Reflections on the Peer Review Process in Journal Publication

Francis A. McGuire
Clemson University

Many of us have had the professional misfortune of having a manuscript rejected for publication by a journal in our field. It is a humbling experience, but one that is inevitable for those who regularly submit work for publication under the peer review process. A question that must be asked, however, is whether the review process is educational and/or fair. Is rejection a true reflection of the quality of the manuscript and the research it reports, or is it simply a matter of the luck of the draw when reviewers are assigned? In many cases rejection is deserved, and the manuscript was known by the author to have been marginal at best, while at other times the experience can be educational because of a thorough and fair critique that provides constructive criticism. However, this is not always the case. Authors sometimes receive terse reviews that negate potential benefits in the review process. On the other hand, some manuscripts are accepted for publication that do not really merit publication; the choice of reviewers is critical here.

Lundegren (1984) addressed the need for excellence in the scholarly writings of professionals and stated that researchers are the key performers in achieving excellence in professional journals. Although it is the researcher’s responsibility to conduct research that will contribute to the development of the field, reviewers share a major part of that responsibility in their gatekeeping role; the nature of that role should not be underestimated. Indeed, the screening process inherent in journal publication can sometimes prevent quality research from reaching the intended audience.

Although Glenn (1976) was referring specifically to journals in the field of sociology, his comments are germane to the fields of therapeutic recreation and adapted physical education. He identified the three functions of journals as (a) the dissemination of findings, theory, data, and ideas, (b) the gatekeeper function providing the users of research with a basis for judging the credibility of conclusions derived from research, and (c) the basis for conferring recognition and other professional rewards. Glenn stated that the extent to which journals perform these functions successfully depends largely on the review process. In many cases the process is inadequate. Glenn concluded, “if a paper is not conspicuously poor, the outcome of its submission to a journal probably depends more on luck than anything else” (p. 185). A large body of literature in this area provides evidence that the process has flaws which require attention.

Request reprints from Dr. Francis A. McGuire, Dept. of Parks, Recreation, and Tourist Management, Clemson University, Clemson SC 29631.
Lindsey (1978) wrote that "professional journal editors and their referees are the gatekeepers of the public forum of a profession. They control access to the public dissemination and discussion of ideas" (p. 15). However, this gatekeeper function is not always effectively performed. According to Lindsey, the scientific publication system is inadequate in providing meritorious and accurate review of research works. Although Lindsey's comments were made several years ago, they are still an accurate reflection of the review process today.

Since journals serve as the primary means of disseminating research findings, and therefore are the major vehicle for contributing to the knowledge base of a field (Lindsey, 1978), the process through which manuscripts are accepted or rejected for publication requires periodic examination. The importance of the process is magnified in fields that are struggling to establish credibility and effectiveness. Reviewers, and ultimately journal editors, act as gatekeepers, selectively allowing some manuscripts to pass through to publication while closing the door on others. Therefore, freeing the review process of uncertainty, bias, and ambiguity will assist in introducing fairness and consistency into the review process. In addition, critical, public examination of the process may stimulate contributions by individuals who have been deterred by uncertainty and fear of the process.

Although the peer review process is not perfect, it is widely accepted as the primary approach to journal publication. A study by Bradley (1981) indicated specific concerns with the process. Of a sample of 672 university professors who were generally in favor of the review system, many identified specific features that concerned them. These included pressure to conform to what was perceived as strictly the reviewers' subjective preferences, reviewers' false criticisms, inferior expertise, concentration on trivia, treatment by referees as inferior, and careless reading by referees. They also believed reviewers' comments were often made to impress the editor, that editors regarded their knowledge as less important than that of reviewers, and that editors accepted reviewers' evaluations against their better judgment.

Bonjean and Hullum (1978) examined reasons for journal rejection by the Social Science Quarterly. They found that the reasons, ranked by frequency, were unimportant or insignificant contribution, methodological shortcomings, theoretical problems, editorial discretion or journal policies, and problems in presentation. The dissemination of similar information by other journals could help potential authors develop high quality manuscripts.

The review criteria used by APAQ provide an example of a typical approach to the review process. Reviewers receive the manuscript under consideration, along with an editorial recommendation (ER) form and an author feedback (AF) sheet. The ER form requests an evaluation of the manuscript on six dimensions: relevance or significance of the topic, methodology, presentation of information, data analysis, discussion or interpretation, and clarity of writing. In addition, there is room for comments. The final part of the form asks for a recommendation to either accept, accept with minor revisions, accept with major revisions, or reject. This form is returned to the APAQ editor and is not transmitted to the author of the manuscript. The AF form asks for specific comments on the manuscript but does not include the recommendation relative to publication. The manuscript's author receives a copy of this form along with a letter of acceptance or rejection.
from the editor. Although the process seems to be simple and straightforward, its subjective nature leads to serious concerns. For example, Lindsey (1978) indicated that while there may be agreement on the criteria for evaluating manuscripts, studies of interrater reliability indicate there is a lack of consistency in applying these criteria.

According to Reynolds (1984), "perceptions range widely about the importance and value of various types of research questions" (p. 263) in most research dealing with physical activity for special populations. This divergence in basic philosophies toward research should be a major concern in the review process. The lack of inter-reviewer reliability documented by Lindsey (1978) can be at least partly attributed to the value system reviewers apply to manuscripts. If that is the case, the review process is limiting the vitality of the field. Several procedures for improving the review process are suggested, some of which are already incorporated in the review process by many journals, including APAQ:

1. A review of reviewers—Although many editors select reviewers carefully, a formal process of evaluating their work would help strengthen the review process.
2. Feedback to reviewers—In many cases reviewers do not see the comments of other reviewers, or even the final decision regarding a manuscript. But in some journals, including APAQ, copies of reviews by the other individuals who reviewed the same manuscript are sent out. This feedback is helpful in improving later reviews and should become standard practice.
3. Publication of reviewer actions—Periodically publishing summaries of reviewer evaluations would help potential authors identify areas of concern as well as assist in identifying trends in the review process.
4. Reward the reviewer—Manuscript reviewing is a time-consuming process. Unfortunately, it is a relatively insignificant factor in decisions about tenure and promotion. As a result it may take a back seat to tasks such as teaching, research, and publication. Listing the names of reviewers in the journal is a common practice that provides some recognition. A letter suitable for a personnel file and acknowledging the reviewer's time and efforts would provide further recognition and may be of value in faculty evaluations. Giving reviewers preferential treatment in the publishing of their own manuscripts would also help. This might be in the form of accelerated review of their papers or priority in the publishing of accepted manuscripts.
5. Identification of specific criteria to use in manuscript evaluation—Wolff (1970) stated that the criteria for professional publication are nonspecific. Although review sheets provided by journals list criteria, as well as areas included within each criterion, the relative importance of listed areas is left for the reviewer to determine. This results in a phenomenon identified by Smigel and Ross (1970), who wrote, "frequently two editors cited the same criticism, one accepting the article, the other rejection it" (p. 21). Smigel and Ross also reported an incident in which four reviewers described the same manuscript as "well-written" and "useful" but made no further comments. Two of the reviewers recommended accepting the article, one rejected it, and one gave it a conditional acceptance.
6. Careful selection of reviewers—Although reviewing is a relatively thankless task, mere willingness to do it is not a sufficient reason for selection. Matching reviewers with appropriate manuscripts is critical to the review process. It
is also crucial that reviewers not be burdened by too many manuscripts.

7. Give authors an opportunity to respond to reviewers—Although this may result in extra work for reviewers and editors, as well as prolong the review process, it will ultimately result in better manuscripts and more thorough reviews. Authors should also have the opportunity to invite comments from outside experts if there are disagreements with reviewer comments.

The major role of journals in the dissemination of new knowledge will continue. That role can only be strengthened as a result of a critical examination of the review process and the initiation of any needed changes.

References


