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The Epistemology and Ethics of Journal Reviewing: A Second Look

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*When thou reviewest this, thou dost review
The very part was consecrate to thee*

Shakespeare Sonnet Ixxiv

The concept of “peer review” is widely regarded as fundamental to ensuring quality, integrity and rigour in all facets of academic and professional life, including career advancement, academic publication and the award of research grants, scholarships and fellowships. However, there is often little reflection on just what peer review is, what it is really meant to achieve and what its limitations may be.

The issue of reviewing is an important one for any academic journal not just because it is central to the production process but also because it raises deep epistemological and ethical concerns. Reviewers and editors have the power both to influence the academic progression of authors [1] and to give status to selected information, thus, determining the direction of the research endeavour and the course, quality and reputation of scientific and intellectual practices [2].

An ethics journal such as the JBI should be especially sensitive to the ethical aspects of its own operations and policies. Following a long process of reflection on the issues raised by reviewing practices, the JBI has established comprehensive editorial policies regarding the review of manuscripts submitted to the journal [3]. In the course of our analysis, we sought to clarify: the goals and purposes of reviews and the possible ways in which they may be undermined or compromised; the available evidence regarding the quality and reliability of reviewing for academic journals; the evidence regarding the misuse of the reviewing process; and strategies for preventing abuses of power, such as declarations of dualities of interests and un-blinding of articles and reviews.

Examination of the available literature is not entirely encouraging. Concerns are persistently voiced about the expertise and training of reviewers and the effectiveness and efficiency of reviewers in detecting significant deficiencies in manuscripts [4, 5]. While empirical data are relatively limited, a recent Cochrane review of studies of reviewing practices has suggested that reviews often fail to improve the quality of manuscripts [6], and it has been argued that reviewing stifles innovation [7]

and that reviewers often resist attempts to make the process more efficient and effective either through the introduction of guidelines [6] or through the use of electronic systems [8]. The evidence about reviewing practices and processes led Richard Smith, the former editor of the British Medical Journal, to conclude that:

...we have little evidence on the effectiveness of peer review but we have considerable evidence on its defects. In addition to being poor at detecting gross defects and almost useless for detecting fraud it is slow, expensive, profligate of academic time, highly subjective, something of a lottery, prone to bias, and easily abused [5].

It is possible that this assessment is unduly pessimistic and that the problem is not as intractable as it may seem. What is clearly required, however, is a clear understanding of the ethical purposes of the reviewing process and a realistic appraisal of the inherent complexities that need to be addressed.

The basic goal of reviewing is to facilitate publication of high-quality articles, not to act as a gatekeeper or to protect the interests or reputations of particular journals or institutions. Reviewing also has the potential to provide a means for engaging authors and readers in an interactive dialogue around the form and substance of their academic discourses and to encourage conversations about the development and deepening of ideas and practices. This means that reviewers should regard themselves as far as possible as representatives of the community of scholars served by a journal and, where possible, provide constructive guidance and feedback to authors, with a view to assisting them in the refinement of their work.

Having identified these strong underlying general purposes, it must be recognised that each journal establishes its own intellectual mission or ethos in relation to which editors have to make their decisions. Accordingly, decisions about how to compose or curate their journals and about whether particular manuscripts should or should not be published is not that of the reviewers but of the editors who not only have access to a variety of reviews but also have a vision of the journal and the contribution it seeks to make. Editorial decisions about manuscripts must take into account, among other factors, the nature and objectives of the journal and the importance, originality, clarity, timeliness and potential impact of the manuscript, including its potential social impact and contribution. The assessment of these criteria may be facilitated by information provided in the reviewing process but should not be directed by it.

Challenges for the Journal of Bioethical Inquiry

Our review of the field has identified a number of key challenges for our own journal:

1. Reviewing practices and the mission of the JBI

One of the key aims of the JBI is to foster new work in a range of disciplinary fields relevant to ethics and bioethics. The Journal therefore recognises that it has a responsibility to provide support for authors new to the field of bioethics as well as for established authors working in new disciplinary areas. The reviewing process provides one of the main ways in which advice and assistance can be provided to authors to help them improve and develop their manuscripts.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Journal also imposes an obligation on us to try to facilitate communication and understanding across the boundaries of the various discourses we encompass. To assist with this, we have decided that for each manuscript, at least one reviewer should have recognised expertise in the primary discipline from which the manuscript arises and at least one should be chosen from outside the primary disciplinary perspective to support and foster interdisciplinary dialogues and exchanges. The main task of the latter reviewer will be to identify aspects of the paper that may need to be revised so that it speaks to as wide an audience as possible.

2. Anonymity, reviewing and the creation and consolidation of an academic community

The question of anonymity of authors and reviewers is a controversial one. In the past, the vast majority of scientific journals concealed the names of reviewers from authors and the names of authors from reviewers. In recent years, however, this process has come under intense scrutiny, and more and more journals have moved to a process of open or semi-open review. As yet, there is no consensus within the academic community, and there is ongoing discussion on the relative merits of anonymity of either authors or reviewers. On the one hand, anonymity is said to facilitate open and frank criticisms and to protect reviewers—especially junior reviewers—from reprisals. On the other, it is argued that anonymity encourages abuse of power and actually undermines disinterested and courageous expressions of opinion [9, 10]. The limited extant empirical evidence on this question is largely inconclusive and offers little practical guidance. However, the mere fact there are few data to support a clear correlation between blinding of reviews and their objectivity or constructiveness suggests that the choice of policy may be based more on moral and political considerations rather than on ‘scientific’ ones [6].

After careful examination of the arguments, the JBI has decided that the identities of authors should be open to reviewers and that reviewers should be given the choice of either remaining anonymous or signing their reviews openly. Reviewers will still be able to make confidential comments to editors if they feel the need to do so. Data will be collected regarding the impact of disclosure of the identities of reviewers on the nature and outcomes of reviews to guide the further development of this policy.

Ideally, the review process should occur as an interactive dialogue involving authors, editors and reviewers. For the most part, there are practical limitations to the extent to which such dialogues can be conducted, although some journals have sought to develop the concept of interactive reviews by utilising online discussion forums. The JBI is supportive of the concept of an interactive reviewing process and will examine ways of continuing to develop and refine the processes by which we promote dialogues involving the community of authors, reviewers and readers which we serve.

3. Dualities and conflicts of interest in the reviewing process

There are specific ethical responsibilities with which reviewers should be familiar. These include respect for confidentiality, constructive critique, impartiality and integrity, disclosure of dualities and conflicts of interest, and timeliness and responsiveness. It is expected that reviews are honest, courteous, prompt and constructive. Comments should be factual and, where possible, provide constructive suggestions for improvement. Reviewers must take care to declare any dualities of interests they may have, including non-pecuniary ones, which sometimes require careful reflection

and honest disclosure. Although there is no reliable empirical evidence regarding the extent to which reviewers' biases and personal interests intrude into the reviewing process, such intrusions are likely to be significant, especially in highly competitive fields.

There are also the responsibilities of the Journal to the reviewers. Reviewers often remain unaware of the outcome of their efforts. As a gesture of respect to them, once an editorial decision has been made, we will undertake to inform reviewers of the outcome of the reviewing process and to provide them with access to the other reviews of the paper in question.

Finally, some special categories of manuscript, such as solicited manuscripts, can present difficult issues. Journals often invite specific authors to contribute material: in our case, as mentioned above, this is important to ensure adequate coverage of under-represented or newly developing disciplines. Authors sometimes assume that an invitation to submit represents a guarantee that their article will be published without revision. This is not correct, however, as solicited manuscripts still need to undergo adequate review. Here, as with other papers, reviews both provide a service to authors and help to ensure the quality of material that is published. In the case of articles invited from minority or under-represented, groups editors may need to take on active roles to give authors guidance and assistance.

The production of a journal—including an ethics journal—presents a range of challenges, both technical and ethical. It is important that the issues are identified clearly and debated as frankly and openly as possible. It is certain that the decisions we have made will be questioned and contested. Our commitment is to serve the community of our authors and readers and we look forward to the ongoing dialogues.

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