



Investigating Social Workers' Experiences with Peer Review

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Introduction and Background

Our project explores how peer review functions within social work journals. We hope to examine the quality and effectiveness of the peer review process in these journals with the eventual goal of providing constructive feedback. Despite the ubiquity of peer review to the publishing of social work research, there has been a dearth of formal research exploring its effectiveness. We modeled our study after Thyer & Myers (2003), and its replication by Barker and Thyer (2005). These studies focused on "the timeliness of editorial communications, the helpfulness of these remarks, the apparent competence of the reviewers, the respect with which the reviewers' comments were framed, and the length of time to publication" (Barker & Thyer, 2005 p. 20). These studies found that peer review in social work journals can be of inconsistent quality.

Peer review is an important aspect of social science research—without this system, it would be difficult to trust the results of published studies. Effective peer review means that the articles published in journals are more trustworthy. Peer review also serves an important role in refining journal submissions. With proper peer review, many articles or studies that are not quite at the level necessary for publication can be refined and resubmitted for consideration by editorial staff. The historic inconsistency of peer review in social work reflects negatively on social science research as a whole. Social work seeks to help marginalized or disempowered groups—those who are vulnerable in one way or another. Social science research seeks to determine whether current practices are beneficial and find more effective ways to improve the conditions of these vulnerable groups. Without effective peer review, it is difficult to assess this research and determine the most ethical and effective social work practices. The real-world impact of social work research makes effective peer review all the more important. The Thyer studies, while informative, are already out of date considering the many changes in peer review (which is now done mainly in an online format). Our study hopes to both revisit these earlier studies and expand upon them. We plan to take a more focused view of the specific areas for improvement necessary than past studies on which we based this survey. We seek to assess the quality of reviews and the main aspects that contribute to or detract from this quality.

Methods

Our study takes the form of an anonymous survey of those who have submitted work for publication in the primary social work journals. In constructing the survey, the study question content was informed by the work done by Thyer discussed above. We plan to frame our study of peer review with respect to reviewer comments on submitted manuscripts, paying special attention to respectfulness of comments, helpfulness of comments, and disagreement between reviewers.

Participants: We compiled a non-random sample of participants from top social work colleges in the US using the US News and World Report rankings. These included full-time and adjunct faculty, emeritus professors, and doctoral students. Criteria for eligibility included age (participants had to be 18 years old or older), identifying as a social work academic or practitioner, and having submitted a work to a journal for review within the past five years. The online survey was sent to this list of authors and peer reviewers with some randomized incentives in the form of \$5 gift cards funded by a UROP materials grant. Gift cards are to be given to a randomized list of participants after all responses have been recorded. The offering of incentives is likely to boost survey response rates. Another method used to increase response rates will be sending the survey multiple times. Our survey will be disseminated three times, each with a one-week period of time in between.

Constructing the survey: Our survey was constructed using the Qualtrics platform, which will also be used to analyze and assess the results for the primary problem areas to make suggestions for improvements. Using the Qualtrics platform allowed us to screen participants for eligibility. This platform also allowed for question display logic, allowing us to sort out those who have submitted work as an author and those who have served an editorial role. This will be useful for further analysis in the future, as having served an editorial role may change participants' view of peer review.



Please rate the following characteristics of the journal review process as you experienced it.

Professional competence (i.e., subject-area or technical expertise) of the reviewers

Helpfulness of the reviewers' comments

Respect with which the reviewers framed their comments

Overall quality of the editorial review process



Methods (continued):

Survey structure: The survey begins with our screening questions. It then provides the informed consent page on which participants learn more about the nature of our research and the way in which we will use and protect their data. We follow this with a standard set of demographic questions covering age, gender identity, sexual orientation, racial identity, country of origin, and level of education. We then ask participants about the roles they've served in social work research. The final part of the survey is the most important: questions about participants' experience with peer review and their beliefs on its effectiveness in social work journals.

Results and Discussion

While our data collection is ongoing, we hypothesize that respondents will report wide variability in the quality and consistency of peer review. Preliminary results (n = 17) suggest that this is the case. When rating the "Overall quality of the review process" (on a scale of 0-4, where 0 reflects 'Failure' and 4 reflects 'Excellent'), participants had an average score of 2.62 (sd = 1.14). Participants rated reviewers' helpfulness as a 2.83 (sd = 1.01) on average. Reviewers' competence was rated more highly, at 3.00 (sd = 1.00); while respectfulness was also relatively high at 2.94 (sd = 1.14).

It is likely that participants have had vastly different peer review experiences depending on the journals to which they've submitted and the editors who reviewed their submissions. What is less clear is how different demographics of researchers have experienced peer review. Given that most journals use blind or double-blind review, it is unclear whether there will be racial, sexuality, ethnicity, or gender-based disparities within social work peer review. Disparities in the treatment of researchers based on these identities exist in many fields—they may exist in social work as well. The degree to which they are prevalent, however, is unknown. We ask questions not just about author's experiences with peer review, but also about their beliefs regarding peer review in social work as a whole. It is likely that some researchers will agree that authors reporting positive results are more likely to be published: positive result bias is common in many fields, and social work is likely not exempt. Likewise, it is not unlikely that some authors report having felt pressure to emphasize their own positive results at the detriment of reporting negative results.

References

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