

DOES PSYCHOLOGY HAVE A CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST PROBLEM?

Some star psychologists don't disclose in research papers the large sums they earn for talking about their work. Is that a concern?

BY TOM CHIVERS



ILLUSTRATION BY SÉBASTIEN THIBAUT

Generation Z has made Jean Twenge a lot of money. As a psychologist at San Diego State University in California, she studies people born after the mid-1990s, the YouTube-obsessed group that spends much of its time on Instagram, Snapchat and other social-media platforms. Thanks to smartphones and sharing apps, Generation Z has grown up to be more narcissistic, anxious and depressed than older cohorts, she argues. Twenge calls them the ‘iGen’ generation, a name she says she coined. And in 2010, she started a business, iGen Consulting, “to advise companies and organizations on generational differences based on her expertise and research on the topic”.

Twenge has “spoken at several large corporations including PepsiCo, McGraw-Hill, nGenera, Nielsen Media, and Bain Consulting”, one of her websites notes. She delivers anything from 20-minute briefings to half-day workshops, and is also available to speak to parents’ groups, non-profit organizations and educational establishments. In e-mail exchanges, she declined to say how much she earns from her advisory work, but fees for star psychologists can easily reach tens of thousands of dollars for a single speech, and possibly much more, several experts told *Nature*.

Twenge’s academic papers don’t mention her paid speeches and consulting. Yet that stands in stark contrast to the conflict-of-interest (COI) guidelines issued by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), an influential organization whose standards have been widely adopted by many medical and some psychology journals. Those guidelines say that such ‘personal fees’ should be declared as potential COIs in research papers because readers should be made aware of any financial interests that they might perceive as potentially influencing the findings.

Twenge is not a lone outlier; an analysis for this article found that several well-known academic psychologists do paid speeches and consultancy work and don’t declare them in their research papers. Many editors and psychologists say that this is fine and is standard behaviour. They argue that this kind of income should not count as a COI and that psychology should not be held to the norms of medical science. “Speaking fees and consultancies would not be obvious conflicts of interest, unlike, say, evaluating a drug produced by a company in which one holds stock, since there would not seem to be incentives aligned with making one claim versus another,” says Steven Pinker, a well-known author and psychologist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who can also be booked for speaking engagements.

But other psychologists say they think personal speaking fees ought to be declared. There is no suggestion that any scientists are deliberately skewing their results to maintain their speaking income. But critics say that lax COI disclosure norms could create problems by encouraging some scientists to play down — perhaps unconsciously — findings that contradict their arguments, and could lead them to avoid declaring other conflicts. “A lot of researchers don’t know where to draw the line [on COIs],” says Chris Chambers, a psychologist at the University of Cardiff, UK, who is an editor for five journals, including one on psychology. “And because there are no norms they gravitate to saying nothing.”

Researchers who spoke to *Nature* about their concerns say they see the issue as connected to psychology’s greater need for self-scrutiny because of some high-profile cases of misconduct, as well as to broader concerns about the reproducibility of results. “Even the appearance of an undisclosed conflict of interest can be damaging to the credibility of psychological science,” says Scott Lilienfeld, the editor-in-chief of *Clinical Psychological Science* (CPS), which published papers of Twenge’s in 2017 and 2018 (refs 1,2). “The heuristic should be ‘when in doubt, declare,’” he says (although he added that he did not have enough information to judge Twenge’s non-disclosures in CPS). Psychology, he adds, needs to engage in a “thoroughgoing discussion of what constitutes a conflict of interest, and when and how such conflicts should be disclosed”.

SPEAKING INCOME

Supplementing one’s income with speeches isn’t uncommon among academic psychologists and other researchers. Take Adam Grant, whose website declares him to be the “top-rated professor” at Wharton

Business School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is best known for his work on the psychology of business and offers speaking engagements on his website, which notes that he has spoken to more than 100 organizations, including Credit Suisse, Goldman Sachs, Merck and Facebook.

Angela Duckworth, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and author of the bestselling book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016), told *Nature* that she does about 12 speaking engagements a year. Other well-known researchers who can be booked for speaking appearances include Carol Dweck, famous for her work on ‘growth mindset’, and her long-time collaborator David Yeager; Amy Cuddy, the researcher behind ‘power posing’; Barbara Fredrickson, a pioneer of ‘positive psychology’; Jonathan Haidt, the author of *The Righteous Mind* (2012) and *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018); and Philip Tetlock, who wrote *Superforecasting* (2015).

None of them would comment on their fees for speeches and consultancy work, although one US-based psychologist — who didn’t want their identity revealed by *Nature*, to protect their privacy — said that they get between US\$10,000 and \$20,000 for speaking at universities, and up to \$40,000 for speaking to trade groups.

Some psychologists appear on ‘speakers’ bureau’ websites, which put potential clients in touch with speakers. One site claimed Twenge can be booked for \$20,000 to \$30,000; when *Nature* asked her about this, she said the page was “out of date”, and it was deleted shortly afterwards. Another site lists Grant as available for \$100,000 to \$1 million. A literary agent — who has negotiated speaking fees for well-known scientists but didn’t want to be identified — says that someone of Twenge’s fame could

SPEAKING FEES FOR “CELEBRITY” PSYCHOLOGISTS BEGIN AT \$10,000 AND CAN GO AS HIGH AS \$100,000.

expect between \$5,000 and \$15,000 per appearance. And an American motivational speaker, Dave Sheffield, says that speaking fees for “celebrity” psychologists “begin at \$10,000 and can go as high as \$100,000”.

Nature examined 60 papers from the psychologists named above that were relevant to their most well-known theses and dated back no further than 2013. In almost all, researchers either declared they had no COIs or did not include such declarations. One of Grant’s papers noted that he engaged in “unrelated” consultancy for a firm that funded the research. In two of Twenge’s papers about the impacts of smartphone use on adolescents’ sleep, published in *Sleep Medicine*^{3,4}, there are no declarations of COIs, but the journal uploads declaration of interest forms on its website. In these forms, Twenge says that she has received money from consultancies and speakers’ bureaus “unrelated” to her research, although her website says that her speaking engagements are about her research findings.

Asked to comment, some researchers said that it was simply the case that they had not received speaking or consulting fees related to the specific papers that *Nature* looked at. “I’ve always declared potential conflicts of interest according to the guidelines of the journals in which I publish — and of our institutional review board — and I believe strongly that scientists should do so,” Grant said. A press spokesperson at the University of Texas at Austin responded on behalf of Yeager to note that he discloses his financial interests (including speaking appearances) internally to his university, as required, and that the university had not identified any financial COIs.

But others noted that although they wouldn’t mind disclosing speeches and consulting fees if required, they understood that this was not currently the case. “If my COI disclosures are in error, I would be happy to correct them,” said Twenge (who added that she doesn’t use the name iGen Consulting much any more). “Generally, I do not consider the speaking and consulting I do to be conflicts of interest because both

compensate for presenting the research, not for a particular research result or analysis ... If the norms do indeed move toward agreement that it is important to disclose these types of activities, I will certainly do so.”

Fredrickson said: “If the norm were to change in psychology with respect to reporting COIs for consultancies and speakers’ fees, I would follow that new norm.” And Duckworth noted: “I would have no issue with disclosing in scientific publications that I engage in paid speaking engagements,” adding, “I have no complaint about changing editorial rules and norms.”

That chimes with what other researchers say: that psychology’s norms do not include declaring speaking fees and consultancy income. Marcus Crede, a psychologist at Iowa State University in Ames who has followed

“I’VE ALWAYS DECLARED POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST ACCORDING TO THE GUIDELINES.”



Adam Grant.

the issue, says he doesn’t think he has ever seen such a thing declared as a COI in a paper. He adds that this is particularly a problem when researchers have been severely criticized for their results but continue to earn money for talks on them, pointing to statistical concerns that have come to light in Cuddy’s power-posing research since her papers were published. “To ask Cuddy to be an objective reporter, and say she has no COIs, seems ludicrous,” he says. (Cuddy, at Harvard Business School in Boston, Massachusetts, did not reply to *Nature’s* requests for comment.)

NOT THE NORM

Other disciplines are stricter than psychology when it comes to declaring speaking and consulting gigs. Richard Hurley, an editor at the *British Medical Journal*, says that speaking engagements would unambiguously be considered COIs at his journal, because speeches are often about a researcher’s findings; if results come back negative, that could affect future earnings from speeches.

“Anything you get money for, beyond about £200 [\$255] or £300, you are expected to declare: certainly fees for speaking,” says Alan Carson, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of Edinburgh, UK, who is associate editor at the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry* and an editorial board member for the journal *Brain Injury*. And at the general-interest journal *PLoS ONE*, editor-in-chief Joerg Heber says: “Anything that may be perceived as a COI should be declared,” and that includes speaking fees. He says that the journal will ask Twenge about a paper she published with them without declaring a conflict.

It is only in the past two decades that many disciplines, led by the medical journals, have codified rules requiring full transparency about payments to researchers. The ICMJE issued its guidelines in 2009; and in 2013, a US law called the Sunshine Act came into force that requires pharmaceutical companies to declare their payments to doctors and hospitals. These rules were introduced as researchers became aware that COIs can colour scientific objectivity. Meta-analyses looking at the work of scientists with COIs have found that their work is consistently more likely to return positive results⁵; and that research funded by for-profit organizations is more likely to find benefits from interventions than is non-profit-funded research⁶.

The COIs in these kinds of study generally relate to companies directly funding relevant research or paying scientists, rather than to fees for speaking engagements or consulting. But the ICMJE guidelines say that researchers should declare “all monies from sources with relevance to the submitted work”, including personal fees, defined as “monies paid to you for services rendered, generally honoraria, royalties, or fees for consulting, lectures, speakers bureaus, expert testimony, employment, or other affiliations”. Reimbursement for speaking engagements or consultancy “fits quite clearly with what [the ICMJE guidelines] call personal fees”, says Adam Dunn, who studies COIs in pharmaceutical research at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

Most COI declarations in research papers run on an honour system: scientists are expected to declare, but there is little actual checking. Last year, for instance, a well-known cancer researcher, José Baselga at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, resigned after failing to declare millions of dollars he had received from various pharmaceutical companies. Journalists found the payments in a federal database related to the Sunshine Act. COI problems have affected psychology, too: this year, a *PLoS ONE* paper about mindfulness was retracted over methodological concerns⁷, but its editors also noted that the authors had failed to disclose their employment at an institute that sold related mindfulness products.

Many psychology journals follow the ICMJE’s line in the declaration-of-interest forms that they ask authors to complete. “Do you have any potential or perceived conflicts of interest?” asks the journal *Psychological Science* in its form. Its examples include “Having received fees for consulting” and “Having received funds reimbursing you for attending a related symposia, [sic] or talk.” Similar formulations are adopted by other psychological journals, such as *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* and *Child Development*, which wants to know about “relevant financial interests (for example ... consultancies, or speaker’s fees)”. All of these journals have published at least one study by a high-profile psychologist who receives money for consultancy and speaking fees but didn’t declare any COIs in the final paper. (*Archives of Sexual Behaviour* is published by Springer Nature, the publisher of this journal; *Nature’s* news team is editorially independent of its publisher.)

Still, there is much ambiguity, making it hard to pin down whether psychologists actually went against journal guidelines. *CPS* instructs authors to follow ICMJE-style disclosures, but its editor-in-chief Lilienfeld, speaking on his own behalf and not that of the journal’s publisher, the US Association for Psychological Science (APS), said that he understood that such ethical considerations were a strong recommendation but not a formal requirement. An APS spokesperson said that the society “has had no formal role in defining conflicts of interest for its members”, and pointed to the individual instructions given by APS journals.

DIVIDED OPINION

Not all psychologists think that their field’s norms need to change. Some take Pinker’s line, saying that although it is important to draw bright, unambiguous lines separating what is and what isn’t a COI, speeches and consultancy work probably don’t qualify. “My idea of a conflict of interest is something like someone hires a fox to look after the chickens’ welfare, and I don’t see that that’s a problem in this case,” said Alex

Michalos, an emeritus political scientist at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, Canada, and the founding (although not current) editor of *Social Indicators Research*. Following a rubric common to many journals published by Springer Nature, this journal states that it requires disclosure of all potential competing interests, including honoraria for speaking at symposia, and employment or consultation.

Stephen Lindsay, a psychologist at the University of Victoria in Canada and the editor-in-chief of *Psychological Science*, said that he was “not sure how to draw the line”. But what worried him most was secretive outside payments for presenting a perspective — such as when a cognitive scientist publishes evidence on the beneficial effects of video gaming while secretly being remunerated by a game company. That’s different, he says, from research psychologists giving speeches or consultancy work that promotes their own work’s claims. He said it was “public knowledge” that researchers such as Cuddy and Twenge receive fees for lectures promoting their research findings, and readers would be aware of this. “When in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and declare potential conflicts of which readers might otherwise be ignorant. But when someone is known for taking a specific stand, it does not seem necessary to include a COI acknowledging that. If we all detailed the various ways in which our self-interest intertwines with our science, COI statements would be very long,” he said.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt at New York University said he agreed that income from speeches and consultancy work could in theory affect an academic’s research findings. “When professors take on the telos [purpose] of businesses, of maximizing their revenue, it could corrupt their search for truth. The more a professor becomes a consulting service, the more that becomes a conflict of interest,” he said. But in the vast majority of cases, he felt, speeches and consulting work do not present an issue — unlike in medical research, where companies do often pay speakers fees to influence doctors’ decisions.

And there are other reasons for academics not to declare such income, he added. “In today’s polarized climate, people write hit pieces about academics using little more than Google and guilt by association. If anyone could scrutinize the list of every group that has paid every academic, then many of us would be reluctant to speak to groups that depart from the favoured political orientations.”

Others were more worried about the lack of disclosure. Although the psychologists are not being paid by a firm to promote a product, by running a consultancy business based on their own research “they are the firm. Their message is the product,” says Eduardo Franco, the editor-in-chief of *Preventive Medicine Reports*, a medical journal which published a paper by Twenge⁸. Franco says that Twenge should have disclosed her consulting business.

CHANGING NORMS

Alongside the push for more transparent disclosures there is also a reaction against psychologists who, some consider, promote work that isn’t strongly supported by data. For instance, Moin Syed, editor-in-chief of *Emerging Adulthood*, told *Nature* that the most damaging cases were when people speak about the results of their work without making it clear that there is “lots of research that runs counter to their ideas”. Unprompted, he brought up Cuddy, Duckworth and Twenge as “three key figures whose names come up most often. It’s not limited to them, but they’re particularly salient, because they have held steadfast to their views, discounting the disconfirming evidence, and continue to do speaking tours and books”. Twenge, however, replies that she closely follows the scientific debate in her field.

Syed was not the editor in 2013, when *Emerging Adulthood* published two articles by Twenge about a narcissistic ‘Generation Me’^{9,10}, but says his initial reaction is that, if they were to be published now, he would want the articles to have COI declarations. (The editor of the journal at the time, Manfred van Dulmen, a psychologist at Kent State University in Ohio, did not reply to *Nature*’s request for comment.) “Just because you’re being paid doesn’t mean that there’s really a conflict, just potential for one. The cornerstone of the open-science movement is transparency

in all regards. Any potential conflicts are part of that,” says Syed.

Even proponents of declaring COIs in publications say that it won’t prevent some potential problems, especially as much consultancy work might be done after a paper is published. Carson, the neuropsychiatry journal editor, points out that it is not just the existence of income but also the level of it that is important. “Whether it’s £100,000 or £10,000 or £1,000 makes a difference,” he says. He thinks that the reader needs to know in order to make a decision on whether to trust the research. And no journal requires that level of transparency.

One possibility, he notes, would be for researchers to simply publish a regularly updated page of all their potential COIs, perhaps with approximate income levels. This could be attached to their unique

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Jean Twenge.

Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID), which could be linked to from research papers. Syed says this could also help in mitigating false accusations of COIs. Having a publicly available list of funding sources could also help researchers to debunk false accusations.

Whether or not that is the right route, it is important for psychology that some sort of solution is found, says Lilienfeld. “I don’t know whether the norms differ in psychology as opposed to other scientific domains,” he says. “It may be that psychological scientists more often write popular books, give public workshops, TED talks, etc. on topics of interest to the average person than do chemists.”

“My hunch, and it’s only a hunch, is that the issue of authors not declaring COIs is much more the exception than the rule,” he says. “But even if it is relatively rare, it’s a problem that needs to be fixed.” ■

Tom Chivers is a science journalist based in London.

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