

More journal standards and their stories

A meditation on a nursery rhyme

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Most of us are probably familiar with the children's nursery rhyming song, 'The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly'. For those who aren't, I direct you to the superior *Muppet Show* version (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC_xO2aN_IA). The song – one of the oddest in a genre where the eccentricity bar is already pretty high (remember 'Hey Diddle Diddle?') – is about an old lady who swallows a fly and then deals with the problem by swallowing a spider, bird, cat, dog, goat, and horse (she's dead, of course). In essence, she becomes the human equivalent of a *matryoshka*: a Russian nesting doll.

One of the reasons why *matryoshka* are so fascinating to children and adults alike is that we're never sure how many dolls we might find hidden inside. 'Surely this must be the last one', we think to ourselves as we crack open a series of progressively smaller dolls, only to find an even smaller one nested inside. The same feeling is evoked by the nursery rhyme: if eating the horse hadn't killed her, we get the sense that the old lady would have been ready for her next course (a lion maybe?). Both cases evoke the possibility of endless 'recursion', a

mathematical term for the following formula: $x^n = x \times (x^{n-1})$, which, left unmodified, results in an infinite loop of progressively smaller inputs.

In their edited volume *Standards and Their Stories*, Susan Leigh Star and Martha Lampland (2009) compare standards to *matryoshka* in describing their nested qualities. To illustrate, they recount an anecdote about a friend who was trying to obtain an appointment to see a US tax preparer but didn't have a phone. This led to the following exchange with the receptionist:

'What is your phone number, please?' asks the polite young man managing the office calendar.

'I don't have one'.

'I'm sorry, but I can't put your appointment into the calendar without a phone number'.

'Yes, but I don't have one'.

Silence. 'Would you like me to make one up?' asks our friend.

'Oh, yes', sighs the calendar-filler, 'that would be great'.

'1-2-3-4-5-6-7', says my friend.

'Perfect!' the young man says. 'The computer accepted that just fine. See you tomorrow!' (Star and Lampland 2009: 3)

Star and Lampland point to the ways in which seemingly insignificant standards – such as having a phone – become linked with making an appointment, which, in turn, is linked with a standardized computer calendar. However, they observe that a variety of other more consequential standards lurk in the background to create a larger 'nest', pointing to the US tax code, which is 'so complexly standardized that most middle-class people pay US\$300–1,000 to have someone else navigate it for them every April 15' (2009, 9). As they demonstrate, a number of larger standards and practices nest the smaller interaction with the calendar.

Taking inspiration from 'The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly' and Star and Lampland's observations about the nested nature of standards, I want to follow up my previous Nightstand essay (Bell 2015) with another story about journal standards. However, this time I focus on one small standard and trace it outwards to see where we end up.



The check box on the online manuscript submission form

Confirm the following:	
<input type="checkbox"/>	req Confirm that the manuscript has been submitted solely to this journal and is not published, in press, or submitted elsewhere.
<input type="checkbox"/>	req Confirm that all the research meets the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements of the study country.
<input type="checkbox"/>	req Confirm that you have prepared a complete text minus the title page, acknowledgments, any running headers with author names, and any self-citations in the main text or references, to allow blinded review.

If you have ever submitted a manuscript to a journal that uses the Scholar One manuscript processing system (if you've published a couple of journal articles then the chances are high that you have), you will probably have been confronted with a series of check boxes. I draw your attention to the second box in the image above: 'confirm that all the research meets the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements of the study country'. This box is a required field; in other words, to proceed with the submission it must be checked.



The ethics application

In order to confirm that your research meets 'ethical guidelines' when you submit your manuscript, you are expected to have received institutional ethical approval for your study. Thus, the initial standard assumes various others: that you have an ethics approval process in place at your institution, and that you were required to receive ethics approval for your study. If you didn't submit an ethics application – either because your institution doesn't have a review board or because your study didn't require it – you can either tick the box anyway, or, if you are at an institution that has a review board, submit an unnecessary ethics application. I periodically witnessed the latter at the University of British Columbia in my capacity as a consultant on research ethics. When I queried such individuals about why they wanted to submit an unnecessary ethics application, invariably the answer was 'so we can publish the data'.



The university research policy

Ethics review processes are determined by larger institutional research policies. At the University of British Columbia, for example, 'Policy 89: Research Involving Human Participants' governs ethics review. This policy describes the scope of requirements for institutional ethics review, the mandate and authority of research ethics boards, and so on.

Each university sets its own research policies, but they are generally linked to, and largely dictated by, a national set of standards.



The national human research ethics guidelines

Institutional standards are informed by research ethics guidelines created by federal research funding agencies. In countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, these agencies require universities wanting to receive research funding to set up institutional ethics review processes to ensure that such research meets certain ethical standards. Universities in these countries generally extend these requirements – either voluntarily or because the funding agencies demand it – to unfunded research as well.



The international codes

National guidelines are, in turn, informed by several international standards, most notably the Nuremberg Code (<https://history.nih.gov/research/downloads/nuremberg.pdf>), the Declaration of Helsinki (<http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/>), and the Belmont Report (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>). The Nuremberg and Helsinki documents set out standards for medical experiments and the Belmont Report presents ostensibly ‘universal’ standards that apply to social science as well as biomedical research, although Zachary Schrag (2010) has convincingly documented that it too had a clear biomedical orientation from the outset. The core principles outlined in these documents are echoed, virtually unchanged, in most national ethics guidelines today.



The Committee on Publication Ethics

These international standards for research ethics have, in turn, been incorporated into larger codes of research and scholarly integrity, including the standards set by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Formed in 1997, it initially consisted of a small group of UK medical journal editors and aimed ‘to provide a forum for meetings of editors, publishers, and others associated with the publication of biomedical journals; to encourage and promote ethical standards in medical publications’ (COPE 2000). By 2008, when the committee drafted its second Code of Conduct, its remit had dramatically expanded from biomedical publication ethics to publication ethics more broadly, although its principles remained essentially unchanged. According to COPE’s *International Standards for Editors*: ‘Editors should

generally require approval of a study by an ethics committee (or institutional review board) and the assurance that it was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki for medical research in humans' (Kleinert and Wager 2011, 7).



Commercial academic publishing houses

COPE's expansion is largely explained by the fact that numerous commercial academic publishing houses (for example, Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Palgrave Macmillan, and Wolters Kluwer) unilaterally signed up their journals for COPE membership as a means of demonstrating their own concern with publishing standards. This has effectively meant that editors of a number of social science journals (some unbeknownst to them!) are now subject to the biomedical standards of publication ethics required of COPE members, despite the fact that many of these standards don't readily apply to social science research. For those journals with online submission systems controlled by their publisher (which is the case for many journals using the Scholar One system), their platforms were updated to include the check-box question about ethical requirements.

In sum, the question about 'ethical guidelines' that appears when you submit your manuscript via many online submission systems is most overtly connected with institutional ethics review requirements. However, where they exist, these are a product of the institution's research policies, which are, in turn, connected with the national standards set by federal funding agencies that the university wants to be eligible to obtain funds from. These national standards echo international standards developed primarily for biomedical research that became incorporated into an even larger set of standards on publication ethics that commercial academic publishing houses implemented wholesale for the journals they own as a way of demonstrating their mechanisms for quality control.

Thus, you might very well ask what the insertion of a check-box question has to do with actual ethics, but, like the fly in the nursery rhyme, it's the least interesting aspect of the story, as the nursery rhyme itself recognises. After all, although the question of why the old lady swallowed the fly is the rhyme's most frequently repeated refrain, it's left unanswered at the end. While the act of swallowing a fly is itself a relatively mundane one (most of us have inadvertently swallowed a bug at some point), the actions surrounding it and the extraordinary chain of logic in which it's embedded are where the real story lies. Likewise, that innocuous check box provides us with yet further evidence of the integrated nature of standards, their connection with particular ethics and values (in this case, biomedical, financial, and commercial), the ways they quickly become naturalized, and their very real effects on the ground.

About the author

Kirsten Bell is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. A former coeditor of the journal *Critical Public Health*, she has published widely on the anthropology of public health and her forthcoming book is *Health and Other Unassailable Values: Reconfigurations of Health, Evidence and Ethics* (Routledge, 2016).

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