subtle biases are less straightforward to identify and manage through disclosure alone²².

To address this, a policy brief²³ provides a clear set of recommendations for HEIs to strengthen their ethical standards and effectively implement CMO No. 15, Series 2019, by establishing dedicated ethics committees, creating an online platform for streamlined submissions, and setting reasonable timelines for the review process.

Reviewers also bear an ethical responsibility to act as gatekeepers against research misconduct, including plagiarism, data fabrication, and falsification. However, effective detection of such issues is often hindered by a lack of specialized tools, extensive time, specific training, and uniformly available resources²⁴.

These additional ethical demands are significantly magnified in the local context by varying institutional capacities. The systemic resource and training challenges within the broader academic and educational system mean that not all universities possess the robust technological infrastructure and adequate computing resources required, nor do they prioritize the ongoing faculty training and development necessary to implement robust ethical screening mechanisms and provide comprehensive reviewer training. This weakens the overall integrity safeguards of the publishing system and potentially creates inequities in publishing opportunities²⁵.

As a result, the entire peer-review ecosystem in the Philippines needs significant reforms, including reviewer training and stricter adherence to international editorial standards, to enhance objectivity and reliability.

RESEARCH-PRACTICE GAP AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Furthermore, the interrelated systemic weaknesses significantly extend criminal justice's enduring research-practice gap. This is not merely a theoretical divide but a fundamental disconnect in how knowledge is produced and applied¹⁵. Researchers and practitioners often operate in distinct domains, employing different lexicons-academics using specialized theoretical language, while practitioners rely on operational terminology grounded in hands-on experience. A contention in their appeal for a new paradigm in police science, there is a pressing need for a shift in how research and policing interact, advocating for engaged, apolitical police practice that actively embraces police science to bridge this divide²⁶.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the pervasive ethical dilemmas and biases that undermine peer review, challenges now even compounded by the rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in academic publishing²⁷, establishing robust accountability mechanisms becomes crucial for safeguarding scholarly integrity. In this context, accountability means ensuring that all stakeholders in the publishing process, reviewers, editors, and

institutions, are responsible for their actions and face appropriate consequences for failing to uphold ethical standards. Without clear lines of accountability, the integrity safeguards meant to protect scholarly communication can erode, further exacerbating the challenges already present in resource-constrained or closely-knit academic environments. Indeed, recent calls for robust reform in scholarly publishing, emphasizing that rigorous peer review is essential to maintaining the integrity of the record of science, powerfully underscore the necessity of accountability for fostering a more just and reliable peer review system²⁸.

In addition, a systemic institutional challenge to accountability exists within Philippine academia. Since universities are the foundational entities employing scholars who also function as authors, reviewers, and editors, weaknesses in their general academic integrity frameworks are highly likely to extend to their specific peer review processes. Thus, the absence of clear, uniformly applied institutional policies or independent oversight bodies for peer review misconduct could weaken the perception and reality of accountability. While the CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 15, Series of 2019²⁹, sets forth broad guidelines, its lack of specific enforcement mechanisms for academic publishing creates a significant gap in the system, leaving integrity largely to individual discretion.

PATHWAYS TO PUBLISHING JUSTICE

Advancing publishing justice fundamentally requires directly confronting the pervasive issues of limited resources and disparate institutional capacities. To this end, intensive funding for local journals and individual social science scholars must come from governmental and academic institutions and research funding bodies. Such steps involve creating specific grants for publications and funding open access initiatives to ease the financial burden on authors and readers—a critical move towards knowledge democratization and equal opportunity for scholars from developing nations³⁰. Additionally, investment in robust, shared digital infrastructure, such as platforms like Public Knowledge Project's (PKP) Open Journal Systems (OJS), is crucial to streamline the peer review process, enhance editorial workflows, and increase the global visibility of local scholarship, especially given the documented need for dedicated and inclusive infrastructure tailored for social sciences and humanities.

Moreover, a nationally coordinated effort in a local setting, spearheaded by their research-intensive institutions, should collaborate to establish or strengthen a central or federated scholarly publishing platform. For instance, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) may mandate the creation of a national repository, and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) may provide the necessary funding for its technical development.

Also, the rapid advancement of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) presents both opportunities and significant ethical challenges to scholarly publishing. To leverage its potential while safeguarding integrity, journals and institutions must collaboratively develop and communicate robust policies on the responsible use of GenAI by authors and reviewers, especially given well-documented concerns about transparency, bias, and accountability in AI-driven processes²⁵. These policies should delineate acceptable uses (e.g., language refinement, idea generation without plagiarism) from unacceptable ones (e.g., generating entire manuscript sections, fabricating data, uncritical summarization without human oversight)²⁸.

Crucially, emphasis must be placed on human oversight and accountability: Authors remain responsible for the content generated by AI, and reviewers for the integrity of their assessments. Simultaneously, there is a pressing need for comprehensive training for all stakeholders on GenAI literacy, its ethical implications, potential biases within AI models, and methods for detecting AI-generated content or misconduct. Investing in AI-assisted screening tools for plagiarism and content analysis can support editors and reviewers. Still, these tools must be used judiciously, with human judgment as the ultimate arbiter, ensuring that technology enhances, not undermines, scholarly communication's rigor and trustworthiness.

In light of the proliferation of journals and publishers today, a critical aspect of safeguarding publishing justice also involves establishing strict qualification and accreditation standards for publishing venues.

The proposed Centralized Board for Justice Research Publishing is a transformative concept with the potential to address these challenges. It would serve as the primary body responsible for ensuring the rigor, ethical standards, and direct societal relevance of research in areas like public safety. By setting and enforcing stringent publishing guidelines, fostering expert peer review, and ensuring effective knowledge translation for policy and practice, this board would bridge the "research-practice gap" and solidify trust in Philippine social science contributions.

While a direct precedent for a single national board for social science publishing is limited, a similar model can be found in the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Introduced in 2014, the REF is a process of expert review that assesses the quality and reach of research across higher education, providing accountability for public investment. Crucially, the REF was the first exercise to evaluate the impact of research outside of academia, a component that has since become a central measure of research excellence. Though it has faced resistance from academics concerned that it may stifle creativity, the REF's core purpose is to inform the allocation of significant public funding for university research based on its quality, while providing accountability and producing evidence of its wider benefits. Like the REF, which links institutional funding to demonstrated societal and policy impact, this board would serve as a crucial mechanism to ensure that social science contributions are not just academically rigorous but also directly relevant to public safety and national development³⁰.

The feasibility of establishing such a board may be explored through a pilot program initiated by a consortium of key universities and research organizations. This pilot would focus on defining the board's governance, securing its budget, and clarifying its authority. This approach would provide a practical, evidence-based model for a full-scale national launch, ensuring that the board's design is grounded in the realities of the Philippine academic and government landscape. This step is crucial for transforming the board from a promising concept into a viable, impactful mechanism for reform.

This board would not only ensure the rigor and ethical standards of research but also tackle the persistent "research-practice gap" through concrete, actionable mechanisms:

Mandatory lay summaries: Research funding bodies would require all funded social science projects to include a concise, jargon-free summary of their findings, designed specifically for policymakers and the public. This practice is common in international journals and funding applications. By standardizing this requirement, the board can ensure that research outcomes are digestible and ready for practical application from the moment of publication.

Research-to-policy liaison offices: The establishment of liaison offices would create a dedicated channel for knowledge transfer. These offices would act as a bridge, staffed by individuals with expertise in both academic research and policy development. Their role would be to proactively identify relevant research and present it to government bodies in a format tailored for policy-making, ensuring that evidence is not only available but also effectively utilized.

Partnerships with policy think tanks: Strategic alliances between the centralized board and policy think tanks in the Philippines can significantly amplify the impact of social science research. Think tanks are experts at translating complex research into policy briefs, white papers, and recommendations that are integrated into policy discussions. This collaboration leverages their expertise and networks to ensure that academic contributions are incorporated into the national discourse and policy development process, thereby solidifying public trust in Philippine social science.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring the integrity of peer review in Philippine Social Science Research is critical to strengthening both academic credibility and public trust. Addressing systemic challenges such as limited reviewer capacity, ethical dilemmas, and institutional bias requires investments in capacity building and ethical governance, along with innovative solutions that link research to policy. The proposed establishment of a Centralized Board for Justice Research Publishing, with mechanisms like mandatory lay summaries, liaison offices, and partnerships with policy think tanks, offers a transformative pathway. By bridging the research–practice gap and embedding accountability, Philippine social science can more effectively shape evidence-based policies and contribute to societal development.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This study discovered the systemic weaknesses in the peer review system of Philippine Social Science Research that can be beneficial for policymakers, academic institutions, and justice sector practitioners in designing reforms that strengthen research credibility and applicability. The findings highlight how limited resources, ethical biases, and the absence of unified publishing standards widen the research–practice gap, undermining the translation of valuable insights into evidence-based policies for crime prevention and rehabilitation. By proposing a Centralized Board for Justice Research Publishing, the study provides a transformative model that aligns social science research with national development priorities. This study will help researchers uncover the critical areas of justice research integrity that many were not able to explore. Thus, a new theory on accountable knowledge dissemination may be arrived at.

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