

John Pryor

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

2. Discipline and publish - doing the peer review. (0081)

Programme number: A1.7

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

This paper considers how the power of the academy is constituted through the practices of peer review both of journal articles and research funding proposals. Although debates about quality in social research and current manifestations of paradigm war are implicated, they are not the focus of the paper. Instead, it investigates how the complexities of power flow through the processes of reviewing. Data come from interviews with frequent reviewers for high impact journals and research funders and feedback sent to authors and applicants. However the paper is mainly an autoethnographic account of reviews that I have done myself, juxtaposed with responses to my own successful and unsuccessful attempts to gain funding and publication. By turning the analysis on myself I develop an argument about disciplining the self within academic discipline and attempt to deconstruct my positioning within the discourses of a collegial academy and a neoliberal higher education.

2. Discipline and publish - doing the peer review.

<1000 word summary

Background

I write this paper as a not-very-successful bidder and someone whose publishing hit rate is mediocre. I am a serial reviewer for journals nine in the last year and an editorial board member of two. I review for ESRC and have also served in a similar capacity internationally. I sometimes feel angry and aggrieved and conspired against by what I can perceive as a hyperrealist, literalist, neoliberal hegemony.

When we are chosen to review it is sometimes by authors / proposers themselves either with or without being asked in advance. Editors, mainly choose reviewers for journal based on how the paper's substance of the paper relates to their reading of the (sub)field. They seem to look first to their perception of the inner circle, then to an outer circle and then, in desperation to anyone who may be qualified, including reliable reviewers who may be less well acquainted with the substance. The squeeze on reviewers means that who is chosen is less directly within their control, but this is counteracted by their role of intervening between reviewers. For grant applications a similar system seems to apply except that the final decision lies more within an inner circle which further polices the proposal.

Data

Reviewing a Research Proposal

Here I review my thought process during reviewing and later reflections on it. I consider the given guidelines and the questions they raise.

These relate first to why I am selected and how that positions me in relation to the paper and the field. They concern the extent to which I feel an insider and what the research council is seeking from me.

Issues are raised about how I conceptualize academic quality and what scientific and scholarly merit of the proposal means. These questions inevitable turn back on my own practice, whether it is like or unlike it and whether it is the sort of work I might want to see done. The complexity of social research means that its practicality technical issues are almost always problematic and can be critiqued.

Appraising the suitability of the proposers and their institutions, how can personal experience of them as people not come into play?

In making a decision more questions arise such as how the Council reacted to me last time and what can be overlooked or seen as relatively less important. The rhetoric and persuasiveness of my own writing seems crucial.

Reviewing an article

Similar issues are played out in these data though differently, especially as the process is less prescribed by detailed criteria. My own previous form with the journal as author and reviewer cannot be discounted, including how well I know of the editor and my relationship with them.

Discussion

The public discourse of peer reviewing is based in STEM subjects where disciplines have a distinctive agreed 'methodology' and so review can be presented as a technical issue. However even here this is not so straightforward since ethical issues, the codification of the political are also brought into play. Cases cited in the literature suggest that often the micropolitics of struggle between different research groups are played out in strong affect within the reviewing process where what constitutes 'advance' can often be an issue.

Reviewing may be seen in terms of Wenger's (1998) community of practice where the positioning of reviewer and authors at the centre or periphery are important. They may also be considered in terms of Bourdieu's (1988) notion of field where practice involves maintaining position. Within more methodologically heterodox areas especially with the social sciences, the field reading of the editor in allocating reviews can be crucial.

Reviewing may involve interpellating different reviewer identities, disciplinary gate keeper, readers' / practitioners' / academics champion, mentor, progressive, liberal, innovator, subversive, paradigm warrior (to name those identified in the data).

The research identified several fault lines, sources of turbulence in the reviewing process.

- Affinity / difference between reviewer and researcher.

- Competition: disagreement may be about agreement – who can be ahead in saying the same thing –or about disagreement, where the reviewer does not want the wrong thing published.
- Methodology includes especially epistemological positions where both certainty and uncertainty, when considered distasteful by the reviewer, can be portrayed as lack of criticality.
- Standards may be seen as technical and fixed or conversely require originality or advancement and raise the question of whether difference should be encouraged or punished.
- Ethics of anonymity and collegiality are also brought into play where authorship is often transparent to those in the know and the notion of disqualifying interests is unclear.
- The decision to accept or reject is a binary that cannot be avoided and the cover of anonymity changes the practice.
- Scarcity and abundance where ‘limiting the resource increases the likelihood of hegemonic processes systematically disadvantaging particular sectors of the community’ (Tobin & Roth 2002:270)

The implication of this for authors is that moves which are seen as subversive or educative within the field are dangerous, because hegemony is hegemonic. One way around this may be to write research which is very careful about its language. Adopting a linguistic analogy, it needs to use ‘monitoring black’ where a pose of the unconventional is struck or ‘monitoring white’ where the unconventional is packaged in familiar forms. In such cases a reviewer who is either an open minded dissenter or a supporter who ‘reads’ the authors’ language will stand the author in best stead.

Conclusions

Peer review is a kind collective self government but its promise of openness and equity often remains empty. We participate in it because we want to practise in the field. This participation offers desired flows of power but the contours of the field are uneven - it is a site of (macro-micro) political struggle. The policing of the field depends on the policing of the self as reviewer and as author. On the whole power flows in (anonymized) peer review produce a conservative - rational academy to sustain the discourse that calls the tune.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Tobin, K., and Roth, W-M. (2002). The contradictions in science education peer review and possibilities for change. *Research in Science Education*, 32, 269-280
- Wenger E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge University Press.