Reviewing manuscripts for Australian Social Work

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Abstract

Reviewing manuscripts for journals is an integral part of the research process, and a service to authors, editors, and readers of academic journals. Reviewing requires much more than finding errors or problems in a manuscript, it involves taking part in an intellectual exchange, and providing feedback about how a paper could be improved. This paper aims to provide guidance to reviewers by setting out a general approach to writing reviews for *Australian Social Work* that are respectful, constructive and responsible.

Reviewing manuscripts for Australian Social Work

Australian social work needs a strong base of research to tackle persistent social problems, and the journal provides a platform to promulgate social work research so its messages can be heard among the many voices influencing policy and practice. As the journal of the professional association, *Australian Social Work* provides a gauge of the wellbeing of the profession and its research foundations, so it is vital to our standing in the community that the journal publishes high-quality papers. Peer review of manuscripts is an essential part of the scholarly publication process, and journal editors rely on reviewers for advice when making decisions about publication. *Australian Social Work* has a long-established peer review policy and is very appreciative of the contribution that reviewers make. Each year we acknowledge this by listing their names in the journal. In 2013, the journal recorded thanks to 174 reviewers, mostly social workers, but including people from other fields, a mix of practitioners and academics, both international and Australian. Every reader of the journal benefits from the voluntary labour of reviewers, because they contribute to the quality of the papers that are eventually published. Most reviewers are extremely generous with their time and expertise. While good reviews are invaluable for authors and editors, reviewing tends to be learn-as-you-go. If you submit a paper you see the reviews other people do, and you learn by example, whether good or bad. If you do a review, you often see the feedback another reviewer has given the same paper. But as any author can attest, reviews vary greatly in length, detail and style. *Australian Social Work* is committed to developing and maintaining high standards of peer review. To contribute to the ongoing enhancement of peer review, this paper provides a short introduction to reviewing, and aims to assist journal reviewers – and consequently authors, editors and readers - by proposing three principles to guide reviewers in their work.

Overview of reviewing

There are numerous guidelines available for reviewing that offer both general pointers and specific technical advice on different aspects of reviewing. The most authoritative and relevant to reviewing for *Australian Social Work* are:

- (1) The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) provides ethical guidelines for peer review (COPE, 2013) that cover the general principles of reviewing, as well as advice about what to do upon being invited to review, during review, when preparing the report, and post-review.
- (2) *Australian Social Work* provides guidance about reviewing on Manuscript Central by setting out criteria for recommending to the editor whether a paper should be accepted, revised, or rejected. Guidance pertaining to the responsibilities of reviewers is contained in the journal's Code of Practice. Detailed guidelines for reviewers are under further development and will be available in 2015.
- (3) The *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (2007) has a section on peer review, oriented to the review of research grant applications but applicable to the review of manuscripts.

Within the scholarly literature, debate about peer review revolves around two main questions. The first question relates to its purpose and outcomes. There is not much evidence that reviewers accurately detect problems with research design, presentation, or interpretation in a paper (Cicchetti 1991; Ware & Monkman, 2008). If reviewers do not agree about the scientific merit of papers, authors may complain that reviewers are inconsistent (Cicchetti 1991; Staller, 2013). But these may not be the right criteria for judging reviews. The counter-argument is that screening out poorly designed or executed studies, or those with marginal value, cannot be objectively determined. Further, disagreement between reviewers should be expected to some degree, because it reflects the different expertise of reviewers, and is part of the dialogue inherent in the research process (Staller, 2013). When authors respond to reviewer feedback, they may correct, but they also clarify and polish. They may be responding to a reviewer who didn't get the point the author was attempting to make, possibly because it was not communicated well, or because of the reviewer's extra expertise and knowledge of the area, or because of a different lens which should reasonably be taken into account. For example, a reviewer might suggest amendments if the author has taken no account of cultural difference, or assumed consistency of policy or practice across jurisdictions. It should be noted that most papers require revision, and many are returned to the original reviewers for a second or even third review following revision.

The second question examined in the literature is whether reviews should be anonymous. Double-blind review (in which author and reviewer names are not known to each other) aims to ensure reviews are forthright and independent. The critics of blind review say (1) it is impractical, especially in the age of the internet, when it is easy to track topics and authors, especially in small research communities (like social work) where people tend to know each other's work; and (2) it is not ethical to withhold the identity of a reviewer who is making an important judgement about the work of others (Ware & Monkman, 2008). Some journals have single-blind review (reviewer knows the name of the author, but not vice-versa) or have moved to open review. The policy of *Australian Social Work* is to use double-blind review except when authors choose not to anonymise self-citations, in which case the paper is single-blind reviewed. The advantage of allowing single-blind review is that the originality of manuscripts can be considered in the light of previous publications by the author on the same topic (Hughes, 2014).

Despite debates about its value and purpose, and noting that peer review adds time and cost to the publication process, peer review remains widely accepted as part of the quality assurance process (Ware & Monkman, 2008). Most authors believe that peer review improves the quality of their publications, and many reviewers undertake reviews because they like to reciprocate the benefits of having others review their own papers (Ware & Monkman, 2008; Ware 2013). This situates the review process as an exchange. The reviewer is not the expert finding flaws, the task of the reviewer is to provide respectful, constructive, and responsible feedback on the manuscript to assist the editor in making decisions about publication (Lee, 1995; Staller 2013). These three principles for reviewing are elaborated below.

Peer review principles

Be respectful

Reviewing is a professional activity, and authors — even if unknown to you personally — are your colleagues. Be polite and courteous, especially when making criticisms. Show you have read the paper by providing a short summary of it at the beginning of your review. A sentence about the type of paper — for example research, theoretical piece, policy analysis, or practice reflection — is also useful to the editor. Provide a balanced review that sets out both positives and negatives of the paper. It is generally best to identify the strengths of a manuscript prior to outlining its limitations, perhaps recognising the efforts of

the author in undertaking research, addressing an important question, or developing the paper. Don't just list the problems, or dismiss a paper with a two-sentence review. Set out the reasoning behind your recommendation. Detail the sections that require further work.

Be constructive

You have been selected as a reviewer because of your expertise related to the topic of the paper, which may be content expertise or methodological expertise. Apply that expertise to your review, with the aim of helping the author to improve the paper, and helping the editor to make a decision about whether it is ready for publication. Does the paper address an important question, does the introduction outline the significance of the problem in the context of relevant related literature, is the research methodologically and ethically sound, are findings clearly presented and adequately discussed, and conclusions in line with the findings? Does the paper do what it says it is going to do? How could the paper be strengthened? Your review is not just about technical merit. Comment on readability and originality.

Be detailed. First provide some general feedback, and then make specific comments. Are key concepts defined and used consistently? If the methods are not sufficiently detailed, what is missing? For empirical studies, ensure there is information about participant characteristics (if relevant), sampling procedures, sample size, data collection methods and measures, and analytic approach. Check the sub-headings and comment on the overall structure of the paper, as to whether there is a logical flow. Are the limitations of the study acknowledged in the discussion section? Provide feedback on tables, figures, and diagrams. List the corrections required, including corrections to grammar, punctuation, spelling, formatting, and referencing. Manuscripts must comply with APA guidelines as well as the journal's instructions for authors.

Be responsible

The ultimate responsibility of reviewers is to help ensure the accuracy, quality, and ethical standards of material published in the journal. Having accepted the invitation to review, be fair and unbiased. You may not agree with the paper, but your job is to assess its scholarly merits. Read the paper thoroughly. Check everything, including the abstract, reference list, and word length (6000 words maximum including references). The editor will have initially screened the paper to assess whether it is suitable for the journal, but is also seeking your expert opinion about this. Read the 'Information for authors' statement to make sure the paper is within scope for the journal, that it is relevant to contemporary Australian social work and social policy, and is also suitable for an international readership. Given the number of issues that require checking and feedback in a review, up to one page (or 500 words) of constructive feedback is helpful to the editor and the author. A shorter (half-page) review may be adequate for papers that fail to approach minimum standards for a publishable article. A brief review might also be sufficient if a paper is close to publication standard and only requires minor revision, or at second review, when you are assessing whether suggested feedback from reviewers has been incorporated.

Notify the journal if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct or reporting of the research, including plagiarism and duplicate publication. Provide feedback about adherence to basic standards of scholarship:

- is the paper original, does it add to knowledge?
- are methods clearly explained?
- are all knowledge claims substantiated, with no sweeping statements?

Critical reviews of literature, theory, practice, or policy should be conducted systematically and the framework for analysis should be clearly outlined. If you do not have the expertise to assess parts of the paper (such as the statistical components or the analytic approach), stipulate this in your review.

Answer all the questions on manuscript central when you submit your review. Providing 'comments to the author' is essential. It is not essential to provide separate 'comments to the editor' – only do this if there is something you need to alert the editor to that you have not already said in comments to author. In particular, don't reserve negative comments for the editor and make only positive comments to the author. Make an honest recommendation about publication – your recommendation is to the editor, not the author. The journal cannot publish all papers received, so your advice about how much work a paper needs to meet journal standards is vital.

It may not be possible for you to accept every invitation to review. If you cannot do it; decline the invitation as soon as possible and suggest another suitable reviewer if you can. The main concern from authors about peer review is that it is too slow (Ware & Monkman, 2008). So if you do accept the request to review, be timely – generally submit your review within four weeks, but ask for an extension if necessary.

Respect the confidentiality of the manuscript, during and after the review process. After you have read the paper, you may think you know the author's identity. This is not necessarily a problem unless there is a perceived conflict of interest, such as close friendship, having published together previously, conflict or rivalry. In this case, notify the editor.

Conclusion

Reviewing can be seen as taking part in an intellectual conversation about a policy, research or practice question. Respect the review process – as both a writer and receiver of reviews. As well as being a service to the research community, reviewing is a way to keep in touch with the latest research in your field, and can help you to reflect upon your own writing. It also builds your research networks with journal editors. Of course, peer review of manuscripts is only a step along the way. The final decision about publication is up to the editor. And an article will continue to be "reviewed" by readers - who might find it useful and cite it, or ignore it. Either way, as a reviewer you have helped the journal and the author to maximise the value of the paper, and its contribution to knowledge.

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