

A CODE OF CONDUCT FOR PEER REVIEWERS AND EDITORS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the past few decades, peer review has come to dominate virtually all professionally respectable academic and scientific publications. However, despite its near-universal acceptance, no code of conduct has been developed to which peer reviewers and their editors are encouraged to adhere. This paper proposes such a code of conduct.

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I wish everyone would read Bartlett's chapter in Normality on the abuses of peer review and editorial bias (Chapter 7) and adopt his proposed code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors (p. 172).

– Suarez (2012, referring to Bartlett, 2011)

Authors with training in clinical psychology have written very little about the psychology of peer reviewers and editors. Perhaps the most detailed paper on this subject is the author's "The Psychology of Abuse in Publishing: Peer Review and Editorial Bias," which forms a chapter in Bartlett (2011, Chapter 7). I do not propose in the present short paper to summarize the results reached there; readers interested in the underlying psychology of peer reviewers and of editors are referred to that publication. For purposes here, I will assume a familiarity with those conclusions, but if you are a reader unacquainted with those results, I ask you simply to consider the plausibility and the potential desirability of widespread endorsement and acceptance of a uniform code of professional conduct for peer reviewers and editors, a code designed to promote reasonable, just, and professionally respectful standards of peer review and editorial behavior.

Do we need a code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors?

A great many professional groups have come to realize that standards of acceptable professional conduct or practice¹ are important both to the people they serve and to the quality of a profession's development. The majority of the major professions have approved codes of practice, which are usually enforced internally; they identify standards of conduct that members of that profession must follow, both to prevent mistreatment of those served by a given profession and to support the respectability and integrity of the profession itself. To list professions, professional organizations, and companies that have embraced codes of conduct or practice would fill a great many pages. To mention only a few of these professions drawn from the many: attorneys are regulated by rules of professional conduct, as are healthcare providers, engineers, flight attendants, chemists, interpreters for the deaf, design professionals, and the majority of large corporations. Many countries have passed statutory regulation of professional codes of conduct and practice, with failures to meet these standards having potential legal consequences.

The Ethics & Compliance Initiative (ECI) is a best-practice consortium of organizations committed to the creation and support of high quality standards of ethics and compliance. The ECI strongly recommends:

Regardless of whether your organization is legally mandated to have a code of conduct (as public companies are), every organization *should* have one. A code has value as both an internal guideline

¹ Since the limited focus of this paper is peer review and the work of editors, I will use the two terms 'conduct' and 'practice' interchangeably without the likelihood of misunderstanding.

and an external statement of ... values and commitments.²

As studied from a psychological perspective in Bartlett (2011, Chap. 7), peer reviewers and editors are in positions of power in regulating what may and may not be published by the journals or book publishers they represent. The power they have come in recent years to wield determines in large part what can and what cannot be published in a great many of today's academic and scientific publications. *Power* when coupled with the *anonymity*, behind which peer reviewers' identities are shielded, have predictably negative psychological consequences in terms of how those who are in positions of power will often tend to mistreat others. These unfortunate consequences have been studied and recognized by psychologists for many decades.³ Particularly when power and anonymity are combined in the tasks of a professional group, as they are in peer review, there is an especially compelling need to identify, to endorse, and to enforce fair and reasonable standards of professional conduct.

A code of conduct for peers reviewers and editors

The following proposes a basic code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors:⁴

² From <https://www.ethics.org/resources/free-toolkit/code-of-conduct/>.

³ For example, Milgram (1963, 1974); Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo (1973); Zimbardo (2007); etc. These studies have not surprisingly given rise to considerable controversy. For the conclusions the author has come to, see Bartlett (2005, Chap. 15).

⁴ From Bartlett (2011, p. 172). The recommendation for such a code of conduct was made by Nicholls (1999, p. 1853). I have added to and paraphrased his suggestions.

(i) Journals, book publishers, and granting agencies expect peer reviewers and editors to abide by professional standards of courtesy and respect in reviewing the work of others.

(ii) Editors are responsible for reading peer reviewers' reports prior to relaying them to authors: Readers' reports that are deliberately dismissive, hostile, offensive, use belittling or sarcastic language, or make unsubstantiated statements will not be sent on to authors but will be returned to the reviewers for revision.

(iii) Editors will respect the intellectual property of authors by refraining from imposing upon an author's text views or language that are not the author's own, unless authors give explicit permission for such changes in advance of publication.

(iv) Peer reviewers will similarly respect the text of authors by refraining from acting as copy-editors, which is not their assigned job, and for which they rarely have this expertise.

(v) The same rigor must be used in the reports of peer reviewers and editors as is demanded of the submitting author—in particular, the use of appropriate literature citations by reviewers and editors to support their statements.

(vi) Criticism should be constructive and balanced rather than destructive or aggressive.

(vii) Derogatory statements criticizing an author's alleged misuse of the English language are not acceptable.

(viii) Gender-neutral language may be encouraged, but in keeping with guidelines formulated by the American Psychological Association, the American Philosophical Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English relating to non-sexist language, these guidelines are in-

tended “to be kept in mind” so that scholars can “take special care to avoid giving needless and unintended offense,” but are not intended as “any specific or compulsory set of rules.”⁵

Where we need to go from here

The above code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors may serve as a starting point for further consideration and development. National professional associations of academics and scientists are urged to begin discussion of an appropriate code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors, with the ultimate aim of creating a *uniform* widely endorsed code of peer reviewer and editorial conduct which all publishers should then be encouraged to put into practice.

This proposal is not naively idealistic. We do already know that when professional groups give themselves the responsibility to regulate their own standards of professional practice or conduct, it is possible for those groups to become self-serving, and then to fail, through neglect or intentional disregard, to take steps to enforce their own standards. Nevertheless, given that we at present have absolutely no commonly accepted code of conduct for peer reviewers and editors, the mere fact that we begin to talk about the need for such a code and then take steps to endorse one can have undeniably beneficial consequences. A beginning must start somewhere.

⁵ Quoting from the “Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language,” originally published in the *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59:3, Feb., 1986, pp. 471-482, and revised and reprinted as a separate report in 2001, and which was based on earlier guidelines of the American Psychological Association and the National Council of Teachers of English.

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