



The Room Is Long and Narrow

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse some of our experiences with peer review and argue that the process should be rethought. Rather than a gate-keeping device, the ideological function should be acknowledged as well as acknowledging that the true (idealistic) purpose of publishing is to air and develop new ideas – in effect to evolve the community. Given this, peer review as a process would be better thought of as helping authors to develop their ideas and to share them. Such a process involves attempting to understand what an author is trying to do and helping her achieve her goal. It is critically constructive and creative rather than destructive/deconstructive. In recognising this we articulate the “true” purpose of the peer review process and of participating in it – or at least the democratic purpose for which it was conceived. This involves enabling divergent opinions to be heard and this in turn enables the evolution of the field from within, for the danger is if evolution does not come from within it is imposed from without.

Key Words: oppression, peer review, power, scholarly community, values

Our experiences with peer review, at this stage in our professional lives have been multiple and of differential value. We have played the role of journal editor, international conference session leader, institutional reviewer, external program reviewer, member of international and national review panels, etc. We have been reviewed ourselves – we have submitted papers to peer reviewed journals and grants and proposals to funding agencies; we have submitted ourselves to the tenure and promotion process at level one US research institutions. We have wounds, scars, and vivid memories. We have identities and values shaped by these processes and we carry these with us. In reflecting back on these we decided to write in a way which describes some of these experiences and the effects they have upon us and what we do, for we have worked hard to reshape the roles we take in response to the things we have experienced. Finally we write about what we perceive as the inherent paradox of peer review – that the word *peer* in peer review implies an equality but those who take on the role enact a power differential. Such power differentials are inescapable in our society writ large and in the smaller confines of our academic community. Being knowledgeable of this and being aware allows us to use our power in the service of others and subversively as a vehicle to enact cultural change. This is dangerous, too, for power is inherently corrupting and the desire to wield power, even for “good,” seduces.

Memory 1

The room is long and narrow. The walls are white; the furniture oak veneer. There is a long table down the centre of the room and at each seat is a computer monitor. The nine panel participants are scattered around this table “discussing” their ranking of a grant proposal. One person talks, the rest of the group work with the images on their computer screens while I observe the interactions, bemused. No one seems to know anyone else or at least no one seems to acknowledge they know each other. Eyes never meet when someone is talking. The men make pronouncements, extend their judgements. The women share opinions and ask questions. Occasionally the men speak over the women’s heads to each other. The other men acknowledge these exchanges with laughter. The women don’t look up, don’t laugh.

Ideology, the values, beliefs and practices emanating from particular dominant groups, is the means by which those in power promote and legitimate their particular interests at the expense of others. Ideology, however, is a made thing – constituted through social practices and evolving – changing in the way social practices do. In this group, a group involved in “peer review,” ideology is made both by what is said and what is left unsaid. It is made in the constitution of the group as well as in how they interact with each other. Putting people together into such a group by definition makes them peers – each vote in the end counts the same but are the interactions those of peers? Who are the peers here? What defines a peer, a peer group?

Looking at the definitions of peer in the Oxford English Dictionary (2001) a peer is: 1) An equal in civil standing or rank, one’s equal before the law; 2) One who takes rank with another in point of natural gifts or other qualifications; an equal in any respect; 3) One who is associated or matched with another; a companion, mate; a rival. The peer group described above was not self-selected. Someone else labelled the members as “equals.” The members are also clearly and purposefully pitted against each other, equal in power no matter how they participate.

This power is the power which Gramsci describes in *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* (1971/1999) as the sort the ruling class wields in its effort to provide the intellectual rigour to develop, rationalise, and sustain coherent world views. Such power provides the basis upon which legitimate authority is maintained – not through coercive power, but through the seemingly rigorous application of the intellect to interpretations of political and civil society. In effect, such power provides the basis upon which the ruling class governs. It has been this elite group which has traditionally sought after “truth,” providing world views and showing how the world has been diffused into the “common sense” of the populous. So that, to the everyday person, ideology as an activity can only be experienced as received and unquestioned. Consequently, the development of a critique of this often remains at the unarticulated level of “knowing.” In the group described above is their real purpose to create ideology or to implement it? It is arguably just to implement it for unless critique of what exists rises up from unarticulated “knowing,” members remain instruments of the status quo.

We would argue that in reflecting upon such images as this group, in which participation is clearly unequal and different members seem to work under different rules and values, our underlying purpose must be to develop a subversive critical

consciousness. It is this critical consciousness that moves us to evolve the field both in substance and in the way it functions. It is impossible to sit in such a group and not reflect on how one got there and why. It is impossible to not ask questions such as what does one have in common with these people, what does one abhor? In effect the function of presenting such an image of a group is to cause one to reflect on the nature of community, identity and self. To quote Charles Taylor (1994, pp. 32–33), “We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want in us.”

To be placed in such a group entails external recognition of some facets of identity but actually participating in that group causes us to recognise other facets – to develop a critical self consciousness, a self redefinition constructed by saying “I am not” as well as “I am.” Such reflection takes us beyond the usual sense of reflection as “critique” and leads us to what Habermas described as “reflection as a form of self-formation (*Bildung*) which emancipates as it dissolves the constraining spell of false belief . . .” (Pusey, 1987, p. 26).

Memory 2

Sitting at home (I work at home, on the living room couch) I notice the envelope with the logo *Journal of* . . . across the top, it has not gone away. I know what it contains, another paper to review. I hate to review. I hate to read the papers that editors seem to think I am qualified to review. I hate the editors. Reluctantly I rip the envelope open. Yup, another contribution to “my field.” Yup, they cite me twice. Yup.

The concept of “peer” in peer review is degrading to both the author and reviewer. Does peer imply that the reviewer could have written the work, should he have so desired? Peer review places enormous power in the hands of someone that has contemplated for an hour what the author contemplated for months. Anonymous review breaks the dialogic context which normal peers would observe. There is a contradiction in this – the word peer denotes equal and equals relate through conversation in which each person’s ideas and opinions are of equal value. The peer review process, however, is secret and somehow sleazy. It involves judging another behind her back, someone whom normally, when we meet in the hall or in the elevator, we might greet as a friend, invite for coffee and ask after her family.

On the other hand, peer review of scholarly writing is the basis of a “community literature,” formed when a group of scholars coalesces into a community. This is because peer review involves filtering and reducing ideas and results to a clear community canon. “Peers,” in this case, are either consensus- or editor-defined members of the community. The community literature is the touchstone that defines and maintains the community. The process of review forces scholars to read and respond to each other’s work. It is this process of being a reviewer and being reviewed that makes one part of the community. (We note that when we submit our annual report of activities for our own professional review we name the journals we review for, the review boards we participate in – for all its being “anonymous” much depends on our receiving acknowledgment for it.)

Memory 3

I'm sitting in a closet, or that's the way it feels. The room is tiny, dirty and poorly lit. The ventilation grating by the door has been blocked with moulded Styrofoam from someone's new computer purchase. This is so no one in the hall can overhear the conversation. Five people are hunched over a folding table placed diagonally at the centre of the room. We are sitting on ancient office chairs with cracked Naugahide seats. These squeak like baby elephants when people shift position. Fortunately they rarely do this for they are *frozen* This is the faculty advisory council deciding whether to recommend an assistant professor for tenure. The committee was voted in by the faculty at large. This and annual reviews are their charge. One member is a full professor towards the end of his career, refusing to retire. Three are young turks in their prime; they hate each other. The last is me, untenured this year, going up next year.

The topic of debate in such a committee is in effect the definition of "peer" – who do we allow as our peers? Who do we admit as a member of our group? It is assumed that all in such a committee are peers but does this mean they are the same? Each is an individual with widely different qualifications for membership on the committee. The struggles they engage in while debating another's admission repeat their own internal struggles with their own membership – their identity as a peer group member. Some argue the value of scholarly publication while others argue the importance of quality teaching and service. The perspectives reflect the identities of the member. The primary purpose of peer review in this committee may seem to be providing the institutionalised community with data for evaluating their personnel as measured against some external standard. The process of being a reviewer and being reviewed may appear to confirm one as part of that community. We would argue, however, that through the process of review the community is personalised – the individuals involved once again must acknowledge the individualised self. The community itself is redefined through this process for the standards have internal referents as well as external. The community members have faces and qualities with value that is socially negotiated.

To talk about this process, though, as "negotiated" does not capture how it feels. It feels more like being in a bear pit. The sense of a resolution and shared values and goals implied by words such as community are not present. Rather the conflict is intense and never ends – it lives on long beyond the time of the meeting and is not resolved in the decision the committee comes to. When we say the committee members hate each other we mean that and years later, they still do. Pitting peer against peer means you live with conflict forever.

Memory 4

Lunch today is cheese and bean tostadas made with organic blue corn tortillas. My daughter and her friends, all of whom are three, receive the food silently from Annie the aging-hippy-home-child-care-natural-food-earth-mother I have engaged to look after my daughter. As Annie returns to the tar paper shack she lives in to get hers and mine, the children exchange glances. One starts to sing

. . . *Ring around the rosie,*
A pocket full of posies . . .

The others join in and slowly start to dance. Suddenly Phoenix, a tow haired anarchist, throws his tortilla into the centre of the group. Larkin, my daughter, kicks sand on it. The group forms a circle and Katie, Annie's daughter, runs into the centre. Pulling up her dress she squats over the tortilla and pees. "Wonder where her panties are," I think to myself.

Well here, in this vignette, the revolution would appear to be happening. The individuals participating in Memory 1, as peer reviewers, might like to act as these children and sometimes, metaphorically, if one has ever received a review from such a committee it feels as if they have. Such actions though, even while they might appear or are received as assertions of something startlingly novel, perpetuate the power dynamics inherent in peer review – the actions are within the "rules" of the peer review process. It is possible to change the constituency of the group, change the criteria of review, alter the power hierarchy within the academy by replacing one "leader in the field" with another but none of these actually alter the review process. The "hidden curriculum" of peer review remains intact. The children of this memory have not altered the power dynamics in this scene and we, in giving good reviews or bad, do little to alter things either. Sometimes it is good that such a democratic system is conservative but sometimes we yearn for the revolution. When we do it is worth asking ourselves why and what would the new "world" look like?

Continuing on with Habermas' (e.g., 1991) ideas about reflection upon experience and how this evolves into critique, our memories contain descriptions and interpretations of existing situations – the members of the group act in the ways they do for particular reasons, some obvious and some less articulated. According to Habermas such a sense making exercise evolves into critique through analysis of the causes and purposes of a situation and an evaluation of their legitimacy. The ideologies and interests at work in these situations are explored. By this means the conditions of "oppression" are brought into consciousness and a greater understanding achieved. This is inherently liberatory and enables emancipatory action. Critique here serves to reveal to individuals and groups how their views and practices might be ideological distortions that, in their effects, are perpetuating a social order or situation that works against their democratic freedoms, interests and empowerment.

It can be argued that ideologically driven thinking, which is what participating in peer review is, involves entering into a state of false consciousness. In other words, it is holding ideas and participating in an activity which originates outside of our own emotional and intellectual subjectivity, our identity. It does something other than what we would intend if we were truly to think about it. In many ways engaging in peer review involves a positivistic abstraction of experience. Despite the growing acceptance of postmodernist/poststructuralist critiques of social practices (Foucault, 1980) and the grand narratives of Jean-François Lyotard (1984), which entail the separation of subjective from objective experience, the belief that some sort of truth or greater good arises from rational debate and objective critique remains. Such rules which guide our actions originate not out of our own needs or desires, or ideas or personal lived experience or community, but from outside of us, external to us. We think they enable our activities, values and commitments but they do so in a circumscribed manner. In addition the person acting under the influence of an

ideology, a false consciousness, cannot see this. The parameters constraining action are opaque and obscure the truth of what we are doing. The apparent success of our procedures (they do enable things to happen and they do give the appearance of arising from our ideas of what should happen) lure us into a self-justification. It makes us feel that we understand what is going on and that we are in control of it. This is a delusion.

In this case of peer review, by participating in these committees or by reviewing the work of others we work within the process and even when we try to “act differently” or effect some change on what is happening, our very participation continues the system. However, simple non-participation does nothing to change things either. The question becomes how to participate but effectively subvert the system if indeed we want things changed.

Memory 5

I never sit in my office but today I am. ‘J’ wanders in. He has my paper – the one I submitted to his journal to be considered for publication – in his hand. “My paper, my paper” I croon to myself. (I write my papers like I read poetry I think.) “You stupid girl, adjust your face, he’s going to say something about it.” He does, he says “I like it” and “could you take out the reference to Foucault?” (My mother, when I showed it to her said the same about the reference to Marx.) I say okay.

It is possible to construe the act of peer review as enabling not as judging, as an act of caring. Caring in this sense is about empathy and sympathy. It is about a way of knowing which develops through a close connection with another. A caring reviewer differs from a traditional reviewer for the role is not about distancing or the application of abstract criteria. Such a process involves attempting to understand what an author is trying to do and helping them achieve their goal. It is constructive and creative not destructive/deconstructive.

When we invoke an ethic of caring in the review process we derive our sense of the phrase from the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), C. Gilligan, N. P. Lyons and T. J. Hanmer (1990) and Nel Noddings (1984). According to Gilligan and Noddings, an ethic of care and responsibility develops from an individual’s feeling of interconnectedness with others. It is contextual and arises from experience. It is characterised by nurturance and an emphasis on responsibility to others. The traditional interpretation of the peer review process with its emphasis on distancing and rationalism de-emphasises caring relationships. Rather the peer review process presents itself as operating without ethical considerations – it is an application of “rational” judgement. We wonder, however, why we should fool ourselves into thinking this. The review process is not “rational” although it does become a “rationalisation” – one in which participants rationalise their opinion and force their opinion on others. It is worth remembering that with modern technology, there is no reason not to allow individuals to express themselves publicly to the limit of their desires in text for if we do not “allow” them to, they will anyway and with less of our control over the product. In addition validation and archival functions of peer review could be

implemented post-facto rather than as gate-keeping for cited papers live on, ignored papers die. Wouldn't our efforts be better spent enabling authors to say what they want *better* and to make sure counter arguments are there and equally well presented? In recognising this we articulate the "true" purpose of the peer review process and of participating in it – or at least the democratic purpose for which it was conceived. This involves enabling divergent opinions to be heard and this in turn enables the evolution of the field from within, for the danger is if evolution does not come from within it is imposed from without. We only need look about us at schools, curriculum, and current practices such as high-stakes testing to see the truth of this. We should remain mindful, however, of the corrupting qualities of power and that power seduces and that by serving in these roles we remain institutional tools while attempting to redirect current practices and reshape our role in idealistic and humanistic ways.

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