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The peer review process at the *Journal of Gambling Issues*

You may have noticed a coda at the end of a paper, “This article was peer reviewed,” and wondered, “What does that really mean?” If so, you are in good company. Questions and comments to this editor by well-educated people indicate that many do not understand how peer review functions. Readers who are not researchers may have never had exposure to the theory and practice of this cornerstone of independent scholarly publishing. Yet peer review is an essential component of science that can help assure higher quality articles and the emergence of new paradigms.

In this nuts-and-bolts editorial essay on how peer review works at the *Journal of Gambling Issues (JGI)*, we hope to offer insight for those who wonder how we carry out scholarly publication. This essay will combine descriptions of ethics (the morality of what should happen) with reality-based pragmatics (what really happens) in peer review.

A quick overview. Here is a 107-word (one half-minute) summary of what would probably happen if you were to submit a good-quality paper for review to the *JGI*. First, the editor would remove identifying information so that the author(s) cannot be identified. Next, we would find two reviewers with a background of research or clinical experience in your specific topic, and we'd ask them to evaluate your paper. Throughout, their criteria would be, “Does this paper attain high standards of either sound scholarship or clinical practice?” and, “Is it original?” We would send you their anonymous comments and ask you to respond. If in your second version you responded well to all comments—as do most authors—then your paper would be accepted for publication. (A more detailed description of the review process appears below.)

Why anonymous authors and reviewers? The peer-review process as we know it evolved after WWII when there was increasing interest in evaluations that removed biases based on an author's academic status (whether high or low), gender, ethnicity/race, location, and other potentially prejudicial factors. Making

authors anonymous to reviewers, with the author or editor removing identifying information, was one means to promote this. (One editor compares anonymous reviews to musician tryouts behind a curtain that allow ability to be evaluated without revealing who is playing. When this practice was adopted for symphony orchestra tryouts, the number of female players hired soared [[Pritchard, 2001](#)].) The rationale for making reviewers anonymous to authors is to protect them from acrimony and possible career fallout. A common term for this process of mutual anonymity between authors and reviewers is “blind review.”

Fair review. The goal of peer review is to supply the author with useful feedback on how a fair reviewer assesses the quality of her paper. There are dozens of potential areas for evaluation, but the basic questions are: (a) Is the content of the paper scientifically or clinically sound? (b) Is the literature review thorough and is it integrated into the paper? (c) Are the results well presented and convincing? and (d) Does the paper present original results that contribute to the field of gambling studies? For a hands-on look at the criteria that we offer to reviewers, please see this attachment (Word file: 47 kb).

You may wonder if reviewers sometimes slip from using fair criteria such as “scholarly (or scientific or clinical) excellence” into unconsciously substituting more personal criteria such as, “Here's how I think this treatment (or research) really should have been done.” To substitute one's own preferences is clearly unfair to an author, and in editing the journal we do all that we can to prevent it. Such slips are usually clear.

Responding to criticisms. Comments from reviewers are not directives. We tell authors:

A reviewer's comments are not orders that have to be carried out. To the contrary, for each critique that a reviewer has made, an author has three options:

i) to discuss/debate/refute a reviewer's comment(s), or –

ii) to rewrite the text in response to a comment(s), or –

iii) a combination of these, so that an author both discusses/debates /refutes a reviewer's comment(s) and rewrites to accommodate some comments by a reviewer.

In many of the articles that you see in print, there are several points that are just as the author intended because she debated and defended her approach as written. As editor, we sometimes very much give the author the benefit of the doubt.

Number of reviews; acceptance rate. Most *JGI* papers (73%) undergo one extensive revision before acceptance. It is rare for a paper submitted to the *JGI* to be accepted as first presented or with minor changes (9%). Beginning authors may be comforted to know that papers by even the most senior researchers in gambling studies usually go through one revision and two stages of review. About 18% of papers pass through a third stage of review. (No paper has yet gone through four stages.)

About one third of submitted papers receive a critical review and the author never responds with a second version. In 2003-2004 we accepted 39% of the papers submitted. The remaining third of the papers are still in revision and review. Reviewers frequently find that they cannot review a paper due to illness, or career or family commitments. This entails finding yet another qualified reviewer and results in delays. Authors usually take several months to rewrite and submit new versions.

In more detail. Now that you understand some of the basic points of peer review, here is a more complete description of the process:

- 1) The first author submits a paper, requests that it be peer-reviewed, and assures the editor that it is not being considered elsewhere for publication.
- 2) The editor removes all identifying information from the paper to support an anonymous review process. Next, we choose two (rarely, three) peer reviewers with expertise in the specialty topic for the paper and request that they return their evaluations within 30 calendar days. (If the author requests that one or two specific reviewers not be used, due to personal or other reasons, the editor always complies.) At the *JGI*, reviewers who return a thorough review within 30 days of the initial request receive an honorarium of US\$100 in recognition of their expertise and labour.
- 3) The editor reads the reviews, removes identifying information, and e-mails the reviews to the author with editorial comments, reminding the author of the three options for response (refute/debate, rewrite, or both refute/debate and rewrite).
- 4) Version two arrives from the author. It is usually unwise for the editor to assess whether a reviewer's critique has been sufficiently answered, for the reviewer herself is the best judge. Therefore we ask reviewers to judge the adequacy of the author's response. If necessary, another round of revision and review is initiated.
- 5) However, if there is agreement that the author has responded well to comments—or, perhaps, after diplomatic discussion by the editor with all parties—the paper is accepted for publication.

Clinical papers. The review process described above is altered slightly for papers

on clinical topics. Clinicians often develop valuable insights that are not appropriate for scientific verification. A recent example is the article by Rugle (2003) entitled “Chasing—It's not just about the money: Clinical reflections” (at: http://www.camh.net/egambling/issue10/ejgi_10_rugle.html). Clinical papers are reviewed by two clinicians (rarely, three) who are experienced in the paper's specialty area. We ask them to assess the paper by three criteria:

- 1) Is it original? Does it go beyond “What every clinician should know” and would have learned in schooling (or other training)?
- 2) Is it credible? Does it make sense?
- 3) Is it of potential value to some clinicians? Or to some clients?

Disputes and misunderstandings. Here at the *JGI*, we rarely have to intervene to ensure fair and even-handed treatment for authors or reviewers. When there are genuine misunderstandings (such as when an author—we feel—has adequately addressed a critique, but the reviewer honestly disagrees, and in other situations requiring diplomacy), we work to support ethical treatment of both authors and reviewers. After five years of editing the *JGI* we are pleased to witness that the overwhelming majority of people in the field of gambling studies are highly ethical and collegial, and treat their peers with respect and good will.

Appeals process. We are developing an appeals process so that an author who feels that a paper was unfairly rejected will have recourse to assessment by an alternate group.

Non-peer reviewed articles. Some *JGI* articles end with the statement: “This article was not peer reviewed.” These include opinion articles, first-person accounts, reviews (books, Web sites, videos, DVDs, movies) and letters to the editor. With opinion articles and letters to the editor we guard against publishing libellous material and personal (*ad hominem*) comments. We may ask authors to consider the effectiveness of their essays by assessing wording, omissions, and evidence. The editor may then:

- 1) accept the paper, either as is, or pending clarification or minor rewriting to promote ease of understanding by readers, and to deal with personal attacks and legal issues—especially of liability.
- 2) consult with an editorial board member who has expertise on the topic to help assess the submitted article's merit.
- 3) consult with the entire editorial board to assess whether they feel that the article merits release and what problems they may see in it.

We hope that, whether peer-reviewed or not, the *JGI* brings you articles that help you to understand the place of gambling in our world and to formulate your own views as a citizen.

We welcome your comments.

Phil Lange, editor Phil_Lange@camh.net

Competing interests: The author is the editor of the *Journal of Gambling Issues*.

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Statement of purpose

The *Journal of Gambling Issues (JGI)* offers an Internet-based forum for developments in gambling-related research, policy and treatment as well as personal accounts about gambling and gambling behaviour. Through publishing peer-reviewed articles about gambling as a social phenomenon and the prevention and treatment of gambling problems, it is our aim is to help make sense of how gambling affects us all.

The *JGI* is published by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and is fully funded by the Ontario Substance Abuse Bureau of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. We welcome manuscripts submitted by researchers and clinicians, people involved in gambling as players, and family and friends of gamblers.

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