

Viewpoints

Seven questions about the border between the role of reviewers and editors and how we tentatively answered them

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We are happy to have the opportunity to react to the editorial by Jonathan P Tennant, *et al* (2019), “Boon, bias or bane? The potential influence of reviewer recommendations on editorial decision-making”.¹ The editorial poses seven questions about the role of reviewers and editors in scientific publishing. We were Editor in Chief (Everson) and one of the two Associate Editors (Verkuilen) of the journal *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (EM:IP)* from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2018, which is the typical three-year term. The journal is sponsored by the National Council for Measurement in Education (NCME). This area is explicitly multi-disciplinary, involving statisticians, psychologists, educational psychologists, educational policy analysts, and other scholars interested in assessment, testing, and measurement. It is US-based but has substantial international authorship and readership from both academia and industry, reflecting the increasingly international nature of assessment. We offer our reflection on our time in these roles and how it bears on the role of the reviewer and the potentially blurry border between editor and reviewer.

Our core view is that the reviewer’s job is to provide advice to the action editor and, ultimately, to the EIC. The way we operated, the EIC made all final decisions, with action editors taking the paper through the review process and making recommendations. Other journals may, of course, operate differently. We do not suppose there is one way for a journal to function well, just as there are many ways for one to function poorly. It is the editor who is responsible to the chartering organisation and editorial board, not the reviewers. It is not at all unusual for reviewers to be from other disciplines and they may not even be members of the chartering organization, depending on the nature of the article. This was something NCME took very seriously.

For us, having clear and consistent lines of authority minimized friction and helped maintain, insofar as is possible in a challenging environment like editing, uniformity and sense. This was both for our own sanity and our prior preferred working arrangement but, more importantly, to ensure that the community who had entrusted us with the role as editors were able to understand our choices. It is often an editor’s role to deliver possibly career-affecting decisions to authors, so making sure that the process is both as fair *and* seen as being fair as possible is essential. This is not easy, however: A big part of being

fair is to be expeditious, which is in tension with the need to get a suitable set of reviews. It is also very important for the editors to recognise that we are the stewards of the journal for our time in that role. We wanted to make sure that what was published under our watch was solid, sound research, well-written, and relevant to the stated scope of the journal. While we hope our perspectives are useful for others, what ultimately worked reasonably well for us—mistakes and all—will not necessarily work for others.

1. Should journals invite reviewer recommendations, either built into manuscript handling systems or within the reviewer reports?

The most important part of what a reviewer does is provide advice to the editor about the scientific value and quality of the work. Obviously, the action editor ideally has a decent sense of the topic, but it is typical for additional expertise to be necessary. *EM:IP* used a fairly simple holistic rating: Accept, Minor Revision, Major Revision, and Reject. Our feeling, as specialists in measurement, is that this four-point scale is enough to provide such guidance and to help orient the editor without being burdensome to the reviewer. While raters may be uncertain, for instance between Minor Revision and Major Revision or Major Revision and Reject, the confidential comments to the editor can be (and in our experience, often were) used to indicate this uncertainty. We endeavoured not to use the holistic rating in a mechanical fashion that reduced to “vote counting” among the reviewers. We discuss this further below.

2. Should such recommendations be mandatory or optional?

For *EM:IP*, recommendation was mandatory. Our belief is that a measurement system—which a reviewer recommendation clearly is—operates best when applied in a uniform manner that is understood by its users, which, in our view, implies that the recommendation should be required. However, we also recognise that the decision made by the editor is, ultimately, a holistic one based on all the evidence presented in the reviewer’s comments as well as other evidence.

3. Do recommendations form part of reviewer best practices?

As we said previously, we question the notion there is a clear set of “best practices” just as there is no clear set of “worst practices.” There are multiple ways to be bad:

Demonstrably unfair by playing favourites, arbitrary, or too slow to make a decision, as examples. What worked for our journal and our discipline is unlikely to be best for a much higher volume journal or a much more diverse field, for instance, social psychology. However, we do believe that the process at *EM:IP* was overall transparent to the reviewers and authors and functioned well for us, and that reviewer recommendations were part of this process.

4. Should authors see these recommendations?

As we said, we believe that the role of the reviewers is to provide advice to the editors about the scientific merits of the article. Given this position, we feel that a good referee report should not say “This article should be rejected” or “This article should be accepted” nor should ratings be made public to the authors. If nothing else, reviewers are often inconsistent. This is not unsound because reviewers are often chosen to represent different perspectives or knowledge and may well have quite different assessments as a consequence. Ultimately the editor needs to weigh the reviewers’ advice as well as other considerations, such as journal scope, advice from the editorial board, and the mix of articles that are in the queue. There may have been additional communications with the authors that reviewers may not know about. Having specific reviewer recommendations be open to the author ties the editor’s hands.

We had two types of situations that could be particularly problematic. The journal scope is of particular importance. We had what we thought was a fairly tightly written set of instructions for authors about what we would consider and what we would not, but frequently rejected articles because they violated the scope even so. Another difficult case for us was the situation of an article—often by a junior scholar or a scholar from an underrepresented group of some sort—which needed an extraordinary amount of attention outside the confines of the ordinary reviewing process. In both cases we found it best to reject such articles but to provide as much useful feedback as we could in our rejection letter.

5. Should the factors upon which the recommendations are based be clearly stated across different venues (eg novelty, perceived impact, quality)?

We have both used ratings that had multiple criteria as reviewers but no direct experience as editors using multiple criteria. In general, we are skeptical of having too many review criteria, given that weighting these different factors is likely to become difficult and arbitrary for both reviewers and editors. Whatever the reviewing criteria are, however, they should be transparent and as clearly specified as possible to all parties.

6. What is the expected distribution of responsibilities and tasks between reviewers and editors, and how does this vary across communities?

We feel that, ultimately, it is the editor’s decision about how an article is to be handled, with reviewers providing essential advice. We do not feel comfortable commenting about other communities besides our own.

7. What is the impact of these recommendations on editorial decisions?

Overall, we found the ratings to be very useful as a macro guide and way to assess the reviewer’s report, a “bottom line” as it were. However, it was the reviewer’s report itself that was most influential, and it was, ultimately our job to integrate the reports and our own sense of the article into a solid and timely decision letter.

In summary, the boundary between editor and reviewer needs to be thought about carefully by editors and the sponsoring organisation of a journal, with periodic efforts to consider how well current practice is serving the aims of the journal. Ideally, it is transparent and understandable to all stakeholders: Authors, reviewers, editors, and sponsors, alike.

Note: These views are our own and do not represent those of NCME or our institutions.

References

- 1 Tennant *et al.* Boon, bias or bane? The potential influence of reviewer recommendations on editorial decision-making. *European Science Editing* 2019; 45(1):2-5.

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