

Publication Processes in Social Work: The Miami Statement

This statement was created by a publication interest group at the 2005 SSWR Conference in Miami (hence its name). The *Miami Statement* is intended to describe some of the problems that plague the publication of social work research and to offer some ameliorative strategies. The *Miami Statement* was recently published in *Social Work Research* accompanied by an editorial by Jeffrey Jenson. We commend this interest group for stimulating this discussion of publication processes.

Although the development of the Miami Statement was independent of the SSWR Board, the Board also recognizes the critical need for improvement in publication processes. We seek to contribute to those improvements by convening a meeting of journal editors, publishers, SSWR Board members, and Interest Group leadership at the 2006 SSWR Conference. This event will be part of an ongoing SSWR initiative to improve the quality and timeliness of the publication of social work research.

The SSWR Board invites suggestions of specific ways that SSWR can act to improve social work publication processes. Email can be sent to rbarth@unc.edu.

Peer Review and Publication Standards in Social Work Journals: The Miami Statement

A Report Following a Roundtable Discussion
Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research
January 15, 2005, Miami, Florida

Social work scholars contribute the intellectual content in, serve as editors and reviewers for, and are the main subscribers of social work journals. Social work organizations or faculty own or control nearly all of the social work journals. Thus, social work scholars are collectively responsible for the quality of the journals in which they publish.

To our knowledge, the profession has only sporadically examined the processes by which it reviews, selects and brings to print articles in social work journals. Nonetheless, scholars in social work are concerned with the overall quality and impact of social work journals as well as with the processes of publication and peer review. Although several journals have made incremental efforts to enhance their review and publication processes, fundamental improvements are needed.

At the January 2005 SSWR meeting, a number of scholars concerned about these issues gathered in an open roundtable session, to discuss them as well as to explore recommendations for improvement. The consensus was that these comments and recommendations be disseminated prior to the CSWE annual program meeting in March.

Summary of Comments on the Peer Review and Publication Process

Attracting quality manuscripts

Some scholars in the profession argue that accomplished authors do not submit their best papers to social work journals because they believe social work journals have limited impact. Although some evidence can be found to support this concern, this complex question deserves further study. Regardless, it is important for the profession to promote higher quality submissions to social work journals.

The quality of the peer review process

Some authors report that social work journals often do not obtain knowledgeable reviewers. Many reviewers do not provide the kind of rigorous critiques that either screen out inferior papers or improve promising submissions. Some authors who publish in journals from multiple disciplines find that reviews done by social work journals are inferior.

Papers are sometimes published without sufficient inspection by reviewers with statistical expertise. Few journals appear to have a statistician examine all papers during the publication process.

The slow pace of the review and publication processes

Review and publication processes take far too long. Very few social work journals publish an article within 12 months of submission. Often it is years before a submission appears in print, a problem resulting from the slow review process, the speed of the copy editing process, and a backlog that still plagues several journals. This has adverse implications in a number of areas, including the public currency of the profession's knowledge and the ability of scholars to satisfy tenure and promotion requirements.

Concerns with copy editing and influence of editorial staff

Certain journals routinely print text errors, and tables and figures are especially problematic. One major publisher highlights certain phrases, sometimes chosen without apparent reason, without consulting the authors. Text changes, including those that change the intended meaning, occur after the author and even the journal editor have seen the "final" manuscript. This same publisher does not circulate galley proofs to authors prior to publication, a practice that sets this publishing house apart from virtually all other academic presses.

Behind in electronic publishing

Some social work journals have fully embraced computing/information technologies, but several of the major imprints still operate with paper and the U.S. mail. The result chokes the review process, and reduces opportunities for correcting errors as the manuscript takes shape in galley format. On-line journals are beyond the scope of this statement, but it is recognized that these publication outlets will become increasingly important.

Lack of accountability and transparency

Many journals do not print the submission date, revision date, and acceptance date of manuscripts. The role of each author is not specified on multiple-authored papers. Ratios of submissions to acceptances are not available for many journals, and become available only occasionally when published by third parties that gather these data independently.

Letters

Some journals do not encourage responses from readers and, in some cases, have not printed replies from authors.

Out of step with current publication practices

Some social work journals are associated with publishing houses that are in the forefront of current publication practices. Some of the most prominent journals, however, appear to be out of step with practices of such established groups as the American Psychological Association and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

Leadership needed

The major journals and publishing houses have a leadership responsibility. NASW Press, for example, publishes the profession's most widely distributed journal, a major research journal, and two specialty journals. As the publication arm of world's largest social work membership organization, NASW Press should be leading efforts to improve all aspects of publication in its journals.

Guidelines for improving the editorial, peer review and publication processes

Review Processes

- Journals should ensure that submissions are reviewed and authors responded to within 10 weeks of submission.
- Editors should require reviewers to respond within 6-8 weeks of receiving a manuscript.
- The review process should be conducted via e-mail, saving time at all points in the review process.
- Potential reviewers should agree or decline within a few days of the request.
- Editors should seek expert reviewers, particularly those with methodological competence and substantive knowledge who can commit to a timely review. Reviewers who are slow, don't read the papers carefully, produce reviews with mistakes, or consistently provide positive or negative reviews should be dropped.
- A reviewer with appropriate statistical expertise should review all manuscripts with statistical data.
- Editors should encourage letters from readers and also replies from authors.

Information Provided to Reviewers

- Prior to receiving a manuscript, reviewers should be notified via e-mail or phone and asked if they are willing to review a manuscript.
- Instructions to reviewers should encourage brief reviews for submissions that fail to approach minimum standards for a publishable paper.

- Editorial staff should disseminate all the reviews of a given submission to reviewers.

Information Provided to Authors

- Authors should receive galley proofs via email, in time to make changes prior to publication.
- All authors should receive a pdf copy of the article as soon as the final galley proofs are approved for their personal use, such as distribution to students and colleagues.

Information Provided to Readers and Potential Authors

- Every article should list the date when the manuscript was submitted to a journal, returned to author(s), resubmitted, and finally accepted.
- Every journal should publish data annually on the number of submissions and acceptances.
- Reviewers should be recognized by the journal, in print, annually.

These guidelines are offered as a beginning step in what we hope will be a broader, long-term effort to improve the quality and efficiency of the process of peer review and publication in journals in social work. We call on social work journals to adopt these guidelines, and we urge editors, editorial board members, publishers, authors and readers to discuss ways of improving social work journals.

Robert Schilling (convener)
Judith C. Baer
Rick Barth
Mark Fraser
Dan Herman
Gary Holden
Gordon MacNeil
Elaine M. Maccio
Jeanne C. Marsh
Ann Nichols-Casebolt
Enola Proctor
Dale Robinson-Rogers
Trina R. Williams Shanks
David J. Tucker

February 15, 2005