

PEER REVIEW, ROOT CANALS, AND OTHER AMAZING LIFE EVENTS

Seemingly innocent words—words that are guilty of nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time—often find themselves in pairings that create strong negative reactions. “Root” and “canal” are two such words. “Third” and “Reich” qualify. “Jim” and “Crow” fit the bill. “Peer” and “review” provide another example, one closer to home for those of us laboring in academic research.

It is a habit of modern academics to draw a parallel between peer review and Winston Churchill’s characterization of democracy: it is the worst possible approach for evaluating scholarly research, save all other options (e.g., Miller, 2006; Tsang, 2013). In this same vein, articles conveying withering critiques appear regularly in all fields, and members of the academic community regularly complain about negativity, harshness, bias, underqualified reviewers, and the like (e.g., Peters & Ceci, 1982; Rennie, 2003; Smith, 2006). Yet peer review has its enduring charms and certainly its untethered defenders. Moreover, the vast majority of survey respondents tend to support the fundamental tenets and tactics of peer review, and they endorse the idea that such reviews improve their work (e.g., Ware & Monkman, 2008). Respondents to a survey in our field overwhelmingly endorsed the idea that peer review had improved their own work (Bedeian, 2003). Many editors in our field also have offered compelling statements of its value (e.g., Davis, 2014).

In this article, we address issues related to peer review with an eye toward ensuring the best possible reviewing at *Academy of Management Discoveries* (AMD). As part of this effort, we hope to signal to potential submitters that we intend to conduct our business a little differently than most other major journals. In some ways, we aspire to return to an earlier, simpler time.

Before we proceed further, it is important to point out that members of the AMD Board of Advisors as well as our fellow editors have assisted in our efforts to craft this discussion of reviewing. They have provided insights, ideas, and advice in informal conversations as well as in response to several formal questions related to the review function in our field. We have also obtained feedback from members of

our editorial review board, who are setting the stage for AMD’s ultimate success. They truly are the best that our field has to offer, and they have embraced our early messages regarding the AMD way. It is a privilege to work with them as we undertake the important journey toward launching AMD.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

As most readers know, peer review involves inviting experts in the field to assist in evaluating the quality and appropriateness of journal submissions. These experts, who are usually anonymous to the authors, reside outside of the team of editors tasked with making final publication decisions. Although instructions and practices vary across journals and fields, they are generally tasked with helping to screen submissions on the basis of 1) how interesting and important the content is and 2) the quality of the research methods employed. The former involves a great deal of subjectivity, whereas the latter may involve somewhat less subjectivity. This practice of appealing to experts outside of the formal pool of decision makers can be traced to the Royal Societies of Edinburgh and London in their formative years, but it seems to have become widespread during the mid-20th century as a response to rapidly increasing journal submissions (Hames, 2012). Today, peer review is a large industry that supports journal submissions numbering almost 2,000,000 per year across approximately 28,000 journals (extrapolated from Hames, 2012). In the Academy of Management (AoM) alone, six journals received a combined 3,180 submissions in 2014. Roughly 700 AoM editorial board members helped to keep the enterprise afloat, along with countless ad hoc reviewers.

Such lengthy history and large scale convey both the time and the need to wring problems and costs out of the system, but this has not happened, as noted in the opening to this article. Sadly, the cost of the ongoing poor judgment in peer review cannot be overstated. For top journals, the primary cost would seem to be lost opportunities to publish the best work while unintentionally publishing inferior work. A study published about 10 years ago (Starbuck, 2005) suggests that a substantial number of articles published in the best management and organizations journals are not actually top papers. A different analysis (Gottfredson, 1978) indicated that reviewers exhibit very low predictive validity

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regarding the future impact of articles, with a correlation of 0.14 between anticipated impact and actual citations. Moving to authors, the cost of poor reviewer judgment includes a lack of fair opportunities to contribute to the existing stock of knowledge as well as possibly ruined careers. Such wasted efforts and inappropriately stalled careers are more widespread than perhaps we choose to believe, as suggested by a recent examination of scholarly life in the management and organizations field (Glick, Miller, & Cardinal, 2007) that summarized the situation facing junior scholars as follows: “Many exceptionally skilled individuals who probably deserve tenure will not achieve it, while a significant number of individuals with average skills may get tenure at prestigious schools aided by luck” (p. 826). Related to this, many members of the AoM perceive that bias in the journal review process is a major career obstacle, as indicated in a forthcoming AoM-commissioned study of members’ careers (Kraimer, Seibert, Sargent, Greco, & Nelson, 2015).

THE AMD WAY

As *AMD* has moved through the development and birthing process, three particular issues related to peer review have surfaced in the collective conversation: 1) exogenous rather than endogenous reviewing, 2) trees rather than forests as conceptual lenses, and 3) negative rather than positive orientations in the crafting of input for authors. Indeed, each of these three issues is prominent in the recent responses to our formal queries of advisory board members and editors. The first and third issues are also prominent in a compelling analysis forthcoming in one of our sister journals (Clair, 2015). To ensure the very best journal outcomes and author experiences, avoiding these problems is central to the culture and functioning of *AMD*.

Exogenous Versus Endogenous Reviewing

Over time reviewers have taken to telling authors their paper is really about X not Y... I don’t mind suggestions but I hate being told to write the paper the reviewer would have written if [he/she] had been the author.

Reviewers hijacking papers [is a common problem].

The rigorous review process can sometimes lead to the loss of the author’s voice.

In expressing the above concerns, three of our advisory board members highlight what many see as

a problematic new world order that stands in contrast to the somewhat less intrusive practices found in earlier times. In earlier periods, authors could have more confidence that their work would be reviewed from the perspective of their own framing, points of emphasis, analytical strategies, and post-data inferential styles. If an author had chosen to frame his/her work in simple logic based loosely on institutional research or on a hunch informed loosely by agency research, then his/her up-front grounding would have been evaluated within these conceptual spaces, not within an alternative conceptual space that was no more useful but was preferred by the reviewer. If an author had chosen to use a particular approach in the empirical analysis, then his/her analysis would have been evaluated within the assumption base of that approach, not from within the assumption base of an alternative approach that was no more useful but was preferred by the reviewer. If an author had adopted a post-data inferential style that assumed complete separation between inference and explanation, then his/her work would have been evaluated within this style, not from the perspective that suggests inference and explanation are inexorably intertwined. *AMD*’s reviewing strategy represents a return to these earlier periods where reviewers step into the framework of the authors when evaluating a paper, rather than imposing their preferred framework or perspective on those authors (and thereby asking the authors to write the reviewer’s preferred paper.)

Endogenous and exogenous dialogue between a reviewer and the authors of a paper must be distinguished (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). Endogenous dialogue is evident when a reviewer accepts the authors’ reasoning strategy. In this case, the focus rests with how well the work has been executed (methodology writ large). Exogenous dialogue occurs when the reviewer questions the authors’ reasoning strategy or its tenets or fails to recognize that the dialogue is between or across reasoning strategies. In this situation, the dialogue is implicitly about policy, meaning acceptable ways of performing scientific research. Reviewers and authors must be aware of the mode of dialogue—whether it be endogenous or exogenous, about execution or policy (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). *AMD* seeks reviewers who emphasize endogenous dialogue, for the authors’ choice of perspective and reasoning strategy must always be respected. In the words of Ketokivi and Mantere (2010): “Unless a journal has an editorial policy that explicitly favors one reasoning strategy over the other, all expressions of preference on the part of the referee constitute nothing less than an act of academic violence” (p. 325).

At stake at an individual level are outcomes related to fairness, a proper sense of authorship, and the ability to send rejected papers to alternative journals without major rework. At its core, fairness implies “limited favoritism toward one side or another” (as defined by *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*). If a different but not better lens or approach is used by a reviewer, then fairness clearly has been violated. Ramifications of such treatment, including low morale and intentions to depart from the situation, have been made clear by research on injustice. In addition, subtle questions related to idea ownership and authorship can arise when authors are given revision opportunities predicated on satisfying demands that are based largely on the personal preferences of reviewers (Bedeian, 2003; Bedeian, 2004; Tsang & Frey, 2007). At what point do reviewers (and/or editors) become ghost writers who perhaps should be made formal authors? And what of the ethics and risks when authors present work that is not really their own? As one successful author put it, “When one of my articles is finally published, I always have a sense that I am only partially the author” (Roth, 2002, p. 15).

Finally, problems related to asset specificity come into play. When authors revise their papers based on the idiosyncratic preferences of reviewers, they create assets that are specific to those reviewers and to the journal in question. Then, they often must undo all or part of the new work if the paper is ultimately rejected. This is a concern drawn from transaction cost economics (for a more complete economic analysis related to journal publishing, see Pitsoulis & Schnellenbach, 2012).

At stake at a collective level is the need for variations in the evolutionary development of scientific management knowledge. When personal preferences rather than more grounded scientific criteria dominate the conversation, homosocial reproduction and other homogenizing forces can become strong forces at a given journal. Yet the growth of scientific knowledge suffers when editorial review boards require authors to adopt a homogeneous brand of exogenous scholarship in the name of “rigorous” quality. Our scientific community is not monolithic, and no one has monopoly rights in defining and imposing their view of scientific rigor. Encouraging diversity and variations in management theories and research methods is critical for advancing the evolutionary growth of management knowledge. However, this is not to say that anything goes; rather, state-of-the-art standards applicable to the author’s endogenous perspective should be adopted. Asking reviewers to step into the author’s framework instead of imposing their own is *AMD’s* way of encouraging greater variations in the evolutionary

growth of management knowledge. Although reviewers certainly can discuss alternative reasoning strategies and the like, they should attempt to adopt the authors’ perspective and should be aware that authors are not obligated to adhere to suggestions born of preference rather than scientific absolutes.

Trees Versus Forests

Please allow me to preface my remarks or answers by saying that my answers are influenced by my experience as editor for two journals (one established, and one I founded, about 15 years in total) and in my role as an author (more than 30 years). In both cases, I read the reviews for their usefulness of the content, accuracy of information provided, openness to different perspectives, and carefulness of the reading of the manuscripts. Overall, I found the quality of reviews have declined in my 30+ years in this profession. I found reviewers have become more and more narrow, focusing more and more on technical aspects of the paper, and give less and less attention to the importance of the question or problem being studied, and the overall contribution. There is a feeling that they have lost the forest for the trees.

Have we lost the forest for the trees? In the heartfelt statement reproduced above, one of our advisory board members expresses the frustrations felt by others. Another advisory board member put it this way: “[there is] too much focus on technical excellence, not enough on innovativeness, [or] whether the problem is interesting.” A third lamented the frequent insistence on “over-analysis.”

Part of the problem may be the relatively straightforward nature of evaluating methods and statistics in comparison with evaluating interestingness of the chosen problem, richness of the post-data theory observations, and depth of the overall contribution. With sets of rules and conventions available for evaluating the former, the task may be a little easier. Even though the appropriateness of different sets of conventions can be contested (different approaches to qualitative data analysis, different methods of meta-analysis, etc.), they are internally consistent to some degree and can be learned in a structured fashion. However, thinking through the nuances of interestingness, richness, and depth, is a more difficult proposition.

Contributing to the problem is an overreliance on junior faculty and others who have limited experience. The ability to judge interestingness and richness comes from time spent struggling with ideas and

problems, yet our work is often judged by relative neophytes. Why? Because senior faculty are much more likely to turn down review requests than are youngsters in the field (Bedeian, 2004; Glenn, 1976; Northcraft, 2001; Tsang & Frey, 2007). The more senior and accomplished the potential reviewer, the less likely he/she is to say “yes” to a review.

To mitigate these issues, *AMD* has an editorial review board that is heavy with senior scholars who are willing and able to evaluate submissions, and to do so in a broadminded, “big picture” way. Further, it has an advisory board with some of the most senior and accomplished scholars in the field, and these individuals have agreed to complete multiple reviews per year. Although strong methods and data analysis are very important at *AMD*, never losing sight of the big picture is a key feature of our operating philosophy; the trees should be in order, but the big picture is paramount.

Negative Versus Constructive Commentary

Some reviewers provide useful feedback but many are critical without offering constructive suggestions.

Too much negativity.

As suggested above, a number of our advisors spoke to undo negativity in reviewer commentaries. Such negativity has been cited by others and can be readily explained (e.g., Beyer, 1996; Glenn, 1982; Raelin, 2008; Starbuck, 2003; Suls & Martin, 2009; Tsang, 2013). First, reviewers are authors too. As such, they are on the receiving end of harsh criticism and may feel a conscious or unconscious need to reciprocate. Such are the dynamics of vicious cycles. Second, reviewers realize that rejection rates are quite high. With the rejection base rate being very clear, a reviewer may generate negative commentary to support a rejection recommendation in order to be consistent with the base rate. This is one way to play it safe. Finding positives and recommending acceptance takes courage in today’s journal world. Third, reviewers may have implicitly or explicitly learned that negative observations and commentary lead to perceived intelligence. Thus, “[reviewers] who are particularly concerned with an [editor’s] perceptions of their intelligence will tend toward negative criticism as a strategy of impression management” (Amabile, 1983, as paraphrased by Suls & Martin, 2009).

As editor of *Academy of Management Review*, Kilduff (2007) offered related commentary on the different roles assumed by reviewers and editors. In his view, reviewers look for reasons to reject papers,

while editors look for reasons to accept papers. As a consequence, reviewers tend to focus on negative aspects of papers when constructive comments might be more useful. In addition, reviewers often recommend rejection of papers based on comments that are not indicative of fatal flaws, but rather weaknesses that could be remedied by authors if they were provided opportunities to do so. Fatal flaw comments are focused on errors that cannot be corrected, such as invalid research designs, measures, or data analysis procedures. In contrast, remedial comments are centered on criticisms that an author could correct in a revision, such as lack of definitions of concepts, unclear arguments or lines of reasoning, or different interpretations of findings or implications. When *AMD* reviewers recommend rejection of papers with only remedial criticisms, the *AMD* action editors may make editorial decisions that counter reviewer recommendations by asking authors to revise and resubmit their papers to correct the remedial issues.

CREATING THE *AMD* WAY

The selection process for our editorial board has been crucial in creating and sustaining the *AMD* way. We have been very fortunate to experience a very high acceptance rate for invitations to the board, enabling us to put the right people in the right places at the right time (for a general and interesting examination of board selection procedures in our field, see Tsui & Hollenbeck, 2009). To complement the selection process, we also have reinforced key cultural elements through annual *AMD* workshops at AOM conferences, and through our reviewer resources document. For endogenous reviewing, our document delivers the core values in the following way:

Revised and accepted papers should always reflect the **author’s voice**, as opposed to that of the reviewer or action editor. To accomplish this, we ask you to assess a paper in terms of the author’s purposes, and to suggest specific ways to improve and achieve them. We encourage developmental reviewing, but be careful not to impose your agenda or to over-step your role by asking authors to adopt your preferred perspective.

With respect to seeing the forest rather than only individual trees, the reviewer resources document highlights our values with these words:

Focus on the core issues that make or break a paper. Is the discovery interesting and important? Are the concepts clearly defined? Are the data valid and reliable? Is the methodology

sound? Is the argument logical and persuasive? Will the findings make a difference? Don't send the author(s) on a "wild goose chase" by suggesting concepts, perspectives, or literatures that are not essential to the paper's core framework. Please provide full citations for works suggested.

Finally, the following appears as part of our mantra for an enduring constructive approach, the type of approach promised but not delivered by a number of journals:

Be constructive—Don't just point out problems, also suggest solutions. Reviewers should be like "lifeguards"—trying to save the current manuscript, or at least the next project in the stream of research.

Be polite and conversational—Be "author friendly" in your tone, and use terms like "you" instead of "the authors."

In addition to board member selection, workshops, and the codification and communication of important values, a strong editor system is also used to ensure day-to-day instantiation of the *AMD* way. Strong editors are not vote counters or simple processors of reviewer comments. Instead, they are true decision makers and gatekeepers. While reviewer inputs are exceptionally important, editors tend to have a broader perspective and can integrate divergent inputs from reviewers. They also have more at stake because they do not operate anonymously, and in the case of published papers their names tend to be directly associated with the work (often in the authors' acknowledgments). Most pundits blame many of the ills of journal publishing on weak editors. With rejection rates around 90 percent and disagreement among reviewers a common occurrence, weak editor systems virtually ensure that random error is a large component of publishing success (see, for example, Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In a recent analysis of journal reviewing, Pitsoulis and Schnellenbach (2012) pointed out that "dissatisfaction with the current institutions of the review process is large and growing" (p. 1446). A number of others have said the same thing, including a number of our advisory board members. On the other hand, peer review has its enduring charms, and some on our advisory board are staunch defenders. To create the best outcomes for everyone, we seek at *AMD* to leverage the good while tossing the bad. We seek to reverse the trend that has put more and more people on the side of attacking peer review. Starbuck's well-

traveled description of peer review is useful in this regard, as moving people out of his negative camp and into his positive camp is an important goal:

"Peer review arouses very diverse emotions, beliefs, and ambitions. It angers, it reassures, it intimidates, it tramples egos, and it puffs them up. For some, peer review demonstrates the vacuousness and unreliability of social science; for others, the substance and reliability of social science" (2003, p. 348).

We have sketched an *AMD* way of improving the double-blind peer review of papers that emphasizes 1) endogenous rather than exogenous reviewing, 2) keeping sight of the interesting and important forest of discovery rather than the individual trees, and 3) undertaking positive and constructive versus negative reviews. This *AMD* way is important. At stake for individual authors are issues of fairness, maintaining the authors' voice, and not being held hostage in repetitive rounds of paper revision. At stake at a collective level is the need for variations in the evolutionary development of scientific management knowledge. The growth of scientific knowledge suffers when editorial review boards require authors to adopt a homogenous brand of writing in service of some monolithic view of rigor. Respecting and enhancing the authors' voice is *AMD*'s way of encouraging greater variations in the evolutionary growth of management knowledge. We encourage other journals to do the same while not losing sight of the importance authors should attach to well-crafted reviewer inputs.

SUPPLEMENT

AMD Reviewer Resources

High-quality papers require high-quality reviews. As you review papers for *AMD*, please keep the following in mind.

1. The paper must **fit the *AMD* Mission**. In other words, it must present an interesting, important, novel discovery that is likely to make an important contribution to the advancement of management knowledge and practice.
2. Because *AMD* seeks empirical studies of poorly understood yet important phenomena, we expect they will be directed by specific research questions and conjectures rather than testing refined hypotheses. Introductory paragraphs should clearly ground the phenomenon and the research question. While this can be done many ways, we encourage this grounding to clearly describe a particular case or instance of the phenomenon and the context or settings in which it exists. This

grounding should also include a statement of the specific research question that guides the study of the phenomenon, why it is important, and how it is addressed in the paper.

3. Revised and accepted papers should always reflect the **author's voice**, as opposed to that of the reviewer or action editor. To accomplish this, we ask you to assess a paper in terms of the author's purposes, and to suggest specific ways to improve and achieve them. We encourage developmental reviewing, but be careful not to impose your agenda or to overstep your role by asking authors to adopt your preferred perspective. Wherever possible, final publication decisions will be made after no more than one revision.
4. When writing your review, please:
 - a. **Be constructive.** Don't just point out problems, also suggest solutions. Reviewers should be like lifeguards—trying to save the current manuscript, or at least the next project in the stream of research.
 - b. **Focus on the core issues that make or break a paper.** Is the discovery interesting and important? Are the concepts clearly defined? Are the data valid and reliable? Is the methodology sound? Is the argument logical and persuasive? Will the findings make a difference? Don't send the author(s) on a "wild goose chase" by suggesting concepts, perspectives, or publications that are not essential to the paper's core framework. Please provide full citations for works suggested.
 - c. **Be concise and specific.** Keep your reviews short and to the point, typically not more than two pages. Number the points in your review, and specify the page numbers where they apply. Don't give a page-by-page critique; instead, consolidate your critiques into more general themes or concerns.
 - d. **Be polite and conversational.** Be "author friendly" in your tone, and use terms like "you" instead of "the authors."
 - e. **Don't be "two-faced."** Don't send a message in your **Comments to the Author** that differs from the message you send in your **Comments to the Editor** on the **Reviewer Evaluation Form**. Following this guideline will help prevent the action editor from being in the awkward position of rejecting a paper that, seemingly, has positive reviews.
 - f. **Be sensitive to non-English-native authors.** You will sometimes be asked to review submissions from authors whose native language is not English. In those cases, distinguish between the quality of the writing and the

quality of the ideas that the writing conveys. Those ideas may be good, even if they are not expressed well.

- g. **Be punctual.** Please return your review on time so that the action editor can guarantee the author(s) a quick turnaround.

Submitting Your Review

- a. Log in to **Manuscript Central**.
- b. Go to the **Reviewer Center**.
- c. Click the teal icon under **Perform Review**.
- d. Rate the manuscript using the **Reviewer Evaluation Form**.
- e. Register your bottom-line recommendation.
- f. Explain your recommendation to the editor in the **Comments to the Editor** (these comments are not shared with the author[s]). Please do not mention your bottom-line recommendation in the text of your actual review.
- g. Under **Comments to the Author**, either paste your review into your browser or upload your review as a Word file.
- h. Contact AMD's Managing Editor, Susan Zaid (amd@aom.org), with any questions.

Thank You!

- Contributing reviews is a vital component of academic service and the peer review process could not function without such contributions.
- As a small token of appreciation for non-board members, we annually list the names of all *ad hoc* reviewers from a given year in an issue of *AMD*. Names of board members are included on the masthead of each issue.

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