Editorial: reflecting on ethical questions and peer reviewing

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Editorial: Reflecting on Ethical Questions and Peer Reviewing

The past year has been an exciting one for the journal. The first issue of the year was a special issue on young people transitioning from out-of-home care; this was followed by a themed issue on mental health, and by some excellent articles showcasing the best of Australian and international social work scholarship. It was great to see some very strong research papers, and others addressing critical issues for practitioners. In this editorial I want to devote some space to reflecting on some of the ethical issues we have experienced with the journal this year, as well as to comment on our policy in relation to blind peer reviewing.

First though, a brief comment on the year ahead. From 2015 we are changing the journal’s issue dates to January, April, July, and October. This will increase the citation window for calculating the Impact Factor of the journal. While pursuing a higher Impact Factor is not the top priority for the journal, it is worth doing everything we can to maximise this as the higher the Impact Factor the more Australian social work scholarship is likely to be seen and used around the world. This year it was exciting to see that our Impact Factor for 2013 increased to 0.591, which ranked Australian Social Work 25 out of 39 international social work journals. Next year we will be releasing a more detailed “Instructions for Authors” to assist in the preparation of manuscripts. There will also be a special issue on applied research methods, which should prove to be a valuable resource.

Some ethical questions

Ethical questions are not limited to the ethical issues involved in the conduct of research, they also arise in the dissemination and publication of that research and other scholarly knowledge. Some of the ethical questions that the journal deals with frequently are referred to as salami slicing and text recycling. Salami slicing is a somewhat pejorative – albeit evocative – term to describe the practice of extracting a number of publications from a single study. In many cases this is a legitimate activity and indeed a necessary one as it is not always possible for one journal article to contain all the research findings from a particular project. Where it becomes problematic is when the findings are “sliced” so thinly that that the papers produced are not of sufficient depth or are missing crucial information to warrant publication. There is also the question as to whether the articles add sufficient new knowledge to the field of enquiry. An additional problem is that sometimes authors may hide the fact that they have been “slicing the salami” by not referring to the other papers they are producing from the same study. Further, sometimes these multiple papers overlap: perhaps in the literature review, key findings, and discussion or conclusion.

This latter problem is in the terrain of text recycling, which is the use of material published (or submitted) in one paper in a different paper. Typically, this would be thought of in terms of using the same sentences and paragraphs in two or more papers, although it also refers to the presentation of the same arguments or findings (even if they are differently expressed) in multiple papers. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) recently produced a discussion document that canvasses a range of cases of text recycling (COPE, 2014). At one end is relatively minor recycling; such as repeating the same information in the methodology section of two articles because both were produced from the same study. Sometimes this is unavoidable, although ideally it would be better not to use exactly the same wording. More significant would be the use of the same paragraphs and arguments across
multiple publications. Again, this should be avoided and where the same arguments are appearing in an additional publication then the author’s original publication should be referenced. And towards the more serious end is the submission (and publication) of virtually the same paper in multiple journals. Given the very clear statements relating to originality that authors must agree to prior to submitting a paper, it is hard to consider this form of text recycling as anything other than fraud.

At *Australian Social Work* we have experienced, and will no doubt continue to experience, all of these challenges. The increasing use of plagiarism detection software, such as CrossCheck™, means that text recycling is becoming easier to spot. As a member of COPE, we use their well-developed guidelines to support our decision making when encountering these situations. We are also very cognisant that many of these issues arise because of authors’ inexperience or unfamiliarity with the publishing process. When detected in the pre-publication process, we always seek an author’s explanation for why text recycling may have occurred, and when the situation is inadvertent or minor then we provide them with the opportunity to revise their manuscript.

**Single- and double-blind peer reviewing**

The reviews carried out by peer reviewers on submitted manuscripts are one of the ways in which these ethical questions are identified. Peer reviewing is a hallmark of scholarly publishing and, at *Australian Social Work*, we are fortunate to be able to draw on the expertise of hundreds of peer reviewers to help inform the decision of the Editor. A list of those who have generously given their time in this activity over the past year is provided at the end of this issue. Forthcoming issues of the journal will discuss the process of peer reviewing in more depth, and offer guidance to reviewers in undertaking this activity. In this editorial I want to draw attention to *Australian Social Work*’s practice with regard to blind peer reviewing, which will be outlined in the revised Instructions for Authors.

Blind peer reviewing is the process of concealing the identities of authors and reviewers in the review process. *Single-blind peer reviewing* involves the concealment of the reviewer’s identity from the author, but not the reverse. The argument in favour of this is that it ensures that the review is conducted without “fear or favour,” and that there could be no possibility of payback if, for example, a junior academic negatively evaluated a senior academic’s paper. The downside is that there is little accountability on the part of reviewers for their comments and this may lead some to judge others’ work unfairly possibly because of a conflict of interest. The majority of journals, particularly in the sciences, have a single-blind reviewing policy (Suen, 2014).

*Double-blind peer reviewing* involves concealing the identity of both the reviewer from the author, and the author from the reviewer. This serves to protect the author from negative bias of reviewers, which has been identified as important to prevent discrimination (e.g., of women authors). It also wards against positive bias, such as reputational bias (e.g., a famous professor getting preferential treatment), and affiliation bias (e.g., assuming that if the author is from Harvard University then the paper must be good). The downside of the reviewer not knowing who the author is is an inability to assess the current paper in the context of the author’s previous work. For example, a reviewer may legitimately want to know how this paper builds on or diverges from their previous work, what new findings it presents, and that the present paper does not reproduce old work (at the risk of text recycling).
There are also quite practical factors that mitigate against double-blind reviewing. One is that in some disciplines (especially in small countries) it is very hard to completely deidentify a paper. Often a reviewer can guess who the author is simply because they are aware of what research is happening in this particular field. In terms of deidentification, how much information should be deidentified is also open for debate. For example, in Australia, should the organisation where the research was carried out be obscured? Should the town or city in which it was conducted be removed? Should the state not even be acknowledged? Inevitably, papers are received in various stages of deidentification. To strictly follow a double-blind process would place considerable burden on journal staff to carry out that work themselves or return to the author for further revision. While fewer academic journals operate double-blind reviewing, it is more common in the humanities and social sciences and is starting to be more commonly offered as an option in the physical sciences, particularly to help eliminate gender bias (“Double-blind peer review,” 2013).

So, what is the policy of Australian Social Work? As will be outlined clearly in the new Instructions for Authors, our policy and practice over a number of years is that all papers are subject to single-blind peer review, and that authors have the option of their paper being subject to double-blind peer review. This means that the identities of reviewers are never disclosed to authors. Where a reviewer may identify themselves in the body of the review, then this information is removed by journal staff before the review is provided to the author. In terms of double-blind reviewing, no papers are released to reviewers with the name of the author identified explicitly; however, the degree to which the paper is deidentified within the body of the text is at the discretion of the author. Thus, an author may choose to completely deidentify the paper (or as much as they want to or can deidentify), and this may include removing self-citations (replacing them with the phrase “author's own”) and references to their previous work, as well as by removing or obscuring other identifying information, such as the names of organisations and locations. Or they may choose to retain such information, thus providing the reviewer with more contextual information.

The journal (including journal staff, editors, and the Editorial Board) recognises that there is a diversity of views about blind peer reviewing among authors, reviewers, and editors. I believe that our approach – of mandatory single-blind review and optional double-blind review – strikes the right balance between the competing priorities and interests, not least in ensuring that the journal’s workload is manageable. It also ensures that those who may be concerned about unfair or discriminatory treatment by reviewers do have the opportunity to have their paper treated in a completely deidentified way. However, the notion of blind peer reviewing is not without its critics, with some arguing that the practice reinforces conservative and positivist ways of knowing because of its emphasis on objectivity, neutrality, and the elimination of bias (Walker, 2004). And others have argued that it is in the interests of “transparent scientific discourse” that an open review policy should be practised where the identities of all parties are known and published (Groves & Loder, 2014, p. 349). But I’m interested in hearing your views, and invite people to email the journal with your thoughts or even to consider composing a “Letter to the Editor,” which may be published in a future issue.

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Editor

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