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fifty shades of academic self-censorship

Liz Jackson

While censorship has been examined often in relation to academic freedom and free speech, self-censorship has been less often explored. This may be because there are many 'shades of gray' when it comes to self-censorship. For instance, self-censorship can be seen as a pragmatic or natural (or educational) response to scholarly peer review or teacher feedback, an act of moral cowardice, or the mark of serious epistemic injustice and conformism. So, what is self-censorship, and why is it bad? In this brief essay, I elucidate on some of the shades of gray as well as some of the risks and challenges of self-censorship. I explore self-censorship both as a common academic practice and as a mechanism of preserving the status quo. I consider the implications for thinking through self-censorship in relation to academic freedom and reflect on other considerations for future research.

Keywords: academic autonomy, academic free speech, academic freedom, higher education, peer review, self-censorship

Introduction

As the editors of this issue note in the editorial, censorship is harmful, but it rarely works for very long. While this may be true, one form of censorship may be considered as more long lasting, pernicious, and opaque. The force, normalcy, and potential harm of self-censorship have not been examined as much as external censorship has been in writings on academic freedom and free speech. This is partly because self-censorship exists more in shades of gray.*1* It is difficult in academic practice to parse out, for instance, what is cowardly self-censorship versus learning and constructively improving one's work through understanding the potential reactions and views of others. In this brief essay, I elucidate on some of these shades of gray as well as some of the risks and challenges of self-censorship.

Self-Censorship as Standard Practice

In the most obvious, simplest definition of self-censorship, someone is asked to censor their own communication and obliges. It is difficult to know how common this is. We know that Descartes and Kant both self-censored at times due to requests and related statements from others, who saw their work as dangerous or threatening in society (Williams, 2016). At the outset, one might imagine that self-censorship in such cases is a cowardly choice. However, at an individual level, we have perhaps all conducted some form of self-censorship as academics. In reality, most people would rather say something (that they argue, believe, or agree with), rather than nothing. Thus, self-censorship can be a pragmatic strategy to promote some of one's ideas in such a way that they will get a fair hearing, even while suppressing or editing out some others. This form of self-censorship is arguably a fairly

standard practice, which is actually built in to academic research supervision and peer review systems.

Much of education and research production involves responding to requests from others—first our teachers and research supervisors and then our anonymous peer reviewers—to say one thing rather than another, to reconsider word choices which could be offensive or ambiguous or simply less desirable or unfashionable, to admire some positions and theories more and be more critical toward others, and so on. These requests may be requirements for improving one's grade or getting their article published. Their normalcy should interest anyone committed to academic free speech for students or professors (Jackson, 2021).

From the view of those requesting changes to a piece of work, and perhaps also from the view of the work's author, the point of requiring changes to a text might be educational and entirely beneficial to the author and their writing. It might help strengthen arguments to consider other viewpoints. Requirements to rethink language can encourage precision and greater clarity about how ideas and topics are conceptualized or theorized. Changes could help writing be more inclusive, enabling a broader readership to benefit from the author's hard work. On the other hand, other kinds of requests for authors to change their writings could be less helpful to the author, such as in cases where the reviewer or teacher has not tried to understand or appreciate what the author means to say (that is, they have not attempted in good faith to try to learn from the author) but instead requires them to align their views with what the reviewer or teacher thinks or would like to have iterated.

Regardless, this is the bread and butter of academic life. We rarely consider it as deeply offensive or harmful to one's scholarship, rights, or voice the often-annoying recommendations from peer reviewers which may seem to amount to requests to conform more in some way to the reviewers' views, expectations, interests, or standards. From the point of view of teachers and reviewers, many may feel they have not done their job well if they simply say that the author's work is perfectly fine as it is. In this context, those who are particularly sensitive to standard revision requests may not succeed in today's academic environment where, in many societies, peer reviewed journal articles are the most common currency, despite this system's problems (Jackson et al., 2018).

Furthermore, while we may find it desirable to draw a line in the sand between annoying peer reviewers and research supervisors and petty revision requirements versus more seriously harmful affronts to academic free speech, it would be very hard to come to a consensus view on what categorizes different cases as 'self-censorship' versus 'reasonably responding to feedback.' If we hold that it is good to be sensitive and open-minded to others' views, wary of unnecessarily offending others, and appropriate within a particular domain and context, most acts of self-censure will be in the latter category. If we hold that individual academic freedom is foundational, we might go on to critically question how norms of academic peer review and related institutional practices curtail many people from saying and exploring exactly what they want to.

Self-Censorship as Preserving the Status Quo

Williams (2016) argues that self-censorship is one of the most common practices threatening academic freedom in higher education. Many avoid intellectual topics that challenge the status quo or even touch on controversial issues, wanting to avoid any kind of conflict with peers, students, or the public (Merry, 2025; Noll, 1994). This creates a false sense of harmony and contributes to a culture of conformity, as facts, arguments, and perspectives that question the so-called consensus

are omitted from the discussion. In the process, students learn that higher education socializes them to a particular set of values and principles but is not a venue to scrutinize or challenge normal paradigms and particular ideological taboos. One might say that such choices represent acts of extreme moral cowardice. But alongside journal articles, the other vital currency of higher education is, increasingly, obtaining research grants. The need to obtain funds increasingly encourages academics to bend their interests to those of funders. This leads to a collective shift away from topics at the margins of public interest and acceptability, as academics face a choice: Be yourself, or keep your job (Jackson, 2023, 2025).

We can consider the problem of moral cowardice on the one hand—on the other, peer review-based systems are highly conservative with regard to minority political and cultural views. Kuhn (1962) noted that 'normal' research has customarily required scientists to confirm established views and discard counter evidence, resulting in science being 'ridden by dogma'. Historically, the social sciences, arts, and humanities have been dominated by ethnic-majority men (i.e., white men in Western societies) who have been more open to mentoring, hiring, and supporting people who appear to be more like themselves than others. In the United States, contributions of people of color and women have been 'buried' over time (Martin et al., 2019). Du Bois' work on racial bias (among others) was dismissed by his nearly all-white peers on so-called objective grounds (Jackson, 2023; Lester, 1988).

These individual cases in their details may seem weak as exemplars of self-censorship. However, their overall effects as quite common elements or structures of academic processes can be significant. The commonplace conformity and conservatism of higher education can result in epistemic injustice in the case where minorities must ultimately serve their higher-ups (in part) in order to gain any ground at all (Bailey, 2018). This status quo facilitates everyday testimonial injustice (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007), wherein ordinary, normalized prejudice against some cultures and communities makes diverse people reluctant to share their views openly ('smothering'). Kotsonis (2025) relatedly describes self-inflicted epistemic injustice as a kind of injustice agents seem to inflict upon themselves, where they are both victims and perpetrators, self-silencing or self-smothering.

In other cases, demands for safe, inoffensive, non-harmful speech that aim (at least in part) to benefit or protect people in underprivileged minority groups can instead encourage self-censorship for the very people they aim to protect. One issue is whether one can vividly share about experiences of racism, homophobia, or transphobia, for example, without reproducing racism, homophobia, or transphobia. Online, it has been found that content moderation practices aiming to create inclusive environments paradoxically discriminate against minorities who are discussing or reporting on negative experiences, failing to differentiate for example 'race-related talk and racist talk' (Lee et al., 2024). These challenges in parsing out what is and is not harmful or hateful make it more difficult for people experiencing hateful incidents to communicate about or convey them, leading people to a position where they must self-censor in order to speak out. When self-censorship is required in order to speak up, this sends the message that other people's comfort in discussions is more important than experiences of hate crimes.

Meanwhile, youth are encouraged at schools not to reappropriate slang which has traditionally had negative connotations for particular groups—for example, 'what's up, bitch?'—by educators who focus on words as harmful regardless of context (e.g., Mayo, 2014). By promoting such self-censorship, teachers can inadvertently re-entrench more negative, harmful connotations in language,

while precluding students from creatively navigating or even directly examining problems related to hateful and taboo speech (Jackson, 2014). Instead, students learn to silence themselves. Professors who wish to teach about racism similarly must be careful that they do not offend or harm while attempting to convey or reiterate racist messages. While discouraging harmful language is obviously desirable in many regards, an environment which encourages self-censorship about taboo and challenging subjects is not ideal when it comes to deeply contending with important real-world challenges.

Final Reflections

If freedom from self-censorship requires freedom from any kind of external standards, most people would say this goes too far. Not all standards for and practices of evaluating and participating in scholarly research are necessarily harmful or discriminatory. In this case, we might say that our understandings of self-censorship are weakened by lack of clarity about what constitutes scholarly autonomy or freedom (Jackson, 2023). Academic autonomy and freedom are concepts that have been explored at length in philosophy and philosophy of education (Jackson, 2022). As alluded to previously, the challenge, when it comes to freedom, is that total freedom without regard for others goes too far. We gain freedom in some cases by following rules and standards; we are interdependent to develop the capacities we need to act freely or autonomously.

As Alford (2005) contends, many people do not appreciate the magic of this space, imagining freedom simply as something that is entirely unattainable by people who want good jobs and good lives. However, what one cannot say ultimately becomes unimaginable and unreachable. As people pragmatically dismiss the importance of personal freedom, they avoid walking new paths and uncovering new possibilities that could benefit themselves and others in society. In this case, as we need a more nuanced and less binary perspective on academic freedom, we also need a more sophisticated perspective on the nature of self-censorship.

So, when is self-censorship more and less acceptable, and what can be done once we know the difference? Self-censorship is sometimes treated as an act of moral cowardice by sheepish individuals. Yet arguably its source is not individual cowardice. Nor, on the other hand, is it always caused by overzealous language police, conservative ideologues, or petty reviewers. Actually, there must be some space for self-censorship. Self-censorship is required within an environment (that is, a community of other people and systems) that punishes people in varied indirect ways for not effectively conforming and complying—often (although not always) with perfectly good intentions.

Finally, this analysis suggests that if we take self-censorship seriously, we should pay more attention to practices of standardization, socialization, peer review, research grading and rating, and others which demarcate some topics, themes, and approaches as better, more important, or more timely than others. How do we determine when peer review, student grading, political deliberation, and other processes are fair or not fair? How can we avoid epistemic and testimonial injustice, smothering, and silencing, while recognizing valuable academic and societal standards and what aspects of academic traditions are worth preserving? How might authenticity be a potentially important value in education and academia, and how can its value be defended against other standards and academic and social values? Censorship and self-censorship remain important topics for thinking through today from philosophical, political, and sociological perspectives.

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liz jackson

Liz Jackson is Karen Lo Eugene Chuang Professor in Diversity and Equity at the University of Hong Kong and the Associate Dean (Research) of its Faculty of Education. She is President of the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong and Editor-in-Chief of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. She is the author of over 200 books, journal articles, and book chapters, including *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions*, *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education* and *Emotions: Philosophy of Education in Practice*.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5626-596X

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1. The title of this paper is partly inspired by a related paper of mine (Jackson, 2023) which I draw on in this discussion called *Fifty shades of academic freedom*.