

Reflections on enhancing accountability in the peer-review process.

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Abstract:

Having served as an editor of a peer-reviewed journal (Family Relations) over the last four years, I read Epstein's (October 1995) comment with great interest. Among a number of thought-provoking suggestions, he recommended that two changes should immediately be made in the editorial review process: (a) Reviewers should sign their reviews, and (b) authors should be provided with the opportunity to evaluate the quality of each of the reviews on their manuscript. Although I disagree with the first recommendation, I agree in principle with the second.

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Article:

Having served as an editor of a peer-reviewed journal (Family Relations) over the last four years, I read Epstein's (October 1995) comment with great interest. Among a number of thought-provoking suggestions, he recommended that two changes should immediately be made in the editorial review process: (a) Reviewers should sign their reviews, and (b) authors should be provided with the opportunity to evaluate the quality of each of the reviews on their manuscript. Although I disagree with the first recommendation, I agree in principle with the second.

In my opinion, Epstein's (1995) suggestions can be subsumed in the general claim that there needs to be more accountability built into the peer review process. In the present system, with reviewers remaining anonymous to the authors and with reviewers receiving no feedback from the authors (and typically little from the editor), reviewers are only somewhat accountable for the quality, timeliness, and tone of their reviews. Because of this lack of accountability, some reviewers may not review the manuscript as thoroughly as they could, may make inappropriate suggestions stemming from a misunderstanding of some important point(s), may be overly critical in their comments, may not review the manuscript in a timely fashion, or may be caustic in the tone of their remarks.

In my editorial experience, even in the bounds of the traditional system, I have attempted to reduce the likelihood of authors receiving nonconstructive and even destructive reviews by only

sending manuscripts to reviewers who I know provide constructive and helpful reviews. Reviewers who even once provide a cursory review or are overly caustic in their remarks are not asked to review again. However, although I have found that most reviewers provide relatively balanced and constructive reviews, my efforts have not completely resolved the dilemmas to which Epstein (1995) referred, and I have struggled to generate better ways to address them. Consequently, I applaud all efforts, including Epstein's, to add accountability to this process. In the remaining part of this comment, I reflect on each of his recommendations and then make some concluding remarks.

Should Authors Be Given the Opportunity to Provide Feedback to the Editor About the Quality of the Reviews?

I am attracted to Epstein's (1995) notion of asking authors to routinely provide written feedback to each of the reviewers of their manuscripts. Some editors carefully evaluate the quality of each external review, and I believe that this practice, if reviewers are aware of it, has the desirable effect of enhancing reviewer accountability. If reviewers knew that each of their reviews would also be evaluated by the authors, my sense is that the quality of the reviews would be better and the tone more helpful. In addition, this procedure would enable authors to feel that they have some input in the review process, which addresses the point that authors often feel that they are the helpless victims of incompetent, biased, or inexperienced reviewers. I believe that the advantages of such an approach outweigh the relatively minor pragmatic concerns, such as the additional costs and time required to implement such a process. It should be noted that this procedure would be effective only if authors provided feedback after the final editorial decision was made. Thus, authors who have been asked to revise and resubmit their manuscripts would not be asked to provide their input on the quality of the reviews until after a final decision was made on the revised manuscript. It might be argued that it would be difficult for authors of rejected manuscripts to provide fair and useful feedback about the quality of the reviews that they received. However, students who do poorly in an academic course are asked to provide their impressions of the quality of instruction that they received. Whereas some may take the opportunity to strike out at the instructor in the evaluation, my sense is that most are able to provide fair and useful input. Similarly, I suspect that most authors of rejected manuscripts are able and willing to provide fair and valuable feedback on the review process.

Should Reviewers Be Forced to Sign Their Reviews?

I do not believe that accountability would be enhanced by requiring reviewers to reveal their identity by signing their reviews. Allowing reviewers to remain anonymous to the authors facilitates candid and honest evaluations of the manuscript. If reviewers were forced to identify themselves, I fear that a number of undesirable outcomes might result. First, it is possible that reviews would tend to be much more positive than they are under the present system and that reviewers would be hesitant to make negative comments. As anyone with editorial experience knows, this would make the editor's job much more difficult than it currently is. It is only slightly

better to have an overly laudatory review than to have an overly critical one. Given that journal space is precious, only a relatively small proportion of manuscripts submitted to most journals can be published. If reviews became much more positive than they currently are, it would be more difficult to determine which manuscripts should be published. Such a situation may detract from the fairness of the editorial process, as editors would be forced to make more unilateral decisions than they currently do.

Second, compounding the first potential undesirable outcome, it is possible that reviewers who have negative impressions of a particular manuscript and who do not want to sign their name to a negative review will be more likely to return the manuscript to the editor unreviewed. This, too, would have the effect of making the editor's job more difficult, as well as compounding the challenges of finding a sufficient number of constructive reviews on which to base an editorial decision.

Third, particularly in relatively circumscribed and focused research areas, it is not uncommon for authors and reviewers to know each other and to even have professional relationships. In such cases, reviewers might be even more hesitant to provide critical comments or to review the manuscript if they were forced to identify themselves. Finally, from the authors' standpoint, receiving critical comments from a reviewer whose identity is known may strain already existing professional relationships or reduce the likelihood that productive relationships may develop in the future.

Conclusions

For these reasons, I believe that the accountability of the review process can be substantially enhanced by the two activities that I have described in this comment: (a) careful screening of reviewers by the editor and (b) providing authors with the opportunity to evaluate the constructiveness of the reviewer's reviews after a final editorial decision has been made. If these two activities were thoughtfully implemented, I believe that it would be unnecessary to force reviewers to reveal their identity to the authors of the manuscript. I also wish to clarify that I think that it is appropriate for reviewers to voluntarily reveal their identity. In fact, there have been a number of instances when authors have asked me if they could thank a reviewer for a particularly constructive review. In such cases, I have asked reviewers if they would be willing to reveal their identities to the author (and they have always consented). My concern is with mandating the revelation of identity.

Epstein (1995) should be commended for fostering debate on how to improve the constructiveness of the editorial review process. By following his suggestion of providing authors with the opportunity to evaluate the quality of the reviews they receive on their manuscripts, the accountability of the process will be enhanced. However, to maintain the integrity of the process by providing editors with the candid impressions of the reviewers, reviewers should remain anonymous.

One critical issue that Epstein (1995) and I have not addressed is how to make editors more accountable for their actions. One might argue that authors, and perhaps reviewers as well, should have the opportunity to provide feedback to the editor on the quality of his or her editorial work. However, unlike the situation in which authors provide feedback to reviewers whose identities are not known to them, the editor knows the identities of the authors and the reviewers, and they, in turn, know the identity of the editor. This mutual lack of anonymity, in my opinion, lessens the potential benefit of a direct feedback mechanism from authors and reviewers to the editor. For example, many authors and reviewers might hesitate to criticize the editor when they fear that the criticism could jeopardize their chances of subsequently publishing in that journal. Despite this difficulty, implementing Epstein's recommendation that there should be a formal appeal process available for authors of rejected manuscripts would take an initial step toward enhancing the editor's accountability. This recommendation merits further consideration and debate.

REFERENCE

Epstein, S. (1995). What can be done to improve the journal review process. *American Psychologist*, 50, 883– 885.