

Zen and the art of journal article reviewing

FROM time to time many of you are asked by editors of BPS journals to review an article. With apologies to Robert Pirsig (author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) we now embark on a short journey into the art, drawing parallels with Zen Buddhist approaches to the study of human behaviour and consciousness.

Enlightenment

The purpose of journal article reviewing is to help advance understanding of human behaviour through theoretical development and scientific research. The reviewer is not being asked to make a decision about the publishability of an article, but simply to assess the extent to which it builds on existing knowledge. This key question should be kept in mind throughout the review. The answer will depend in part on the methods used in the research, on the theoretical contributions and on the significance of the contribution of knowledge given what we already know in a field.

Enlightenment is also served in a secondary way. The investment involved in producing a journal article review is not selfless, although it is a professional



MICHAEL A. WEST (*Chair of the Society's Journals Committee*) provides guidance and encouragement in a vital activity.

obligation for all psychologists qualified to undertake such reviews. The advantage for the individual is that they are almost certain to learn more about a field as a consequence of undertaking a review. It is unusual for a reviewer to have knowledge that overlaps completely with that of the article author(s). Consequently the process enhances the reviewer's knowledge about literatures, methods, findings and research references of which he or she is unaware.

Regularity of practice

Zen Buddhism and meditation (and indeed all activities that require the development of skill) demand regularity of practice. This is no less true in relation to journal article reviewing.

Of course, one could practice meditation all day every day, and indeed one could do an almost unlimited amount of journal article reviews, which would

prevent us from engaging in our own research and work activities. So what is a sensible minimum and maximum number of reviews? The Journals Committee of the Society proposes that the minimum professional obligation for BPS members should be four journal article reviews a year.

A simple way of justifying this figure is in terms of reciprocity. Many academic psychologists submit two articles to journals each year and this necessitates approaches to two or three reviewers per article to write reviews. On this basis we propose that each BPS member should be willing to undertake a minimum of four and up to six reviews per year. If you submit more articles each year perhaps you have an obligation (in terms of this principle of reciprocity) to provide more reviews.

One of the reasons why BPS members sometimes find requests to undertake journal article reviews wearisome is that they are bombarded with so many requests. However, if the principle of four reviews per qualified member per year was accepted and acted upon by colleagues then there would be many more reviewers available to review articles, thus dramatically reducing the burden on those who already feel overloaded.

Keeping a count of how many reviews one has done in a year is a useful way of assessing whether each of us has fulfilled our professional obligations and of identifying when it is appropriate to decline to do further reviews in a year.

Focus on the present

Zen Buddhism emphasises awareness of all that is here and now. A key current concern for BPS editors and many other journal editors in our field is the speed with which decisions are made about journal article submissions. The longer it takes to receive article reviews and provide an editorial decision, the slower is our progress in

BPS JOURNALS NEED YOU!

BPS journals editors and the Publications and Communications Board encourage all of those with an interest in reviewing article for BPS journals to submit an application. By undertaking reviewing you gain valuable experience as a potential author and also contribute to the development of the discipline.

To be selected as a reviewer you must have published at least one article in a peer-reviewed journal in psychology. This is because the experience of publishing provides you with the knowledge and expertise necessary to undertake reviews of articles submitted by other authors.

To be a competent reviewer it is important that you regularly read the three or four key journals that are critical to your field. In this way you are able to stay up to date with the latest knowledge in your area and also to assess the quality of research and writing in your field.

Your application should include a copy of your CV, including your publishing record and details of the BPS journals you would feel most competent to review for. Please also describe your specific areas of expertise. It is helpful to be much more specific than to indicate simply 'social psychology' or 'clinical psychology' or 'occupational psychology'. In each area try to indicate the key domains in which you would be competent to review; for example, 'intergroup conflict', 'psychotherapy outcome', 'team processes', etc.

Reviewing a manuscript requires you to make a sufficient commitment of time. When you begin reviewing manuscripts, it is likely to take you half a day or more to complete a thorough review. However, experienced reviewers are able to review manuscripts in two to three hours. If you are selected to review a manuscript, please invest the necessary time in completing the review and ensure that your review is completed within three weeks from the date you receive the review request.

If you are interested in acting as a reviewer, please write to Julie Neason, Journals Manager, British Psychological Society, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR, or preferably e-mail details to julnea@bps.org.uk.

terms of understanding of human behaviour. Those who take many weeks or even months to produce journal article reviews are quite simply slowing down the process of advancing our understanding of human behaviour. So what is a reasonable turnaround time?

The BPS wants to dramatically increase the speed of editorial decisions on journal articles and also the quality of reviews. We are undertaking to provide editorial decisions within a target time of eight weeks from receipt of articles, with an absolute maximum of twelve weeks. This process has been aided enormously by the introduction of an electronic review process.

The focus on the present that we require from journal article reviewers is that they complete their journal article review within three weeks of the date of receiving an article to review. Allowing for a week to identify associate editors, for them to identify willing reviewers, delays in the process due to absence or e-mail difficulties (up to two weeks), this leaves editors and associate editors two weeks to consider reviewers' comments, write decision letters and communicate with authors (some BPS journals editors are processing over 100 articles a year).

Once this is established as a clear norm and adhered to it will be possible to make timely editorial decisions for authors and to ensure that the results of research appear in the journals more quickly than would otherwise be the case. With the new electronic review process the BPS has implemented it will also be possible to give authors feedback on the average speed with which they have made decisions in any period.

Attention, attention, attention

Just as Zen masters believe attention is the key to the highest wisdom, good practice in journal article reviews involves fine attention to detail. Journal article reviewers are required to do as careful and thorough a job as we would expect of authors whose papers are subsequently accepted for publication in journals. Reviewers are therefore required to give their attention to the whole paper. This involves commenting on the major strengths and weaknesses in the article but also giving detailed attention to each section of the paper: abstract, introduction, methods, analysis, results, discussion. The journal article review should therefore be comprehensive in its coverage of the content of the paper.

Sloppy, quick, sleepy meditation is not a route to enlightenment, and focus and quality dictate that reviews take up at least two to four double-spaced pages of comments. Any review which is shorter than this is unlikely to have the depth and breadth of content necessary to help those who submit articles to BPS journals.

Balance

Zen Buddhism emphasises balance in approach to life and experience – never falling one way or the other into urgent desires or sloth. The approach of the reviewer to an article should also be balanced. Most reviews will begin by drawing the editor's attention to the strengths and contributions of the paper – there are always some. It is important for both the balance of the review and for the

well-being of authors that reviewers give attention to the strong points of the paper as well as the weak, so that authors get clear feedback on where reviewers see their main contribution and where they see the main concerns, weaknesses and lack of clarity.

Guidance from a guru

The first times one is asked to undertake a review, the task can seem daunting. It is therefore important to get coaching or guidance from those who are used to undertaking such reviews. One way to do this is show your completed review in confidence to someone more experienced in journal article reviewing. Another is to ask editors or associate editors to whom you submit the review for feedback on your review. Know when you don't know and be prepared to seek guidance. After all, Zen Buddhism emphasises the importance of humility in all things. Pride and bluster

hamper the development of knowledge and skill.

An example of this is where a paper reports on the use of advanced statistical techniques. If the reviewer is not competent to judge the adequacy of the approach, he or she can seek advice from someone with appropriate expertise and ask for their guidance. Another approach is to ask the editor to seek guidance from a reviewer with appropriate expertise. It may be necessary for a reviewer to decide they are not competent to review the article and to inform the editor that the content of the article is outside their areas of competence.

Compassion

Zen Buddhists propose that through compassion we achieve enlightenment. Academics don't often do compassion so well. There is a story about an academic, on observing the humiliation of a visiting speaker by one of the more senior figures in the department, observed: 'We're all of us clever around here, dear boy. The secret is to be nice.'

The purpose of the review is to enable the editor to make a decision about the contribution of the paper to our understanding of human behaviour. It is also a professional obligation upon reviewers for BPS journals to provide guidance and advice to prospective authors. The review should therefore be supportive and helpful.

Many authors will remember the first time they submitted an article for review to a journal and received a set of comments back that left them feeling devastated or inadequate as a result of the litany of criticisms in the review. It is important that reviewers are aware that the purpose of the review is to assist professional development not to demonstrate the incisive, critical ability of the reviewer.

It is good practice to imagine that a paper has been submitted by someone for whom it is the first submission of a paper to a professional journal. Our aim should therefore be to be clear about the contribution of the paper and, while being appropriately critical, sufficiently encouraging to ensure that the author's motivation is maintained.

Morality

Central to Buddhism is the concept of observing moral precepts. The reviewer has moral obligations too.

The BPS review process is through

blind peer review. This means that any identifying information about the author is removed from the front page of the manuscript and from wherever else possible. Of course anonymity is not always maintained since the reviewer may often guess who the author is. He or she should nevertheless respect the anonymity of the authors.

Another moral obligation from the reviewer is to ensure that the paper is treated as confidential and is not distributed, quoted from or used in any way prior to its publication.

The reviewer should not be biased by the content of a paper should it challenge or support his or her theoretical position.

Conclusion

Journal article reviewing is a professional responsibility for BPS members who are competent to undertake journal article reviews. Their approach to the task is in the context of the overall purpose: to advance understanding of human behaviour as a result of theoretical development and scientific research. The other elements of the process follow. It is important to produce excellent reviews in a timely fashion and to do sufficient reviews to sustain high-quality publication in BPS journals (and indeed other journals). It is vital that reviewers are balanced, compassionate, supportive and enabling in the review process. The result will be a benefit to reviewers as well as to authors and editors and to the health of BPS journals. In short, reviewers contribute to our collective enlightenment.

■ *Professor Michael West is at Aston Business School, Aston University. E-mail: M.A.West@aston.ac.uk.*

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