Editorial: Enhancing the Quality of Dialogue Among Editors, Authors, and Reviewers in Editorial Review

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Enhancing the Quality of Dialogue Among Editors, Authors, and Reviewers in Manuscript Review

As I reflect on my years of editorship of the Journal of Pediatric Psychology (JPP) and our work together, I’m very proud of our collaboration and collective accomplishments as an editorial team. For the most part, I believe we have delivered prompt, high-quality reviews that have improved the quality of the published research in JPP. Many authors have commented on the quality and helpfulness of the reviews they have received from JPP. That said, all reviews and editorial decisions are done by human beings. Hence, they remain imperfect. For this reason, in the spirit of continuous quality improvement, I believe it is important for us to work together to improve our review process. Previous editorials focused on improving content of reviews (Drotar, 2009) as well as the efficiency of reviews and reducing their burden on authors (Drotar, 2011). Some areas continue to require our attention and are the focus of this editorial. For example, some authors and associate editors remain concerned about the length and unnecessary detail of reviews. In addition, the quality of the dialogue that occurs among authors, reviewers, and editors in the context of manuscript review can be enhanced.

The importance of developing and sustaining an effective dialogue among authors, reviewers, and managing editors is based on the following assumption: respectful dialogue and consideration of discrepant opinions in scientific review will improve the review process, better serve one of our most important consumer groups (i.e., authors), and ultimately enhance the quality of published science. On the other hand, to the extent that dialogue among authors, reviewers, and editors is confusing and/or strained, the quality of the editorial process and published science can suffer. The purpose of this editorial is to stimulate authors, reviewers, and editors to consider ways to create a more effective collective dialogue in manuscript review.

Why Am I Concerned About the Quality of Dialogue Among Authors, Reviewers, and Managing Editors?

One of the bedrocks of science is the concept of a community of scholars who engage in respectful dialogue about the critical issues in various fields in order to improve the quality of published science (Lipworth, Kerridge, Carter, & Little, 2011). Lipworth et al. (2011) found that some reviewers identified their professional responsibilities to their respective scientific fields and their colleagues as a primary motivation to contribute their time and energies as reviewers. In the ideal scenario, authors, reviewers, and managing editors engage in respectful, nonadversarial dialogue that can include give and take and at times disagreement concerning relevant scientific issues. On the other hand, there is significant tension between a truly open dialogue and reviewers’ and editors’ roles as gatekeepers, who determine which manuscripts reach the threshold of acceptance for publication and which do not. This unequal balance of power inevitably limits the quality of dialogue among reviewers, authors, and editors.

Variation in Specificity, Constructiveness, Length, and Quality of Reviews

Variation in specificity, constructiveness, and overall quality of reviews can also constrain collective dialogue and frustrate authors. Amidst relevant correspondence
from more than 1000 manuscripts that have been submitted over the course of my editorial term thus far, I have observed significant variation in the quality of reviews as well as the quality of authors’ response to editorial critique. Such variation is to be expected given differences in experience, skill level, and competing demands on reviewers, editors, and authors. We have instituted procedures by which editors who are managing the review can provide feedback to reviewers via ratings of helpfulness, clarity, and timeliness of their reviews as well as narrative feedback. We encourage such feedback to improve our editorial process.

However, such opportunities for feedback have been underutilized, perhaps for several reasons: Our busy managing editors focus on getting a sufficient number of reviewers to submit their reviews on time, reviewing the manuscript and reviews, and writing an editorial decision letter that incorporates multiple sources of information. Given such demands, editors may not provide consistent feedback to reviewers that will enhance the quality of their reviews. Authors are equally overcommitted and may not choose to use their time to provide feedback to JPP unless they feel very wronged by the process. But even then, authors may not be completely honest in their feedback because they feel it would not change the editorial outcome or might offend the editor.

Some Signs and Symptoms of Problematic Dialogue in the Editorial Process

One of the most difficult challenges that I’ve experienced as editor of JPP is how best to manage the heartfelt concerns by authors about the process of review and editorial verdict. Should these concerns be regarded as a reflection of a “sour grapes” response to a negative editorial verdict? Alternatively, are these authors courageous whistle-blowers who are expressing cogent protest of an unjust editorial verdict and/or the way it was delivered? For purposes of this editorial, it is most relevant to recognize that authors’ frustrations can be triggered not only by the editorial verdict but by their experience of communication in the review process, that is, quality of informational content and how it was delivered. Such issues as ambiguity in the content of the reviews, disrespectful tone, very lengthy reviews that focus mostly on small editorial points rather than major issues, number of manuscript revisions that are requested, and failure to consider alternative points of view about manuscript content or methods as valid have been most frustrating to authors.

It should be noted that authors’ negative reactions to editorial critique in JPP are by no means the norm. Moreover, similar concerns have been described by authors who have submitted manuscripts to other journals. For example, Sweitzer and Cullen’s (1994) survey found that authors identified problems in the tone of the reviews, unclear reviewer or editorial feedback, and reviewers’ overlooking of relevant material, as significant sources of their dissatisfaction with the review process. Let’s consider some of the signs and symptoms of burdensome and problematic dialogue among authors, reviewers, and editors in a bit more depth.

Unnecessarily Burdensome Reviews (Reviewers and Editors)

Authors continue to be concerned about the length of the reviews and the burden of response for manuscripts that receive a revise and resubmit editorial verdict. Although there is value in a thorough and complete review, some reviewers go too far with a large number of smaller editorial suggestions that are not central and by failing to distinguish between major and minor points of critique. Moreover, multiple revise and resubmit verdicts are also clearly burdensome. Some authors have wondered whether so many revisions were necessary.

Unhelpful Reviews (Reviewers and Editors)

The evaluative function of editorial review is important, not only from the standpoint of deciding on the acceptance versus rejection of the manuscript but also in helping to improve the science that is published. For this reason, reviews that provide a litany of negative evaluative critique in the absence of constructive suggestions are problematic. On the other hand, clear and constructive feedback to authors is most valued by authors. Such feedback is very helpful to authors in deciding next steps for submission when their manuscripts are rejected and in improving the quality of the revision in response to revise and resubmit editorial decision.

Disrespectful Tone (Reviewers and Authors)

Problematic dialogue in the review process can be triggered by disrespectful tone in editorial critique. That said, prevention of disrespectful tone is not easy because it is in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, reviewers and editors can communicate disrespect to authors by patronizing comments or content that implies that authors should have known better in choosing a topic of research, designing the study, or selecting specific methods or measures. Reviewers’ and editors’ strong opinions about the specific research that should have been conducted (as
opposed to evaluating the research that was reported) and unrelenting focus on the mistakes that were made in the study can come across as condescending, especially for students, fellows, and junior faculty who are not as acclimated to the review process as more seasoned authors. That said, it can be a difficult balance between effective and harsh critique. By its very nature, editorial critique always provides evaluative counterpoints that raise questions about the significance of research, design, and methods. In fact, reviewers are charged with doing an evaluation of submitted research rather than rubber stamping it or pulling their editorial punches to avoid offending.

The difference between a more positive versus negative tone in giving the identical critique can be subtle but recognizable by some authors—consider the difference in the tone of the following critique of the identical methodological issue: “The authors should have known to control for relevant covariates in conducting their analyses” compared with “The precision and impact of the analysis would be enhanced by an analysis of covariates.”

**Ambiguous Communication (Reviewers and Authors)**

Reviews that provide very general critique but do not indicate specific areas that need to be changed and, as importantly, a specific rationale for making changes, may lead to less productive communication in helping authors respond to a revise and resubmit editorial verdict. In order to craft the most effective response to critique, authors need to understand the specific issues that raised concerns and ideally the rationale for the request for changes (e.g., how will the authors’ response to critique improve the science of the manuscript?). In the absence of clear and specific guidance from reviewers, authors are at a significant disadvantage. Consider the difference in message value of the following two critiques: “Please extend the description of participants and nonparticipants, which was incomplete” versus “It will be important to describe the demographic differences between participants and nonparticipants, as this is needed to understand potential sampling bias.”

**Incomplete or Disrespectful Response to Editorial Critique (Authors)**

Authors are not immune from problematic dialogue in their response to a revise and resubmit editorial verdict. Editors usually request a point-by-point response to reviewers who may have spent significant amounts of time preparing their reviews. For this and other reasons (e.g., everyone likes their point of view to be heard), reviewers may be quick to recognize when an author ignores or gives a less than complete response to specific points that were made. Consequently, authors who omit a detailed, point-by-point response to critique in the cover letter and in the manuscript can put their manuscript at a disadvantage. Authors can also contribute to problematic dialogue in the review process by expressing their frustration regarding the review by implying that reviewers did not know what they were talking about.

**Inconsistent and Discrepant Reviews (Editor)**

Not uncommonly, reviewers differ in the specific issues that they identify as most problematic in a manuscript and their recommendations for an editorial decision. Moreover, reviewers may have highly discrepant and even contradictory views, which can be very confusing to authors and make it difficult for them to respond effectively to critique. For this reason, editorial decision letters that do not address highly discrepant or contradictory review points can frustrate and confuse authors.

**Promoting More Effective Dialogue Among Authors, Reviewers, and Managing Editors**

To my mind, one of the key benchmarks of an effective, quality dialogue among authors, reviewers, and editors is their abilities to engage in effective and respectful dialogue about the quality of science. Here are some specific suggestions to improve this process.

**For Reviewers and Editors: Proof Your Reviews for Clarity, Specificity, Tone, and Level of Helpfulness**

I would suggest that reviewers and editors proof their reviews for clarity, specificity of response, and level of helpfulness. It may also be useful for reviewers to consider how authors may react to their comments and change the tone of their reviews accordingly. If you are not sure about how the tone of the review comes across, have someone else read it for a “tone check.”

**For Reviewers and Editors: Streamline Your Comments to Authors for Revise and Resubmit Editorial Verdicts**

It is helpful to organize editorial critique into major and minor points and to prioritize the responses that are most important and required of authors in their revisions. Focused reviews that target the most important scientific issues are especially valuable to editors and authors.

**For Authors: Consider Whether Your Response to Critique is Complete and Respectful in Tone**

At times, authors’ emotional reactions to editorial critique may affect the quality of their point-by-point response
letter to the editor and reviewers and decisions about what changes to make to the manuscript. As is true for reviewers and editors, it may be difficult for authors to identify problems in the clarity, completeness, or tone of their response to critique. For this reason, authors might wish to rely on their coauthors and/or colleagues who are not involved in the manuscript to critique their response to the reviews to ensure that it is clear, complete, and respectful.

Managing Editors: Resolve Contradictory Reviews in Your Communication to Authors

To facilitate authors’ response to editorial critique in revising their manuscripts, it is important that the editors’ response to authors resolve contradictory reviews. In such instances, editors would do well to guide authors’ revisions by clarifying the recommended changes in manuscripts.

For Authors: Contact the Editor to Obtain Guidance to Respond to Confusing or Contradictory Reviews

Authors who find themselves very confused in the face of highly discrepant or contradictory reviews should not suffer in silence. In such instances, it is not only acceptable, but desirable that authors contact the managing editor of the manuscript for clarification about confusing points and guidance about how to proceed. This will help authors craft a more effective revision and provide useful feedback to editors and reviewers.

For Authors and Reviewers: Consider the Practice and Etiquette of Counterargument

The majority of the editorial decisions submitted to JPP involve revision and resubmission of manuscripts. In making such decisions, reviewers and managing editors believed that there was sufficient merit to invite the manuscript back for another review following critique and recommendations for revisions. The recommended revisions may involve some that authors do not agree with and hence may be the subject of debate. A wide range of difficult methodological questions can trigger debate such as: What are the best methods to analyze mediational models in longitudinal data (Cole & Maxwell, 2003)? How should one apply analysis of covariance in descriptive research (Miller & Chapman, 2001)? What is the best way to analyze data from clinical cases (Borchardt et al., 2008)? At times, reviewers’, editors’, and authors’ strong points of view and biases about methods, etc. can interfere with respectful debate about how best to proceed with a revision.

For understandable and pragmatic reasons (e.g., not wanting to offend reviewers and editors and/or ruin their chances for acceptance) authors may choose to accommodate all of the reviewers’ and editors’ comments rather than fight what they may perceive as a losing battle. But what if the author has a cogent and scientifically significant counterargument to make? Should he or she always keep silent? Although it is important for authors to choose their battles in responding to reviews, there are clearly occasions when authors serve the best interests of science by making cogent counterarguments. In such instances, reviewers need to appreciate that their opinions, however heartfelt, may be open to question or debate. The most convincing counterarguments by authors involve a respectful presentation of a detailed rationale and supporting references for the specific point of disagreement in a way that recognizes the reviewers’/editors’ views. Significant and irreconcilable differences between authors and reviewers that remain following the authors’ presentation of counterarguments will need to be resolved by the managing editor of that manuscript.

Counterpoints, Difficult Questions, and Call for Commentary

I recognize that views expressed in this editorial raise very difficult questions and counterpoints: For example, what is the balance of the responsibilities of reviewers and editors in evaluation of the quality of science (i.e., their roles as gatekeepers) versus provision of constructive, helpful feedback (i.e., roles as mentors)? Shouldn’t tender-hearted authors “just get over it” and simply develop tougher skins in reacting to and managing editorial critique?

The review and editorial process is inevitably fraught with tension. Nevertheless, I believe that authors, reviewers, and editors have a collective responsibility to improve the quality of the science that is published in JPP. Improving the quality of reviews and collective dialogue in the context of editorial review is one way to accomplish this, and we all have a role to play.

Will this appeal for collective dialogue facilitate the editorial process? I guess it’s up to us. In order to encourage dialogue, we have and will emphasize that reviewers streamline and focus their reviews on major scientific issues (Drotar, 2009) as this remains a concern for authors. I invite suggestions and commentary concerning the issues raised in this editorial, including viewpoints from authors, reviewers, and editors concerning the ways to improve the dialogue in the context of the editorial process.
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