EDITORIAL

Health Psychology’s New (Old) Peer-Review Policy

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Health Psychology’s peer-review policy has been revised. Consequently, authors are neither being asked nor allowed to de-identify the manuscripts that they submit to this journal. This article explains the rationale for our revised policy.

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To the surprise of many of our authors and reviewers, and to the consternation of some, Health Psychology’s peer-review policy has changed—again. Most scientific journals follow either a single-blinded peer-review policy in which the reviewers know the names of the authors but the authors do not know the names of the reviewers, or a double-blinded policy in which the authors’ names are withheld from the reviewers and vice versa. A minority of journals follow an open peer-review policy in which the authors’ names are revealed to the reviewers and vice versa. After relying on single-blinded reviews for many years, Health Psychology eventually switched to double-blinding. However, we recently gave up on double-blinding and reverted to single-blinded reviews. This decision may be controversial, but it was carefully considered, and we want our contributors, reviewers, and readers to understand why it was made.

Pro and Cons of Double Blinding

Advocates of double blinding view it as the best way to eliminate any biases that reviewers’ knowledge of authors’ identities may inject into the peer-review process (Klein, 2001). A critique might be influenced by the reviewer’s prior experience with one or more of the authors of a manuscript. It might also be affected by the reviewer’s attitudes about the authors’ gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, institutional affiliation, seniority, or reputation. Such biases can either decrease or increase a manuscript’s chances of acceptance, although authors are understandably more concerned about the former than the latter. This helps to explain the relative popularity of double blinding among authors. For example, 58% of the respondents to a recent survey of biomedical researchers from highly ranked universities favored double blinding (Ho et al., 2013). Only 4.8% of the individuals who were invited to participate completed the survey, so this result may not be representative of the attitudes of biomedical scientists at leading academic institutions, to say nothing of scientists who work in other fields or at other kinds of institutions. Furthermore, in 2013, two Nature specialty journals started allowing authors to choose between single- and double-blinded reviews. Double blinding has been requested for only about 20% of the manuscripts that have been submitted so far, a figure that is far lower than the survey leads one to expect (Campbell, 2015). Nevertheless, it is apparent that some scientists would rather have their manuscripts subjected to double-blinded than to single-blinded reviews.

Double-blinding is much less popular among journal editors than it is among authors (Froman, 2010). This does not reflect editorial indifference to biased reviews; it is based instead on significant operational and substantive concerns. When authors send their manuscripts to journals with double-blinded review policies, they must submit both the original and a de-identified copy of the manuscript. De-identification requires more than eliminating the authors’ names and affiliations from the title page. It also requires scrubbing the entire manuscript, as well as the cover letter, of self-referential material such as disclosures of the author’s institution, self-citations of previous publications, and acknowledgments of grant support and the contributions of close associates. De-identification must be performed not only on the original manuscript but on revisions as well. This makes it more difficult and frustrating to submit and to revise manuscripts. The process is already burdensome, due to all the other requirements that journals such as Health Psychology impose on authors (e.g., proof of trial registration, adherence to reporting guidelines, conflict-of-interest declarations). Editors are reluctant to make it any more difficult for authors than necessary.

De-identification also creates more work for the journal’s staff and editors. It requires them to manage two copies of each version of every manuscript instead of only one. They must also inspect the de-identified copies and return them to the authors for further scrubbing if any revealing items have been overlooked. This is hard enough for journals that have ample staffing, but it is prohibitive for ones that operate with limited resources.

More important is that de-identification conceals information that reviewers need to avoid conflicts of interest and to make well-informed judgments. For example, when authors state that their current study addresses questions that emerged from one of...
their previous studies, most reviewers want to look at the previous study. They cannot do so if the reference to that study is blacked out, and thus they cannot make a fully informed judgment about the new study. This is especially problematic for scientific journals like *Health Psychology* that try to encourage programmatic research. Reviewers cannot tell how a new study fits into an ongoing series of studies if they are prevented from examining previously published findings.

**Is Double-Blinding Beneficial?**

Double blinding might be worth the trouble if its benefits greatly outweighed its drawbacks. However, there is an empirical literature on peer-review policies, and it does not offer much support for double blinding. Alternative blinding policies have been compared both in quasi-experimental and in experimental studies across a variety of disciplines. Most studies have found no difference in the quality of reviews submitted under single- versus double-blinded policies (Alam et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2015; Justice et al., 1998; van Rooyen, Godlee, Evans, Smith, & Black, 1998). One study found no difference in the number of weaknesses that reviewers discussed in their critiques (Godlee, Gale, & Martyn, 1998). Several studies have examined the effects of double-blinding on reviewers’ recommendations, but the findings have been inconsistent. One found that double blinding resulted in lower (worse) manuscript recommendation scores (Isenberg, Sanchez, & Zafran, 2009), but another found that it resulted in fewer recommendations to reject manuscripts (Godlee et al., 1998). Neither study showed that these effects were due to neutralization of biases. A third study found no difference in recommendations between single- and double-blinded reviews (van Rooyen et al., 1998), and a fourth found that alternative peer-review policies had no effects on editorial decision-making (Justice et al., 1998). Collectively, these studies have produced little evidence that double blinding is superior to single blinding, and no evidence that double blinding effectively prevents biases from influencing what reviewers write or recommend.

**Is Double-Blinding the Right Thing to Do Anyway?**

Some researchers support double blinding despite the paucity of evidence that it improves the peer-review process. They think that it is the right thing to do because they believe that it eliminates bias. Evidence aside, this belief assumes that masked manuscripts are usually completely de-identified and that double-blinded reviews are truly double-blinded. Several studies have found that a high proportion of the manuscripts that are submitted to double-blinded journals are not completely de-identified, and that in many cases, reviewers can guess the authors’ identities (Cho et al., 1998; Chung et al., 2015; Justice et al., 1998; Katz, Proto, & Olmsted, 2002; Liebeskind, 2003). To make matters worse, the likelihood of correct guesses differs by author, reviewer, and study characteristics. For example, an experienced reviewer who works in a specialized area of research may recognize the work of a well-known peer because her lab is the only one that uses a particular assay or because he or she has a distinctive writing style. In contrast, no one is going to recognize the work of an obscure postdoctoral fellow who is hoping to publish his doctoral dissertation (Lane, 2008; Naqvi, 2008; O’Hara, 2008). The ethical argument for double blinding disintegrates when de-identification fails so frequently and when some authors are so much more likely than others to be identifiable.

**A Better Strategy**

Reversion to single blinding leaves us with the question of what to do about the very real problem of bias. Admittedly, bias is far from the top of our editorial team’s list of concerns about peer review. We are much more concerned, for example, about our ability to engage qualified reviewers for the wide variety of submissions we receive. Nevertheless, we take bias seriously. We will do whatever we can to minimize it, and we will challenge it whenever we find it.

Poorly supported opinions about research, including ones that are rooted in bias, are inconsistent with scientific objectivity. We therefore believe that our single best defense against bias is to encourage reviewers to back up their recommendations with clear and convincing justifications. If a reviewer recommends that we reject a manuscript, we want to know what is wrong with it. If he or she recommends that we accept it, we want to know what makes it worthy of publication in *Health Psychology*. Our reviewers should know that we expect them to try to rise above any conscious biases they may hold, and to recuse themselves when their impartiality is in doubt. They should also know that it is incumbent upon them to persuade us with well-reasoned and compelling arguments rather than unsubstantiated opinions. We can easily live with the shortcomings of single blinding, as long as we can continue to count on our reviewers to submit high-quality critiques and to do so in good faith.

**References**


