Guidelines for Reviewers of the Intergenerational Justice Review

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Peer-reviewed journals rely on expert reviews by knowledgeable researchers to ensure the quality of the papers they publish. The body of reviewers offers a collective opinion on the expected standards of scientific rigour for the discipline. Their opinions on such matters as which techniques are current, valid and appropriate; how data should be analysed and presented; and how rigorous authors must be or how speculative they can be in the interpreting their data become de facto standards of the field. In addition, their critiques set subtle standards of collegiality, behaviour, and ethics - not only through their recommendations concerning which papers should be published and which should be rejected, but also through the tone and wording of their reviews and through the thought that they give to their scientific and ethical responsibilities as reviewers.

A young researcher's first experience as a reviewer is often haphazard. Some young researchers are asked by their advisor or mentor to review a manuscript and are offered assistance. Many, however, are suddenly thrown into the process when a journal sends them a paper to be reviewed. All too often, new reviewers are given little guidance as they approach this task. The journal may send a set of instructions to reviewers that provides information on such specifics as the format for the review and the date when the journal wants the review, but there is often little guidance on the overall review process or on the related ethical issues the reviewer should be considering.

Few journals take measures to shed light on a process which is often a "black box". This leads to the well-known problems of peer review.

A telling quote:

"A recent U.S. Supreme Court decision and an analysis of the peer-review system substantiate complaints about this fundamental aspect of scientific research. Far from filtering out junk science, peer review may be blocking the flow of innovation and corrupting public support of science" (Horrobin, 2001).

Rothwell and Martyn (2000), analysed the statistical correlations among reviewers' recommendations (made to two journals and two conferences) by analysis of variance and found out that for one journal correlation "was not significantly greater than that expected by chance" and, in general, agreement between reviewers "was little greater than would be expected by chance alone." Put differently: assessments made by independent reviewers of papers and abstracts submitted to journals and to conferences are not reproducible. Conceptual and methodological research and reflections on peer review are becoming increasingly desirable, important, and even

necessary in academic disciplines. Peer review is a research evaluation process which requires research itself. Peer review of peer-review methods is thus urgently needed.

To find a common standard, the editors of Intergenerational Justice Review have decided to forward all reviews made for individual articles of one certain issue to the reviewers who worked on that issue. Each reviewer will receive the corresponding reviews from other reviewers for the article that he/she reviewed. This initiative will provide reviewers with a comparison to their own review and hopes to facilitate a harmonisation regarding the length and tone of reviews. The editors of the Intergenerational Justice Review have also formulated these guidelines[1] and hope they will aid you in your task as a reviewer.

Qualities of a good reviewer

To be a good reviewer, one must understand the peer-review process and the role the reviewer is expected to play. A reviewer must have expertise in one or more aspects of the work, but the qualities of a good reviewer go well beyond that. The reviewer must be objective and must not have conflicts of interest that might compromise the objectivity or perceived value of the review. He or she must have good judgement and must be able to think critically and logically. The reviewer must be able to write a good critique that is accurate, readable and helpful to both the editors and the author. The reviewer must be reliable and must have the time to do the task, and do it well, in the time frame allotted.

Issues to consider when deciding whether to review a paper

Do you have the expertise the editor is looking for?

From an editor's point of view the ideal reviewer is a researcher who is working in the same discipline as the subject of the paper yet is not in direct competition with the authors. The ideal reviewer will be able to assess the significance of the work to the field. During the review process, reviewers often find that they have questions or concerns about an area outside their expertise; this is not a problem. Please note these, and any recommendation for additional reviews, on the review form provided.

Is the work too close to your own?

It goes without saying that reviewers can pick articles according to their interest. This decision usually can be made after reading the abstract that FRFG provides. But sometimes a potential reviewer is then presented with the very awkward problem that the paper appears to be very close to his/her own unpublished work. The potential reviewer should not review a paper that he/she perceives as being close to his/her own forthcoming work, as doing so presents a "no-win" situation even if the reviewer acts with the utmost integrity. If the paper is good and the reviewer were to review it rapidly and recommend acceptance, he/she might well compromise

[1] They are based to a great extent on the splendid work of Rockwell (2008).

his/her ability to publish his/her own work – this knowledge creates an immediate, significant conflict of interest. On the other hand, if the paper proves to be flawed and the reviewer (with all integrity) were to recommend extensive revisions or rejection, the perception of misconduct could arise in the editor's mind when the reviewer's own studies were submitted or published.

Does this paper conflict strongly with your personal beliefs or your (published) statements?

A strongly held personal belief or a vocal public position in a scientific argument could raise problems if it compromises or appears to compromise the objectivity of a review. Even in issues of pure science (e.g. a heated debate over the validity of a specific scientific method or an observation), emotions can occasionally rise to a level where objectivity can be, or can appear to be, compromised. The reviewer should stick to Voltaire's famous maxim: "I despise what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." In other words: the reviewer should not try to suppress alternative research results.

Do you have the time to review the article within the time frame requested by the editor?

It is unfair to both the author and the journal to accept a paper for review if you know you cannot review it rapidly. It is also unethical to give the paper only a cursory reading and then provide a superficial and careless review. In agreeing to review a paper, you are contracting to provide the journal with a thorough and incisive review. The review need not be long: indeed in the case of the very best and very worst papers the written critiques may be very short. However, even these very short reviews require time, reflection, and thought. It is possible that the above issues do not appear to be apparent when only an abstract has been seen and may arise later when the full article has been read. If this is the case, please inform the editor immediately.

Points to consider when reading and reviewing the paper

Can you contact the author about the work or the paper?

You generally cannot contact the author about the manuscript during the review process as this compromises the double blind process. However, in rare cases when a reviewer feels that he/she needs to communicate directly with an author about a specific issue in the paper they should contact the editor and discuss the reasons for the request.

Can you seek help with your review?

Sometimes a reviewer may wish to seek advice or information from a colleague or an assistant during the course of a review. This is acceptable as long as the colleague is informed about the Intergenerational Justice Review's peer-review policy and willing to adhere to it. Please inform the journal in advance and seek permission. In most instances this request will be welcomed as the more reviewers we have the better. The review should note in the comments to the editor that a

colleague or research assistant has seen the paper and assisted with a review. This is important for the journal records and also ensures that the colleague gets appropriate credit for his/her contribution to the review.

Remaining an agent of the journal and not becoming a friend to the author

This is an important point, as the day-to-day activities of young researchers usually involve collegial interactions within a group of researchers and trainees, where an atmosphere of mutual assistance predominates. The same is the case if the author is a student or ex-student of the reviewer. It is sometimes difficult to adjust to a more institutional perspective and to realise that the primary role as a reviewer in the review process is to advise the journal, not to assist the author. One must make this shift in order to be an effective reviewer. A reviewer may feel bad about rejecting a paper and empathise with the authors of the paper, but he/she must be able to make such a recommendation when it is the appropriate one. The reviewer must remember that it is unethical to allow a badly flawed paper to pass unchallenged into the peer-reviewed literature, where it will be a trap to the unsophisticated reader who will read the manuscript (or perhaps only the abstract) superficially and will accept the flawed conclusions at face value. Articles in peer-reviewed journals are trusted by readers who would be skeptical of claims made in non peer-reviewed sources. The peer-review process is viewed as a process that provides a scientific stamp of approval to the paper and its contents.

As a reviewer, you are helping to set the standards of the journal and of the field.

In making recommendations for acceptance, revision, or rejection of manuscripts, reviewers are helping to set the standards of the journal. Moreover, the collective activities of the investigators who review manuscripts in a scientific discipline set the standards of that field. The reviewer therefore must consider the manuscript from the perspective of the journal and the field of science.

The appropriateness of the paper for the journal should always be considered.

It is sometimes perfectly appropriate to return a review which states that a paper is of a very high quality and worthy of publication but that it is inappropriate for publication in the journal to which it is submitted. In such cases, it may be valuable to the author to suggest a more appropriate journal.

Ethical concerns may arise during a review.

Sometimes the reviewer may discover serious ethical breaches. The reviewer may recognise much or all of the paper because it has been published previously by the same authors. Alternatively, the reviewer may find text or ideas which have been copied without permission or appropriate attribution from the works of others. The reviewer may feel that the data cannot possibly be correct as presented and may suspect that some data have been fabricated or falsified. Alternatively, the reviewer may feel that the data are sound but that the data have been manipulated or analysed inappropriately, so that the conclusions drawn from them are deliberately misleading.

Instances of possible misconduct require thought and wisdom on the part of the reviewer and the editors. On one hand, reviewers and editors must take all appropriate steps to preclude publication of duplicate, plagiarised or fraudulent papers. On the other hand, the suspicion of scientific misconduct can have a devastating impact on a academic career, even if deliberate malevolence is eventually disproved. Because of this, the reviewer should carefully review the facts underlying his/her concerns. In the case of suspected duplicative publication or plagiarism, the reviewer should obtain and carefully examine copies of the original documents to confirm his/her initial impression. The reviewer should then contact the editor in confidence to discuss the problem, and should provide the editor with copies of the original papers.

Writing the review

Reviews can be difficult to write. They must be clear, concise, and accurate. Although their primary purpose is to advise the editor, the comments to the author frequently are of value in guiding revision of the paper for the same journal or a different journal and in suggesting ways to improve the project by the inclusion of additional data or experiments. Comments to the author may be very brief, especially in the case of an excellent, well prepared paper. They may be extensive if the reviewer feels the paper has valuable elements but requires many revisions and corrections to present the findings effectively. There is therefore an element of mentoring and collegial advising inherent in the review process. The comments made in the review should present clearly the reviewer's analysis of the quality, novelty, and importance of the science and the effectiveness and appropriateness of its presentation in the manuscript. The reviewer may have comments on the length of the paper, the writing quality; the clarity, accuracy, and completeness of the figures and tables; the accuracy and adequacy of the introduction which frames the area of the research; the discussions of prior and related work; and the citations to the literature.

When writing the review, the reviewer should remember that the review will be sent to the authors and that it should be written in a constructive and collegial tone. The content should be constructive and informative. Comments and recommendations should be clear and should be supported with citations to specific figures, tables, or sections of text.

When the reviewer's criticisms rely on or are supported by data in the literature, the reviewer should provide citations to the relevant papers. A good review should help the authors to think more clearly about their work and its design, execution, presentation and significance. As far as possible, a negative review should explain to the authors the weaknesses of their manuscript, so that rejected authors can understand the basis for the decision and see in broad terms what needs to be done to improve the manuscript for publication elsewhere. This is secondary to the other functions, however, and referees should not feel obliged to provide detailed, constructive advice to authors of papers that do not meet the criteria for the journal.

If the reviewer believes that a manuscript would not be suitable for publication, his/her report to the author should be as brief as is consistent with enabling the

author to understand the reason for the decision. Some reviewers submit critiques that are rude, snide, sarcastic and argumentative. Please remember that even the most serious scientific criticisms can be worded and presented in such a way as to be constructive and collegial. Reviewers should write critiques using a style and tone that they would want to see in reviews that they, or their most insecure student, might receive. Reviewers should remember that they are setting the standards of behaviour and collegiality for their field, as well as the standards of science.

Confidentiality

We do not release reviewers' identities to authors. However, the reviewer should note that no system is perfect. The possibility of identification by the author and the availability of the reviewer's identity to the editors are among the reasons why reviewers should take care to provide constructive critiques, written in a collegial manner, rather than using their anonymity as a cloak to allow snide or rude comments and argumentative critiques. Manuscripts under review are confidential documents, and should be treated as such. They contain unpublished data and ideas that must be kept confidential. You cannot share the paper or its contents with your colleagues. Moreover, you cannot use the information in the (unpublished) paper in your own research or cite it in your own publications. Manuscripts that you are reviewing should be kept in a secure place, where they will not be readily accessible to the curious or unscrupulous.
Lapses in confidentiality undermine the review process, betray the trust of the authors and the editors and can create serious problems for everyone involved in the reviews.

In addition to this document please see the information for authors about our editorial policy on our website www.igjr.org under >About the Journal

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Contact and further information:

E-mail: editors@igjr.org

www.igjr.org