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Reining in Reviewer Two: How to Uphold Epistemic Respect in Academia

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ABSTRACT   Journals and scholarly communities seek to uphold standards of professional conduct. They regularly issue guideposts for how to do a good peer review, which highlight its tone should not be overly harsh. However, this guidance is frequently violated by a well-known academic folk-devil: 'Reviewer Two'. A defining feature of reviewer two is that they do not show 'epistemic respect'. A review shows epistemic respect by assessing arguments on the basis of their soundness, their logic, or their originality. A review violates epistemic respect when it assesses scholarly work on the basis of irrelevant information such as the epistemic origins of arguments, or the ranking of journals in which the arguments were published. We suggest that epistemic respect can be upheld by fundamentally changing established practices that scholars, editors, reviewers and journals take for granted. We show that upholding epistemic respect in academia is more than a question of tact. Stopping reviewer two-like behaviour will promote innovative thought, accelerate the evolution of knowledge, and increase the diversity of knowing and learning.

Keywords: review, reviewing, epistemic respect, social science, science

INTRODUCTION

Many journals are issuing guideposts of a good peer review in regular intervals. They do so not only to guarantee the quality of arguments in reviews is high, but also to ensure reviewers use an appropriate tone and style. Social media and professional conversations are still full of academic horror stories about reviewers who have been unnecessarily dismissive of an authors' work or downright rude and insulting. The offensive review has even taken on a persona: they are frequently known as 'reviewer two'.

This academic folk-devil 'symbolizes the peer reviewer who is rude, vague, smug, committed to pet issues, theories, and methodologies, and unwilling to treat the authors as peers' (Watling et al., 2021, p. 299). Some scholars have suggested that reviewer two gets an unnecessarily bad reputation, but the phenomenon of unduly harsh peer reviews is certainly prevalent. An analysis of 850 negative reviews lodged on the website 'shitmyreviewerssay' found five common over-arching comments (Hyland and Jiang, 2020): the competence of the author ('The authors are amateurs'), overall verdict ('This paper is so bad I cannot even reject it!'), quality of the argument ('I just don't get the point of this'), structure and language ('The writing and data presentation are so bad I had to leave work and go home early to spend time to wonder what life is about'), and study design ('There is no need to test these hypotheses. They have been tested a long time ago. It is in all the textbooks').

Gorgi Krlev @gorgikrlev · 9. Aug.
This is the most **dismissive** reviewer comment I have ever received.

Not of myself, but anyone publishing "lower tier". This is not OK, is it?

> You're citing papers in lower tier journals (e.g. JBE), and this fits the pattern that "social capital" as a concept has grown so large that it can be used in almost any way by almost any author. It doesn't surprise me that authors in lower tier journals are making this argument, but that doesn't make it correct.

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One of the authors of this essay recently had a closer encounter with reviewer two. His manuscript was rejected from a highly regarded journal in the social sciences. The most negative reviewer, appeared to be a well-established scholar in their field. The issue was not with the editorial decision. Nor was the tone of the review nearly as dismissive as in many of the academic horror stories which are frequently shared. However, the review included two lines that the author considered very problematic: *'You're citing papers in lower tier journals (e.g., JBE), and this fits the pattern that "social capital" as a concept has grown so large that it can be used in almost any way by almost any author. It doesn't surprise me that authors in lower tier journals are marking this argument, but that doesn't make it correct'.*[1] The author was not alone in his judgement, it appears, as his post about the incident received hundreds of likes and over 38,600 interactions as per the statistics of Twitter analytics.

THE REACTIONS: WHY SUCH OUTRAGE?

The academic community was quick to show solidarity with the author. One group of scholars interpreted the statement as a sign of elitism and gatekeeping, commenting

'Unacceptable, hierarchical, bullshit',[2] or figuratively responded to that reviewer with irony *'I'm sorry, but your analyses of elite epistemic closure only appear in lower-tier journals…'*.[3] Another group sought to deconstruct the argument: *'research quality seems to be inferred from the tier of a journal, which is a low-quality line of argument in itself'*.[4] Still others saw the comment as undermining a productive academic discourse, with consequences for the status of academia in society: *'I'd say these are the attitudes that are increasingly rendering academia irrelevant'*.[5] There was also a small amount of counter-reaction, for example from an experienced editor who argued *'this type of dismissive reviewer comment is very rare'*.[6] What is more, the responsible journal editor when contacted by the author, did not share the author's assessment of the comments. The editor pointed out how over-committed everyone in academia was, how difficult it was to find reviewers and how unlikely that the critical stance demanded by the author could be upheld by reviewers at all times, or controlled by editors. The editor also advanced an argument about the specialization of knowledge and different standards in different fields. While not signalling agreement with the reviewer's comments, the editor stressed that they could be read in different ways.

Our own assessment remains that the reviewer's statement manifests a hierarchy of knowledge based on status, that it contains a high degree of idiosyncratic bias, and a narrow understanding of research quality. So there is a bigger issue at stake here than an individual paper rejection: the issue of epistemic respect in academia.

WHAT IS EPISTEMIC RESPECT?

In a relatively obscure paper entitled 'The Nature of Respect', the moral philosopher Stephen D. Hudson (1980) conceptualizes 'evaluative respect'. This kind of respect is granted to those who have earned merits or shown exceptional commitment, performance or dedication. It is akin to attitudes of esteem or admiration by one's peers. However, evaluative respect is not bestowed on someone by what they have inherited, the power they hold, or the status that others project on them. Rather, it is given based on a person's achievements, contributions, reason and social conduct.

In her well-known book of the same title, moral philosopher and social epistemologist Miranda Fricker (2010) developed the concept of 'Epistemic Injustice'. Fricker argues that certain individuals in society are fundamentally disregarded, because they are subject to silencing, purposeful depreciation and denial of status, unfair power differentials in authority, or a systematic misrepresentation of their meanings and contributions. More specifically, hermeneutic injustice occurs when people's experiences are alien to others, or even to themselves. This happens when established concepts do not capture people's experience or when new concepts (which do capture their experience) are not readily accepted by those with authority (such as the meaning of sexual harassment before the 1970s).

We believe the two concepts can fruitfully be merged into the concept of 'epistemic respect' and applied towards an argument instead of a person. When applied to a scientific argument, the dimension of 'evaluative respect' means showing esteem when an argument is original, sound and striking, no matter where it originated. 'Hermeneutic injustice' is prevented when scholars show appreciation for an argument and weigh it critically, even when the argument is at some distance to their own thinking and experience.

Epistemic respect entails (1) paying due attention, (2) valuing a knowledge claim and (3) behaving in a thoughtful way towards it.

First, the *attentional aspect* of epistemic respect involves putting effort into understanding a knowledge claim properly – even if it might be difficult to comprehend. A violation of this attentional aspect entails being dismissive, failing to apprehend or misrecognizing knowledge claims. This might happen due to a lack of effort (for instance by not reading a manuscript carefully), or due to wilful miscomprehension (for instance by caricaturing an argument). Second, the *valuation aspect* of epistemic respect means that a person assigns some degree of worth to a knowledge claim – even if they might disagree with it. The judgement of worthiness is based on typical criteria for judging knowledge such as logic soundness, empirical support or clarity of argumentation. The valuation aspect is violated when a knowledge claim is assessed on the basis of irrelevant factors such as epistemic origins, markers of prestige, reputation or performance metrics of the journal in which knowledge is published. Third, the *behavioural aspect* of epistemic respect entails how a particular knowledge claim is treated once a judgement has been made. Respectful behaviour towards a knowledge claim requires careful acknowledgement, balanced and reasonable argumentation, detailed reason giving, and being open to counter-responses and disagreement. While it does not require agreement or even acquiescence, the behavioural aspect is violated when there is either no engagement or engagement that lacks a critical degree of reflexivity.

HOW CAN WE UPHOLD EPISTEMIC RESPECT?

To be clear, we think no one is immune to disrespectful reviewing behaviour. The first author of this article for example recalls an instance where he dismissed a conference paper by saying 'it should be evident that the paper is nowhere near the standard required for an AOM meeting', just to express his frustration about how the paper was executed rather than engaging with what the authors meant to say. The second author, in his past role as a senior editor of a journal, would frequently assess the suitability of a submitted paper by using a number of common editorial routines such as looking at the papers cited in the reference list – which is representative of a general scholarly tendency to manifest a tier system. Showing epistemic respect in assessing a paper should instead be marked by a readiness to engage more deeply with different epistemological and ontological traditions, research methodologies, genres of research, or sources of data and knowledge.

Epistemic respect should also be shown in other venues of academic exchange (such as conferences, lectures, grant application reviews), and in fact even in public debate. Our personal accounts show how important it is that we seek to actively improve evaluative practices in the academy. We build on comments from the Twitter debate to propose a way forward for the academic community.

Experiment with Different Degrees of Openness

As a general rule, any reviewer should be ready to defend their judgement of a manuscript in public. So first and foremost, we call journals to experiment with changing

degrees of openness in the review process. Open peer review has been discussed in academia for some time. A common argument as to why to make peer reviews public, is that they appear to be valuable artefacts of scholarship in themselves that should be shared. We offer a new reason to promote openness: when disrespect is made visible, academia may impose a reputational cost for violations. Some commentators called for a *'Glassdoor but for journals, editors, and reviewers'*.[7] Others offered interesting propositions of how to increase transparency and community-grounding in peer assessments: *'Ironically, [this is] one of the few actual use cases of a blockchain […]. Authors sign and release papers and send them to a domain-specific set of other authors. Once a certain number authenticate, the paper is made public to all'*.[8] Such mechanisms could be modified to allow for improvement through the review process rather than promoting a one-off approval by the academic community.

In November 2020, Nature shifted to a 'transparent peer review system', where the journal can publish reviewer comments and author responses of published articles. This is an important step, but it is not enough. The present incident offers excellent ground for a natural experiment: journals could randomly assign submitted papers into double-blind, single-blind, or open review tracks. Further variance could be introduced by preserving the anonymity or publicly revealing the identity of the parties involved ('fully open'). Journals could also allow reviewers to pick papers instead of papers being assigned by editors. After having run this experiment for some time, scholarly communities could analyse reviewing practices for traces of epistemic respect or violations. Instead of ideological arguments about the affordances of 'fully blind' reviews, this experiment would enable evidence-based inference about how openness may or may not help increase epistemic respect in academia.

Establish Mechanisms for Dialogue

Given the many technologies we now have at hand, it is strange that the review process is still essentially based on sending digitized letters to each other and waiting for a response for months. This gap in space and time, as we know from social psychology, encourages psychological distancing on the part of both, the reviewers and the authors. It is likely to lead to greater abstraction, harsher assessments and mutual misunderstanding. One of the causes for the explicit expression of epistemic disrespect by the reviewer in the present case, was that there seemed to be a mismatch between the author's message and how the reviewer received it. Much of the confusion and mutual frustration may have been addressed by having a conversation instead of relying on correspondence. This may be enhanced through the principles of openness outlined above, but having a conversation could also work within the established system of blind reviews. For instance, authors or reviewers could be given a chance to ask a number of pointed questions, or by having an exchange on ways of fixing potential sources of misunderstanding within an anonymous electronic communication system.

Demand from Editors to Step in

As the editor in charge of the present paper remarked correctly, the established system of peer reviewing is at its limits: there are more papers to review and fewer experts who are willing to review them. However, we need to seriously assess the downsides of letting

incidents like this slip as well as consider better alternatives. First, we suppose many reviewers would actually appreciate a hint about what is inappropriate and why. Such feedback may lead to effective behavioural change on the side of reviewers. Second, we want to firmly maintain and advance that editors should see themselves as decision makers and not merely pass on what reviewers have said. One commentator highlighted: *'[…] a handling editor should be more than the post office'*.[9] Editors are the ones who initiate the review process. They only do so, when they see some merit. Their initial assessment may be revoked by rightful critique from reviewers. But when this critique is problematic, editors must step in and protect not only the authors, but also and foremost the scientific standards.

Establish a Mutual Contract and Ban Troll Reviewers

One commentator on social media pointed out that: *'The mark of a good review is it's thoughtful, professional, collegial, and helps the author improve the paper'*.[10] However, all too often reviewers slip into the opposite stance. They ask how they can find reasons to reject a paper. This makes reviewers much more prone to violating epistemic respect. Therefore, we suggest journals implement a step, in which they issue a statement of epistemic respect, for reviewers to sign up to. This is similar to statements about research integrity for authors. Such a contract may prevent certain types of research from being devalued. However, there will always be a small minority of scholars, who continue to abuse their status, power, or anonymity. In such extreme cases, we suggest the academic community gets rid of these 'troll reviewers' by stopping to invite them to review, or by choosing to disregard troll reviews. In the long run, we hope this will mean academic reviewing practices become more respectful.

Change Educational Practices

Potential violations of epistemic respect get entrenched early on in one's academic career. PhD programs, hiring committees and promotion panels are often focused on a very small number of journals as worthy outlets of research. Commentators on Twitter highlighted: *'Too many doctoral programmes train students to narrowly believe there are only 6–8 journals of relevance. Especially in North America'*.[11] We should not only push for more careful assessments of research quality, but also make education about epistemic respect an integral part of scholarly training and assessment. The present incident may serve as valuable input to reshape and update curricula: *'I was wondering if we could use this in our training sessions for PhD students and early career researchers […] As an example of how one can contact the editor when a reviewer makes inappropriate comments?'*.[12]

WHY SHOULD SCHOLARS UPHOLD EPISTEMIC RESPECT?

It is very important to note that upholding epistemic respect by changing our practices is more than a question of tact: it would improve research by promoting innovation, accelerating the evolution of knowledge and increasing epistemic diversity.

Benefit #1: Promoting Innovative Thought

Publishing in any field's top journals is based on finding a common denominator between the authors' original intention, the view of the editor(s) and often three or more anonymous reviewers, over many rounds of revision. This means the paper may need to become so polished around the edges that it ends up having no edge at all. This may explain why the best work in less well-ranked journals, is often more influential than most of the work in top journals (Oswald, 2007). One commentator added: *'[I]nnovations almost never appear in the centre but the periphery and then spread'*.[13] This has nothing to do with those outlets being of a lower quality, but with their apparent greater readiness to value originality. As another commentator put it: *'Some of my favourite citations come from "lower tier journals" precisely because those journals embrace interdisciplinarity, theoretical creativity, and non-traditional methodologies'*.[14] Epistemic respect should help researchers embrace the real value of arguments, and innovative thought is vital when research is meant to have societal impact beyond the academy – as the *Journal of Management Studies* and other journals have been calling for repeatedly.

Benefit #2: Accelerating the Evolution of Knowledge

Misunderstandings in the scholarly evaluation process not only result in a waste of time and energy, but they may also create blind spots in research fields, isolate them from others, or make them homogeneous and inward-looking. Some commentators have noted that important, but at the time exotic topics, research questions or methods, are often promoted much earlier by more specialized outlets: *'They forget that @JBusinessEthics @BASeditors have been publishing on ethics and grand challenges for decades now, much before they became acceptable for the top-tier journals'*.[15] Upholding epistemic respect would help bridge this chasm, connect fields and communities in significant ways, and push important but neglected issues. Ultimately it may help address the circumstance that we see more publications than ever before but a slower evolution of our overall level of knowledge (Chu and Evans, 2021).

Benefit #3: Increasing the Diversity of Knowing and Learning

There is an intensifying debate, especially in the social sciences and humanities, about how the dominance of knowledge from the USA and Europe has marginalized non-Western, non-white, or non-male viewpoints. It is undoubtedly harder for people from outside the main geographic centres and tier 1 universities to publish in top journals. Violations of epistemic respect are likely to further cement this hegemony of knowledge. As a commentator put it: *'The argument that we should keep citing from the same "top tier" journals that consistently refuse to publish research from alternative contexts, theories and methodologies is the definition of gatekeeping. Rubbish!'*.[16] Upholding epistemic respect would help challenge this hegemony and begin unpicking the serious restrictions to the diversity of knowing and learning we currently face. Ultimately, it may promote efforts of decolonizing knowledge production and of making academia more equitable.

CONCLUSION

There is no single action that will uphold epistemic respect and our proposed solutions are not without problems. For example, principles of openness may prevent honest critique. Attempts of control and correction might result in censorship. Increasing interaction and responsibility might overstrain individuals. Dissolving tiers in return for assessing research quality may lead to an effective decrease in that very quality. However, one thing is clear: academics need to show each other epistemic respect. This means not only reining in review-two-like behaviour in others, but stopping the reviewer two which lurks within all of us. By showing epistemic respect, we will protect individuals, but also ensure scientific progress that is faster, more innovative, and more inclusive.

NOTES

[1] https://twitter.com/gorgikrlev/status/1424760181687214083
[2] https://twitter.com/estebanjq3/status/1425135752523001858
[3] https://twitter.com/haroldpollack/status/1425061605591683073
[4] https://twitter.com/ingorohlfing/status/1424760981096484865
[5] https://twitter.com/ProfCarlRhodes/status/1425201244562333697
[6] https://twitter.com/braydenk/status/1425080315316482053
[7] https://twitter.com/walkerbenjj/status/1424856922902065174
[8] https://twitter.com/yudhanjaya/status/1425027882921906176
[9] https://twitter.com/leon_oerlemans/status/1425002595907772417
[10] https://twitter.com/StephMBryant/status/1425059154188771338
[11] https://twitter.com/SamerAbdelnour/status/1425001304984805387
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[14] https://twitter.com/dannagal/status/1425215985527791621
[15] https://twitter.com/HariBapuji/status/1425647527261392902
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