

Forum: Ethical Standards for Journals

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ABSTRACT

Discusses a number of issues related to publication lag and violations by journals of social work ethical principles. Develops several recommendations for remediation and invites readers and journal editors to engage in a dialogue.

Key Words: Ethical standards, journal, publication lag.

Some 35 years ago, one of the authors submitted a manuscript-- written in a doctoral seminar-- for publication in a new journal. There was no response from the journal, and, in the midst of completing his dissertation, graduating, and settling into a new job, the manuscript was forgotten. Five years later, the author received a letter from the journal stating that they intended to publish the manuscript, which they did the following year, thereby creating a six-year publication lag.

Since that time, at least in social work, there has been an explosion of new journals as well as a large increase in graduates of doctoral programs-- the main source for editorial boards and journal submissions (Pardeck et al., 1995; Thyer et al., 1994; Klein and Bloom, 1992). It is not unreasonable to hope that the increasing proportion of highly trained doctoral graduates would lead to a corresponding increase in journal standards and ethical practices. Unfortunately, that is not uniformly the case.

Three recent incidents involving both authors of this article can serve to illustrate the nature, if not the extent, of the problem. A 10-year review of the state of clinical practice in social work was solicited from one of the authors for a special issue; it was written in 1990 for publication the next year in one of social work's leading research journals. The article was not published until 1993, with virtually no chance for the author to update its contents to reflect new developments, even though the article was supposed to reflect the current state of knowledge.

Another manuscript by the same author was submitted for publication in May 1993. Since no word about even the receipt of the article by the journal was received by the author, a series of letters and phone calls to the journal editor in the summer of 1994 resulted in a begrudging response: "Well, I'm waiting for one more review, but it looks good." With no contact for another

year, two additional phone calls to the editor in September 1995 produced a phone message from the editor that the article was accepted for publication, "but could you please send another hard copy? I've lost mine." No date for publication was offered.

The third incident took place over a number of years. One of the authors submitted a manuscript to a social work journal in December 1993, and included the stamped, self-addressed envelopes that the journal required, one to be used to inform the author that the manuscript was received. After receiving no acknowledgement from the journal, in February 1994 the author began a series of telephone inquiries. While the author was able to reach the voice mail of the editor and, on occasion, his secretary, no calls ever were returned. In late March, a letter was sent to the editor describing this lack of communication and requesting a status report on the manuscript. Two new, stamped, self-addressed envelopes were included. No reply was received. Over that summer, the author contacted a member of the journal's editorial board, who said she knew of no special circumstances that would justify the situation, which she described as "not acceptable."

In September 1994 the author initiated a new set of telephone calls to the editor and, out of frustration, to the associate editor as well. During that time period, the author spoke to the associate editor who initially indicated no knowledge of the manuscript, follow-up letter or telephone calls, but later admitted the manuscript had been lost and was "now found." The author asked for written acknowledgement of receipt and soon thereafter received a copy of a publication submittal form to sign. Despite frequent messages to the journal, no other word was received by the author for a period of two years, when the journal finally accepted the article for publication. It is particularly ironic and sad that one author of the submitted manuscript was a social welfare doctoral student who naturally wondered what this whole process says about social work knowledge development. A final irony was that, during this same time period, this journal announced a call for submissions for a special issue, as though there was not enough work to be done on their current backlog.

Ironically, published data on review time and publication lag (time to print after acceptance) exists for two of these four journals. For one, the specified review time is three to six months with a 12-24-month publication lag, while for the other journal, the review time was specified as three weeks with a 3-5-month publication lag (Mendelsohn, 1992).

A recent note by Thyer (2004) confirms that these publication lag violations likely have existed for decades in social work and suggests that the anecdotal evidence cited above may indeed be representative, particularly for the NASW flagship journal, *Social Work*. In fact, Thyer argues convincingly that unfair publication lag has an even more insidious negative effect on authors by

virtually negating the impact factor used by the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) to measure journal quality. Since that impact factor is calculated by “dividing the number of citations in any one year with items published in the journal in the *previous two years*” (Thyer, 2004, p.361), social work authors typically must cite papers published more than two years previously because of the multi-year publication lag of the later papers. Thus, the original authors are deprived of the credit in the SSCI since social work journals typically are considered low quality journals because of low impact scores. Indeed, Thyer suggests this publication lag problem is widespread in social work since not a single social work journal had an impact score greater than 1.0, while many journals in other fields have high impact scores (greater than 4.0). For example, the *American Psychologist*, the journal that, like *Social Work* for our profession, is the one journal all psychologists receive, had an impact score in 2002 of 5.9 (Thyer, 2004)!

These incidents constitute serious breaches in the ethical (and business) practices of these professional journals. In fact, given a central ethical principle of social work, as codified in the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996; available online: <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>), that “social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of their profession,” these incidents actually constitute possible violations of our profession’s Code of Ethics. Indeed, the responsibility to publish is specifically a part of the NASW Code of Ethics. Thus, long publication lags may be seen as violations of this responsibility by inhibiting publication, as can be seen in Standard 5 of the Code which deals with “Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession,” as described in Standard 5.01d: “Social workers should contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. Social workers should seek to contribute to the profession’s literature...” (emphasis added). This article, focusing on ethical standards for journals, attempts to do exactly what the Code of Ethics prescribes.

Two other ethical standards of NASW may also be violated when journals refuse to communicate with authors, engage in sloppy practices or hold articles for a matter of years. The first is Standard 2, “Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues,” as codified in Standard 2.01a, “Respect.” This standard specifically states that, “Social workers should treat colleagues with respect.” One can hardly argue that refusal to communicate and loss of submissions is respectful to colleagues. The second violation relates to Standard 4.01, “Competence.” Standard 4.01c specifically states that, “Social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically-based knowledge relevant to social work and social

work ethics.” Thus, a publication lag of years constitutes a possible ethical violation affecting the entire profession because it deprives social workers of the current knowledge necessary to conduct their practice.

These violations are particularly ironic and hypocritical in the face of uniformity among professional journals regarding the standard that multiple submissions of manuscripts is a breach of ethical practices on the part of authors, and will not be tolerated. This standard of course, is, completely self-serving on the part of journals. It does nothing to ensure the fastest possible presentation of new work into the marketplace of ideas to benefit consumers —the readers of journals and, ultimately, their clients.

Since journals have a near monopoly in professions on dissemination of new ideas (at least in written form), journal prohibitions against multiple submissions, along with slow review and publication processes, severely limit the speed with which new ideas can surface in the literature. In the world of business, such monopolistic collusion is illegal, in large part because it reduces or eliminates competition. In the same way, the ban on multiple submissions, wherein some journals keep manuscripts for periods up to several years, reduces or eliminates the competition among journals for the fastest publication of the best ideas. And, in the end, the consumer is the real loser.

In the professions, ethical standards for researchers, for practitioners, and for authors are clear and, we assume, widely followed (see, e.g., NASW Code of Ethics Standard 5.02, “Evaluation and Research”). Sanctions are available for non-adherence. Why, then, should journals, our most important outlet for on-going professional development, not be held to similar standards?

Recommendations

While our intent in this article largely is to bring this problem to the attention of the profession and the boards of professional journals so that a debate on resolving these issues can begin, we do have a series of recommendations as a starting point for the debate. In fact, we want to encourage other authors, editors and editorial board members to respond to our comments in the hope that an ongoing dialogue will help journals move to resolve some of these ethical violations.

First, we recommend that all journals publish yearly data about their review process, including the mean, standard deviation, median and range of time for reviews and for publication lag. Since there appears to be a discrepancy between what some journals do and what they say they do, we must be prepared to push journal editors to be accurate in those figures, a sort of "truth in advertising" principle for journals.

Second, we recommend that all journals publish the dates of initial receipt of a manuscript, date of receipt of subsequent submissions, and date of manuscript acceptance for every article. This, of course, is standard practice in other fields such as psychology.

Third, data on review time and publication lag should be published every year in a journal such as *Social Work* in the same way that the *American Psychologist* publishes a yearly summary report of journal operations for American Psychological Association (APA) journals.

Our other recommendations are an attempt to address the power imbalance between journals and authors by revising the currently accepted standards of the review process itself.

First, if a journal does not respond within one month in writing to an author that the manuscript has been received, the author may submit the article to another journal without notifying the first journal, even if belated notice that the first journal has received the manuscript is sent. The author then may proceed with either journal depending on speed of acceptance.

Second, if the author has not received an initial review within three months of submission of the manuscript, he or she may submit to another journal without notifying the first journal and may proceed with either journal, depending on speed of acceptance.

Third, if an accepted manuscript is not published within 12 months of acceptance, the author may submit the manuscript to another journal without notifying the original journal and proceed with either journal as he or she sees fit.

We specifically have not called for a completely open process of multiple submissions in recognition of the huge amount of duplicative work this would entail for journal reviewers. On the other hand, if journals cannot find competent reviewers who are willing to conduct their reviews in an efficient manner, and in response to the limited proposals we have made, then journals need to reevaluate those reviewers' standing as well as their own review process.

Finally, there is a clear gap in our profession in identifying professional bodies that can respond to ethical violations by journals. Our final proposal, then, is to use the ethical commissions of our existing professional organizations, e.g., NASW and APA, as conduits for ethical complaints against journals. Since most journals have clear professional affiliations, the ethical commissions of the profession with which the journal identifies would be authorized to make the final decisions in such cases, with journals and authors bound to accept their decisions. Thus, the journals would be subject to the same disciplinary bodies and actions as are individual members and other organizations of the profession.

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