On Submitters’ Rights and Peer Review in Academic Journals: A Conversation with Judith Clair

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Judith Clair is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management and Organization at Boston College. Dr. Clair’s research interests are variegated and have taken her down a variety of paths. She has written about a number of topics – including professional identity development processes, identity change and career intentions, and the management of invisible stigmatized identities – and her work has been published in many Academy of Management outlets such as AMJ, AMR, and AMLE.

In a recent article, Dr. Clair offers her reflections about the peer-review process and the governance of academic journals in the organization studies field. The paper is titled “Toward a Bill of Rights for Manuscript Submitters” and is published in the 2015 March issue of the Academy of Management Learning & Education. In this paper, she claims that little attention has been paid to the rights of manuscript submitters during the peer-review process. After proposing to formally recognize a set of basic rights, the article addresses a critical question: Where do we go from here?

Dr. Clair has been so kind to accept our invitation to answer a few questions, in the spirit of stimulating a conversation and encouraging positive change.

About the motivation for the paper

Your manuscript echoes the call for a bill of rights that David Harrison made in 2002 in the Academy of Management Journal. As you note at the incipit of the paper “Harrison’s ideas remain relevant and important, but little has been done to recognize his call” (p.112). Could you please share your thoughts about why this idea has been overlooked for so long? How did you reach the decision that it was time to reopen the conversation?
Dr. Clair: My interest in reopening the conversation was originally driven by the many behind-the-doors conversations I’d had with Ph.D. students and colleagues about the problems we collectively had faced during peer-review in publishing our own work. I had simply gotten to a point where I felt that we, as a field, needed to bring the conversation that was already happening into a public forum from behind closed doors. I must admit, taking this step felt a bit like jumping off a cliff. I had more than one colleague ask me if I was intending to commit career suicide by writing this article. This was indeed viewed as a taboo topic! So, I actually don’t think this idea has been overlooked because people talk about it all the time in private – but it certainly hasn’t been brought out into the open for a public conversation as much as it could be.

As any researcher would do, my first step was to investigate what other scholars had already written about the peer-review system. Once I started digging, I was surprised that, in fact, so much had been published on the peer review system across many disciplines! There is quite a bit of material telling us about all of the problems in the system; there is a lot of material that aims to help manuscript submitters navigate the process; and there is much advice provided to current and future reviewers to improve the quality of manuscript reviews. It wasn’t too long before I ran across David Harrison’s article, and it struck me right away that he had hit on something exceedingly important. We almost never attend to the question of our own rights, as manuscript submitters, even as we participate in the peer-review system and grumble about our experience of having our rights trumped! This was an important issue that should be re-visited, and that was my intention in this article.

About improving the peer-review process

In addition to discussing the rights of manuscript submitters you propose “some ideas to fix the problems”. Some of the measures are corrective and aim at improving existing practices. For example, raise editor and reviewer awareness about implicit biases would help guarantee the submitters’ right to an objective evaluation. Two of the proposed ideas particularly attracted my attention because they suggest changing existing peer-review practices in a more substantial way. The first one is to “cloak manuscript-submitters’ identities to all parties” and the second one is to “allow manuscript submitters to shop their papers” (p. 123-124). Could you tell us more about the origin of – and the rationale behind – these two ideas? In your view, is the peer-review process more in need of corrections or innovations in order to continue to effectively guarantee submitters’ rights?
Dr. Clair: I think any corrections we make need to be innovative. As discussed in the paper, these are highly complicated problems and there are many good reasons why we, as scholar-leaders and journal editors, have had such a hard time tackling them.

The first recommendation – to cloak manuscript-submitters’ identities to all parties – came from my knowledge of the implicit bias literature, which tells us that even well-meaning people who are consciously committed to evaluating others in an unbiased fashion have a hard time doing so. We are biased by a variety of factors that elude us because the biases operate below consciousness. Therefore, the information that an editor is given – such as the names of a scholar or their school affiliation – are likely to have an unconscious effect on evaluation and decision making, even when the editor has made an explicit commitment to objectively evaluate a manuscript. In editorial roles, most people have had to evaluate a scholar-friend or acquaintance, and certainly can appreciate how difficult it is to keep the relationship out of the evaluation. While cloaking all identities seems to be an obvious fix, there are some reasons why editors may not want to make this change. For instance, it creates and extra-administrative step. Or, an editor might want to be extra-developmental for new entrants to the field, such as Ph.D. students, who are just starting out. However, if we are truly committed to the notion of meritocratic functioning in our peer-review system – that all manuscript submitters have equality of opportunity in the evaluation of their work and treatment during peer-review – we should do what it takes to ensure our commitment to treat all submitters equally.

The idea to shop around one’s paper is not a new one, as I noted in the paper. It essentially levels the playing field a bit for manuscript submitters, who can send their manuscript to several journals at once to see which journals might be interested. I actually have a hard time imaging our field taking up this idea – this would certainly be a radical change. The point I am trying to raise is that there are innovative ideas in other fields that might be worth considering. For instance, some journals in the medical fields are experimenting with getting rid of blind reviews all together, and publishing the reviews along with a paper so that the process is much more transparent, at least for those papers that make it into publication.

About power relationships in the peer-review process

Your paper points attention to the power relationship that exists between manuscript submitters and editors/reviewers. As you discuss, “journal editors and reviewers typically have much greater power than do manuscript submitters because they act as gatekeepers to the publication of one’s work” (p. 113). If we look at the other side of the coin, there are also power relationships that favor submitters over editors. As you noted earlier, editors may have personal and/or professional relationships with submitters. These relationships may create “conflicts of
“duties”, so to speak. Do you think of these situations as problematic? Could your suggestion of “cloaking manuscript-submitters’ identities to all parties” also help editors in those extreme cases?

Dr. Clair: I addressed some aspects of this issue in my earlier response. However, you raise a provocative question. When does the power relationship shift toward the manuscript submitter? In most cases, I can state with good certainty that editors and reviewers hold great power – after all, they are the gatekeepers to publishing one’s work! On the other hand, it is evident that manuscript submitters who have collegial or friendship ties with editors do certainly have a less power-down experience compared to those who lack these ties. I know that I’ve certainly sighed in relief when I know the editor assigned to my own submissions. To be clear, I don’t think that the editor will give me a pass or be purposely easy on me just because we know each other. My colleagues are highly professional people, and I don’t think that they’d abuse the system like that. The effects are much more indirect, in that the relationship subtly greases the peer review process. As a submitter, I feel more able to reach out and ask questions, I feel that I can predict the editors’ interests with greater certainty, and so on. I think we’d be fooling ourselves to deny the effect of such social ties on smoothing the peer-review experience.

About experiments in the peer-review process

You mentioned earlier that other disciplines are re-evaluating and potentially re-designing peer-review practices. Science publishing seems to be inclined to experiment with different forms of peer-review. The journal Nature, for instance, conducted in 2006 an experiment with “crowd-reviewing”, a participatory approach in which an open an interactive peer-review is conducted and comments were required to be signed. These experiments are seemingly rarer in the social sciences. Do you think that experimenting with alternative (e.g. open) peer-review may be useful in management research?

Dr. Clair: As I mentioned above, I know that the sciences have been experimenting with these ideas. There is an interesting study I read that looked at scholars perceptions of the different cloaking practices (from no cloaking to double-blind peer-review) called “To Blind or Not To Blind: What Editors and Authors Prefer” by Glenn Regehr and Georges Bordage (2006). The results of the research showed a good deal of resistance to the elimination of blinded peer-review. Scholars expressed concerns that revealing information would lead to more unfairness, and that doing so would foster conflicts and rivalries among the parties. Conversely, revealing identities of all parties provided more transparency and accountability, and gave more insight into reviewer’s credentials for evaluating the work.
About continuing the conversation

Dr. Clair, thank you very much for this informative and insightful conversation. Any suggestions for those OMTers who would like to learn more and continue the dialogue?

Dr. Clair: I want to quickly note that I was urged by several colleagues to do more than just publish an article. Therefore, I organized a PDW for the 2015 AoM Conference which takes place on Saturday, August 8th called Recognizing Rights and Opening Governance in Our Peer-Reviewed Journals (12:45 PM - 2:45 PM at UBC Robson Square - Room C130). This PDW gathers scholarly leaders who can and do have the most impact on the peer-review system – editors and former editors of major journals in the organization studies field – to engage with PDW participants in an examination of the peer review system to (a) help build insight into how to improve fair and just functioning of peer-review processes followed by journals and (b) to enhance participants’ knowledge and insight into how to navigate through the system in light of its strengths and weaknesses. The session requires pre-enrollment. I can be emailed at clairju@bc.edu to give those interested participants a code to register. There are a limited number of seats available, so plan to register soon if you are interested!

OMTers, we would love to hear from you! If you have ideas and comments you would like to share, please reach out - evelyn.micelotta@ualberta.ca