

REPORTS

Reviewing Papers for Social Science Journals: Recurrent Problems and Suggestions for Improving the Evaluation Process

ROBERT L. MOXLEY & DOUGLAS BACHTEL*

This article highlights the challenges associated with reviewing articles for professional journals in the social sciences. Topics explored include the importance of reviewers in the publication process, how reviewers are selected and their willingness to review. Suggestions on critiquing a paper such as (a) having its eventual publication in a journal as the goal and (b) taking a "state-of-the-art" perspective rather than a "how would I do this" approach also are presented. Finally, the importance of spelling out the reasons regarding revision or rejection and the tendency of some reviewers to reject all papers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that refereeing academic publications provides a service to those submitting articles may be alien to an author who currently is collecting rejections. Reviewers, however, represent a vital link in the publication process, yet, similar to academic writing, little systematic training or instruction for reviewing papers has been developed. In the development of a science some things invariably receive greater emphasis, and it may be that the level of intensity social scientists place on their methodological and theoretical activities simply has overshadowed the review processes. Understanding the review process, however, is fundamental to writers and editors and merits investigation because of the historic importance placed upon scholarly productivity for tenure and promotion. It is particularly important in the social sciences because very often a lower percentage of submitted articles are published compared with other academic disciplines.

Robert L. Moxley is in the department of Sociology at North Carolina State University, and also editor of *Southern Rural Sociology*. Douglas Bachtel is an Extension Rural Sociologist at the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602, and also former editor of the *Journal of the Community Development Society*. Special thanks to James C. Walters and Faye Scoggins for their editorial assistance.

THE REVIEWING PROCESS

Stages, Selections, and Objectives

The review process for most journals begins after the editor has screened the article for obvious problems such as inappropriateness for the journal, incomplete references, failure to provide sufficient copies or follow the basic directions outlined in the "instructions to authors" section. The next step is selecting reviewers. This process varies greatly from journal to journal. Some editors rely almost exclusively on social networks to find reviewers, while others work from files systematically constructed from surveys of society members or known professionals working in a particular discipline.

Incidentally, but fundamental to the process, if you would like to review articles but have never been asked, write to an editor and volunteer. Most editors welcome such requests. Do not send a copy of your vita or a long, detailed letter outlining your qualifications. Rather, a brief discussion of your research interests and area of expertise is sufficient. Eventually most editors will use a systematic, on-line computer data base and software format for identifying a national or even international pool of appropriate reviewers, but that day has arrived only for a very few.

Usually three reviewers familiar with the topic are chosen, and they perform an absolutely essential task. Whatever method is chosen, good reviewers are hard to find. Remember that three people in separate institutions have to be contacted and their work coordinated within a prescribed time frame. Considering normal assignments, meetings, holidays, vacations, and a myriad of other reasons, it can be extremely difficult to locate three people with the appropriate expertise and have them commit to the same time schedule.

Luey (1987) points out that referees have a great responsibility, and anyone who is not willing to take the job seriously should not agree to review. Also, a referee must be competent in the field, which includes being familiar with current research; able to judge other peoples work objectively; willing to spend the time it takes to evaluate the article; make useful suggestions; and be committed to the task. When asked to be a referee, make sure to meet your own standards or at least those you expect when your work is reviewed. If you feel you cannot complete the assignment in the allotted time, immediately decline and, if possible, suggest an alternate reviewer.

Referees can save an author from mistakes of fact, poor logic, bad grammar, ignorance of sources, mathematical mistakes, and other embarrassments. On the positive side, they also can push the author to explore more thoroughly their topic (the data or the literature or both) which sometimes results in a ground breaking, leading-edge article rather than merely an acceptable one.

Reviewers should remember that their purpose is not merely to screen bad articles, but also to recognize good ones and to help more articles from the "unacceptable" category into the "acceptable" (Luey,1987). Certainly not all criticism need be constructive, but much of it should be. The amount and its acerbity should vary depending on the value placed on the overall manuscript. Truly "bad" manuscripts should receive the severest reviewer response, but without attempting to be punitive.

In terms of priority, once the decision is made to do an evaluation, the reviewers' first assignment is to determine if there is a fatal flaw in the manuscript. Examples could be: (a) the literature review is hopelessly out of date, irrelevant, or grossly

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incomplete, (b) the sample is not adequate to allow a legitimate test of the hypothesis the author claims to have tested, (c) the statistical tests are inappropriate, (d) the author's theoretical orientation and findings are incompatible or have not been adequately addressed, or (e) the research design is so bad that too many obvious competing hypotheses are available as to render the author's conclusion meaningless. If so, the detailed criticisms can be saved for the day when the reviewer has a manuscript without a fatal flaw. When this occurs, simply state what the irreparable problem is, reject the manuscript and return it. Experience shows that most (about 90 percent) manuscripts, however, do *not* fall into this category. Remember that reviewers are likely at some time to be both referee and author, and to perform both jobs well it is important to keep in mind what it is like to be in the other role while performing either.

Luey (1987) stresses that reviewers need to consider the following: (a) Is the topic worth investigating? (b) Is the research sound? (c) Is the thesis clearly and convincingly argued? (d) Does the evidence support the thesis? (e) Is there adequate documentation? and (f) Is the writing clear and succinct?

Reviewers also should ask the following question: "Did the manuscript suggest anything new?" One question that should *not* be asked, although many reviewers do, is: "Is this the way I would have written the article?" A similar question not to ask is: "Is this exactly the way I would have done the research?" Interjecting personal standards instead of professional standards limits creativity and, more importantly, inhibits change.

The following points represent some of the most important considerations:

First: When you get a manuscript, please (in the name of all the poor struggling non-tenured young authors) perform the task in the allotted time period. If you cannot, send it back immediately so another reviewer can be selected.

Second: For most journals, a paper should not be rejected simply because it is not perfect, the best you've ever seen, or good enough for a Pulitzer Prize.

Third: On the first reading try to detect a fatal flaw. If there is no fatal flaw, begin the process of judging such things as quality of research, theoretical underpinnings, a complete and current literature review and the overall magnitude of the article's contribution. Is it of sufficient merit and relevance for that particular journal? If not, suggest an appropriate journal.

Fourth: Discuss all of the points regarding the decision to "accept", "reject" or "revise and resubmit". Make sure enough information has been provided to justify an accept or reject for the sake of the editor and the author. Never tell an author to revise and resubmit an article without detailing what needs to be done. Try not to instill false hope. Some papers can be relegated to revise and resubmit limbo without ever having a chance of being accepted. If the paper is unacceptable, reject it outright. Never reject a paper, however, without spelling out the reasons for rejection.

CLOSING COMMENTS ON THE REVIEWING PROCESS

Professional Responsibility, Motivation, and Ethical Considerations

Something should also be said about willingness to review an article. Most faculty members are generous with their time. Willingness to review does not require a major investment of time except on esoteric, theoretical subjects where there are few experienced people. There are some topics, however, such as rural health, in which getting experienced, qualified reviewers is hard because they are relatively few and are in considerable demand for such tasks. As part of their professional responsibilities, social scientists should attempt to make time to review manuscripts. When reviewers do not respond, some editors wind up selecting anyone who will respond. At least recommend someone appropriate - i.e., an expert in the area - if possible.

The decision to accept responsibility for reviewing will depend on the magnitude of the task involved. To review an article that requires four or five hours may preclude acceptance of the task. The quality of the review, however, should be the primary consideration. If you do not anticipate that the review will take very long and accept the assignment, then you are ethically bound to take whatever time is required in order to complete a first-rate review.

Some may think there are always plenty of good reviewers available, but consider the typical situation. If the number of people who are actually teaching or engaged in research or service work on a particular topic are counted and the rest are dropped out, a large number of reviewers are automatically lost. Eliminate those who recently have completed reviews or have refused, and the pool grows even smaller. When this happens, editors often have to take an unknown, hopefully on the recommendation of an experienced person in the area.

Reviewing manuscripts need not be looked upon entirely as an altruistic, unselfish task, because critiquing a paper also can assist writers in improving their own communication skills. Editors know the reviewers who are willing to complete first-rate reviews. The others lose out in the long run because their work is recognized as superficial or mediocre. The better the job, the greater the professional opportunities in the future. A good way to demonstrate ability is through carefully prepared reviews that provide evidence of professional competence. In addition, being a reviewer provides an advanced view of the patterns and trends of new research and ideas well before other professionals who rely on publications alone.

Remember always that a manuscript is a privileged communication. It should not be used, cited, or shown to other colleagues. Specific questions, however, about certain aspects, such as the appropriateness of a statistical test, certainly could be directed to colleagues as consultants if the reviewer feels there is no danger of revealing the author's(s)' identity.

If selected to referee an article that you previously have reviewed and rejected for another journal, it is appropriate to decline and suggest another qualified, unbiased reviewer. There is one exception when this happens. If you thought the article was unacceptable for one journal but acceptable for another, or if you recommended publication but it was not published, it would be appropriate to proceed. Also, previous reviewers who have already rejected the article may have developed some negative biases which are not fair to an author dealing with a second and presumed independent journal. The general point is not to put an individual in double jeopardy for the same article.

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The bottom line or biggest problem for authors and editors is turnaround time. Everything else is secondary. Editors ask reviewers to critique an article in three weeks, but only a very few do. Most take about six to eight weeks, but a substantial minority take several months. If you are not going to review the paper or cannot come close to the specified time frame, do the whole enterprise a favor and call the editor or send a handwritten note as quickly as possible.

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