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REFEREEING THE GAME OF PEER REVIEW

A Dialogue

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Refereeing the Game of Peer Review

Abstract

In this dialogue, the author depicts the journal peer review process as a high-stakes game involving three parties: editor, reviewer, and author. In light of a non-infrequent transposition of what should have been a constructive professional development process into a self-promotional social process, critiques of peer review have abounded, such as the “as-is” process recently recommended by Eric Tsang and Bruno Frey in this journal. While the “as-is” process highlights and potentially remedies some of the abuses of the system, there may be less radical options through professional education and development to preserve the critical developmental function of peer review.

Keywords

peer review, professional autonomy, professional publication, academic freedom, peer control, professional development

Refereeing the Game of Peer Review

Interest in peer review has recently surged in our field of management, at least on the basis of editorial attention in our journals. The editors of the *Academy of Management Journal* have taken up the subject on three separate occasions in recent volumes (*AMJ*, 2006b; Miller, 2006; Rynes, 2006) and sponsored a forum on the review process in Volume 49 (*AMJ*, 2006a). The editor of the *Academy of Management Review* also devoted some attention to it in Volume 32 (Kilduff, 2007). Now, the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal in its first issue of the current volume has published a critique and proposition for the review process by Eric W. K. Tsang and Bruno S. Frey (2007), entitled: “The As-Is Journal Review Process: Let Authors Own Their Ideas.” I will return to the Tsang and Frey paper shortly in this dialogue, but let it first be noted that, as my colleagues have undoubtedly seen for themselves, the subject of peer review has become a lightning rod not just in our own field, but across a range of professional and academic specialties. As a core practice underlying professional and academic identity and integrity, any reflexivity extended to it has political and emotional overtones that can make its many adherents anxious at best. Further, peer review is no longer just an exercise in advancing scholarship and discovery. It has become a pivotal career and economic linchpin shaping the lives of most people in the professions, especially our neophytes.

Part of the problem with any critique is that peer review has become institutionalized as a durable historical practice. The Royal Society of London is frequently given credit for having introduced the concept of refereeing as far back as 1752 (Kronick, 1990). Its operation proceeded without any great perturbation until the 20th Century at the point when the raw number

of scientists increased exponentially. To that extent, the pressures and incentives to publish are relatively recent, but in this current age of specialization, fragmentation, and technological capacity, the subject of peer review has come out of the closet into full view of its practitioners. Indeed, the American Medical Association and its flagship journal, *JAMA*, the BMJ Publishing Group, and a host of other sponsors have now produced five international congresses on peer review in biomedical publications. Professional society meetings and journal publications in nearly every professional field devote time and space to both challenging and attempting to improve the process. Empirical work on reviewer quality and author satisfaction has been initiated (for a comprehensive review, see Weller, 2001). Yet, in spite of the renewed self-examination, reports of the benefits of peer review remain largely anecdotal. So too have been the critiques.

The criticism has been provoked by some well-publicized cases of abuse in which papers based upon fraudulent findings have squeezed through the peer review system (see, e.g., Engber, 2005). Although most editors will point out that peer review is not intended to detect fraud, it *is* designed to serve as a gatekeeper on the quality of publication. However, recent commentaries have suggested that peer review has performed this function *too* well.

False Negative Review Errors

In particular, it is possible that peer review has been committing too many false negative decision errors,¹ namely, rejecting papers that although they may not conform to existing

¹ False negatives are also referred to by inferential statisticians as Type I errors, signifying incorrectly rejecting a true null hypothesis. Conversely, false positives or Type II errors constitute not rejecting a false null hypothesis.

paradigms may, nevertheless, in an alternative fashion, contribute to if not remake the field (Kuhn, 1962). Such papers may be rejected only because they do not adequately conform to the wishes of particular and historical interpretive communities (Luke & Luke, 2005). This critique considers review boards to represent a tight hierarchical regime of power, privilege, and status interested in their own reproduction (Kumashiro, 2005). It can be further argued that this community is held together not by academic veracity and contribution as much as by patronage and participation in social networks. Some critics contend that reviewers are selected who have dubious qualifications to reliably assess the worth – be it in process or in substance – of the work submitted (Bedeian, 2004; Glenn, 1976; Roth, 2002). Editors often staff their boards, in part, with trusted acquaintances or friends of acquaintances. They have a fair degree of autonomy in deciding which reviewers to assign to which authors. In some cases, ad hoc reviewers are asked to review papers, and it is not an uncommon practice to motivate such reviews by expressly choosing reviewers cited in the authors' papers.

In addition to the problem of scholarship compression, other abuses in peer review have been cited, such as protracted duration of review, and reviewer hostility, bias, and dissensus (Miller, 2006). It is no wonder that this taxing environment, which tends to wear down authors, has produced recommendations for overhaul, such as Tsang and Frey's "as-is" review process. Rather than face round after round of reviews that can as much distort as improve the original manuscript, the "as-is" process renders a verdict after just one round of review. Authors whose papers are accepted are given the opportunity to revise their papers, but only if they are so inclined. Reviewers would understand that their role is first and foremost to evaluate the publishability of the current manuscript and either accept or reject it on that basis alone.

Given the self-acknowledged radical nature of the “as-is” proposal by Tsang and Frey, it may be argued that a far simpler solution to the problem of reviewer abuse be to merely upgrade the quality of review and reviewers. For example, editors could ensure that they line their editorial boards with scholars of indisputable distinction in the research domain in question. If they were to do so, unfortunately, it is possible that such reviewers might be the ones expressly guilty of committing too many false negative errors due to their commitment to a legitimization of extant knowledge forms (Foucault, 1980). Such criticism can be particularly severe in fields that are not known to have strong disciplinary consensus, such as those in the social sciences, e.g., sociology and management vs. those in the physical sciences, e.g., astronomy and astrophysics (Hargens, 1990). Agger (1991), in studying the field of sociology, found evidence of disciplinary hegemony in textbook editing, exhibited through such features as the dominance of quantitative research methods, complex statistical analysis, emphasis on research over theory development, and preference for applied over basic research. It is thus possible that editors and reviewers may unconsciously employ a form of “cognitive particularism” (Travis and Collins, 1991) in determining the quality of a publication. Such factors as institutional affiliation or commonality of training may encode schematic expectations leading to a form of academic partisanship underlying editorial decision making (Crane, 1967; Bedeian, 2004).

The Game of Peer Review

It has been suggested that the review process has become a form of collective game or, as was suggested by Bourdieu (2000), a complex, interconnecting system of dispositions. Whether unwitting or not, authors collude with editors and reviewers in upholding this game in order to sustain the “field of power.” However, if it is a game, it is one characterized by very high stakes since it can make or break one’s career in the academic profession. When it comes time for tenure review, especially in research universities, one’s publications in refereed journals are often considered to be the key criterion. In applying for government and foundation grants, a process itself dependent on peer review, one’s record of publication features prominently in the review process. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that academics may spend as much time on the style of their writing and the orientation of their arguments as on the raw content (see, i.e., Black, Brown, Day, & Race, 1998; Cummings & Frost, 1985; Thyer, 1994). It could also be argued that peer review obliges authors to write preventatively so as to appeal to prospective reviewers rather than proactively in their own voice. On the other hand, it could also be said to force authors to think about their arguments more critically, thus serving as a form of implicit quality control over submissions (Chubin & Hackett, 1990).

The structure of peer review is constituted of an uneasy alliance between three parties: editor, writer, and reviewer(s). All three tend to have as their professed core objective the advancement of knowledge in their chosen profession. Yet, there may also be personal objectives to consider. The author likely has the greatest stake in this tripartite enterprise, as suggested above, but editors and reviewers also have interests to preserve. Editors, of course, have the mission and

integrity of their journal to uphold and wish to leave a legacy of accomplishment. Wellington and Nixon (2005) also found that editors obtained a sense of satisfaction from their generative role of supporting the work of others. They also may gain a sense of power in orchestrating the review process, including the often fateful decision about which reviewers to assign to which papers. Reviewers, meanwhile, perhaps engage in the most altruistic of responsibilities since their work goes largely unrecognized. Yet, the reviewer role is one of the first to be sought in establishing oneself within the profession, leading in some cases to subsequent editorial assignments. When reviewers are assigned pieces that fall within a substantive purview, there is also the chance to reinforce a perspective and even one's personal contribution to its literature.

Invoking discourse process theory, Bedeian (2004) suggests that the relationship among writers, editors, and reviewers can be viewed as an ongoing mutual transaction. Seen in this light, the author may be thought of as the initiator but not necessarily the sole proprietor of the work. Rather, as in the instance of musical composition illustrated by Umberto Eco (1979), the composition can be thought of as unbounded and open and thus susceptible to alternative interpretations. For this discourse process to flourish, however, it strikes me that the parties have to approach their task on a relatively equal footing.

Turning again to Tsang and Frey's "as-is" proposal, their recommendation would clearly upset the current tripartite balance, taking a fair amount of "power" away from the reviewers and placing it more into the hands of the other two parties. Reviewers would no longer be developmentally "wedded" to reviewers but instead be placed at arms-length. Editors would be given enormous responsibility to make a "go – no-go" decision at the first reading. Admittedly,

decisions at the extremes are fairly easy to make; it is the paper in the middle – with good points and not-so-good points – that requires most of the scrutiny. This is the type of paper that especially benefits from developmental peer review. Citing a specific example from the *Academy of Management Journal* (Rynes et al., 2005), Tsang and Frey demonstrate that given a final acceptance rate of 8 percent and an approximate total of 16 percent of submissions that receive invitations for revision and resubmission, the “as-is” rejection rate just increases first-round rejections by 8 percent. However, this 8 percent rejection rate represents half of all prospective papers and, given that *AMJ* receives some 800 – 900 new submissions per year, that accounts for some 70 papers that would potentially constitute false-negatives. Further, given the commitment of *AMJ*’s editors to a four-week turnaround time on submissions, it appears that for the authors of the 70 papers in question, the review might be well worth the wait. Indeed, in a subsequent forum focusing mostly on the revise and resubmit process, authors of award-winning papers from this same journal provided detailed accounts extending a good deal of credit for their papers’ level of success to the review process (*AMJ*, 2006a).

Without question, the “as-is” process returns more autonomy to authors, allowing them to resubmit their rejected manuscripts elsewhere and certainly to be freed from the often relentless, blistering self-righteous attacks from lofty critics. But at the same time, the authors lose a chance for a potentially committed community of scholars dedicated to a chosen journal to work with them steadily to develop their composition in new ways. Admittedly, paper development is available in the “as-is” process, but it would be voluntary, and there is no evidence that newly empowered authors would take advantage of the opportunity.

As for some of the other concerns addressed by the “as-is” process, the issue of divergence among reviewers is cited as causing a fragmentation of a piece; yet, it can also lead to a paper’s enrichment through the integration of previously overlooked perspectives (Kassirer and Campion, 1994). The *AMJ* editors in one of the aforementioned accounts (Rynes et al., 2005) even admit to building *lack* of interrater reliability into their reviewer selection process to promote diversity of thought. When it comes to the plight of derogatory evaluation, the conduct of review can be monitored by attentive editors. Finally, although the authors make use of a study by Bedeian (2003) that starkly illustrates some of the heretofore mentioned ill-effects on original scholarship by peer review, a heavy majority of the respondents in this same study found the comments of their reviewers to have been useful.

Recommendations

Given the legitimate concerns raised in the Tsang and Frey article about peer review structure and process, are there any remedies that might be less severe than a first-round as-is methodology? I have made the paradoxical case that though guilty of hegemonic and particularistic practice, peer review, when seriously internalized toward the noble ends of scholarship advancement and writer development, can indeed be constructive. To ward off the personal and political ambitions of reviewers, should their identities be revealed (McCutchen, 1991)? Unfortunately, this option could lead to the exacting of revenge or grudge for which the double-blind process was enacted to begin with (Corlett, 2004). Perhaps, we should take the opposite tack of recognizing constructive and active reviewers and providing them at their

discretion with a byline on articles once published. Meanwhile, editorial staffs should continue to hold referees privately accountable, using both authorial and editorial evaluations, and the periodical should publish its peer review criteria and procedures (Knoll, 1990). A formal appeals process should also be afforded to rejected authors.

If the academic review process continues to break down, we may not be far off from the method familiar in literary reviews of using well-trained, disciplined master reviewers or a cadre of internal reviewers. If, however, we prefer to keep the practice among peers and retain the benefits of constructive developmental review, we might consider a number of methods to “professionalize” the process. I am not suggesting that management is or even should be a profession with this assertion, but there is certainly a role for the management *education* professoriate, as members of a professional institution, to become more involved in the process of peer review. This process has already begun by the formal attention dedicated to it by our principal journals, such as this one and its sister publications, as noted in the introduction.

Beginning with the voicing of concern, management educators can launch into constructive action on a number of fronts. At the early stages of one’s career, graduate-level training and seminars could be offered to prospective reviewers to be followed by hands-on learning and coaching. Professional associations, such as the Academy of Management and its affiliates, can provide a venue for such training at their professional conferences or through periodic workshops. The Academy of Management reliably sponsors workshops on peer review, but its predominant focus has been for neophyte writers on how to “get through” the review process. However, two of its divisions sponsor a “craft of reviewing” workshop at the annual meeting.

Sessions of this nature should be emulated at other venues to assist new reviewers prepare constructive reviews. These sessions would initially provide direct instruction on how to organize, process, and draft a review. A range of topics would be covered, such as: acknowledging journal guidelines, handling editorial communications, differentiating types of papers, using constructive language, understanding the boundaries of reviewer contribution, confronting ethical issues, and detecting and overcoming personal biases. In subsequent workshops, participants could be given the same paper and mutually compare their review with their peers. Using experiential models of learning, prospective reviewers might also be assigned a coach or mentor to assist them in their first set of actual reviews. There should also be some attention given to the role of peer review as a vital cog in the longstanding tradition of academic freedom and peer control within the academy (Hamilton, 1997; Meier, 1997; Raelin, 1991).

Generic peer review training would not take the place of a recommended orientation that each journal's editorial team would provide on the policies, procedures, and standards (including ethical guidelines) of the respective journal (Hamilton, 2003; Strayhorn, McDermott, & Tanguay, 1993). The editorial mentoring role, suggested above, could be formalized in which senior members of the editorial team might offer constructive feedback to junior members on a select set of their reviews. As has become common practice among some journals, reviewers should receive the complete set of reviews on the papers to which they have been assigned, allowing them an opportunity to learn through peer comparison, especially from exemplary reviewers. The editorial staff might also dedicate a portion of their editorial board meetings to the review process, taking note not only of the quantitative criteria of performance (percentage of manuscripts accepted, turnaround time, length of reviews, and the like) but of qualitative criteria,

such as best and worst practices, avoidance of false negative decisions, inter-reviewer agreement, or professional decorum in reviewer writing style.

Ultimately, there may be no substitute for a reliable selection process. Many editors methodically scrutinize ad hoc reviews to screen potential entrants to their permanent editorial boards. Boards need to be constituted of scholars known for their qualifications, not their connections. Reviewers should consequently be chosen on their capability to specifically apprehend the field or sub-field in question, leading to a contribution that intellectually challenges and ripens the manuscript under review.

The “as-is” review process recommended by Tsang and Frey has brought to light some of the serious limitations of our peer review process, as it has been institutionalized in the academy especially among our social science publications. In particular, it illustrates how what should have been a professionally constructive and developmental process became transposed in some cases into a social process of conceit and cronyism. Yet we are not quite ready to abandon the value of developmental peer review in favor of authorial autonomy accompanied by literary evaluation. Authors need their peers to help them refine their thinking as long as they are concurrently encouraged to present perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms of substance and method. Indeed, it is such challenge that often leads to transformative learning in our field.

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