


On Civility in Reviewing

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Guest Columnist



Many of us have put in our best-faith efforts in writing journal articles or grant proposals, only to receive savage reviews. I recently received a savage review of an article I co-wrote and submitted to a journal that referred to the submitted article as sounding like it was written by a “charlatan attorney” and that referred to parts of the article as “absurd” and as “gibberish.” It compared the argumentation to that in “freshman-level term papers,” and recommended that the author, who is “seriously out of his/her element with this topic...refrain from venturing into areas that exceed his/her professional competence.”

Other comments in the review were not dissimilar to these comments. Fortunately, the savage review was “confidential,” although of course, this confidential review was seen by the editor, other reviewers, and who knows who else. There was a second review of the article as well, which was very favorable.

Whether reviewers in other fields do the same, I do not know, although I have heard that when it comes to reviewing, reviewers in no field attack their own in quite the savage way psychologists sometimes do. What I do know is that more than once in my career, I have been stunned by the savagery with which my own work, and the work of others, has been attacked, usually under the cloak of anonymity. I have been surprised both that the reviewers wrote what they wrote and that the editors (or heads of granting panels) sent back the reviews in such form. Such reviews are, I believe, unacceptable, regardless of the quality (or lack thereof!) of the manuscripts being reviewed.

Professors spend some amount of time teaching students in graduate school how to write articles, but they spend little or no time teaching them how to review articles (or books or grant proposals). Perhaps they like to think that reviewing is a skill that just comes naturally to people. Apparently, it doesn't. Perhaps explicit training is needed.

HARMFUL EFFECTS OF SAVAGE REVIEWS

Savage reviews are harmful to all concerned, and for several reasons:

Fundamental Ethics: As a matter of fundamental ethics, savage reviews violate the Golden Rule-to act toward others as we would have them act toward us. No one wants to be treated in a disrespectful and even insulting way, no matter who the individual is.

Balance: Really, it is the rare article or grant proposal that has no fundamental positive value at all. The

job of a reviewer is to provide a balanced evaluation of an article or grant proposal, pointing out the positive value of as well as the flaws in whatever is reviewed. Savage reviews are unbalanced. Thus, savage reviewers are not really doing their job. They are providing unbalanced one-sided accounts of an article or proposal rather than a balanced one. Even if articles need to be criticized rather severely, such criticism can always be communicated in a tactful way.

Stretching the truth: It is rare that more than one of a set of reviews is savage. Not infrequently, other reviews even are positive. The papers and proposals are rarely as bad as these reviewers make them out to be. In savaging a paper, the reviewers usually are stretching the truth.

Maintaining Credibility in Order to Effect Change: In general, you do not get people to change their behavior by demeaning or insulting them. Rather, you lose credibility in the eyes of precisely the people whose behavior you want to change. As a result, these people may be disinclined to listen to what you say. The personal content of the review reduces rather than increases its effectiveness.

Undermining self-efficacy: Senior investigators usually, although not always, take occasional savage reviews in stride. They have gotten such reviews before; they know they most likely will get them again. Besides, they often have tenure, so do not have to worry that their employment is in jeopardy. But junior investigators just starting out are often taken aback. They may become quite discouraged and even give up hope of ever achieving success in the field. They do not yet realize that the problem is in the reviewer, not in the material he or she reviewed. The material may in fact be in need of considerable work, but even if it is, there is no need savagely to attack it.

Creating animosities: We often have the most to gain from those with whom we disagree. But savage reviews create animosity, not collegial interchanges. When you find out that a particular individual has savaged your work (as often happens, even though the review was anonymous), you are more likely to engage in a fight with or a flight from that individual than to engage in meaningful dialogue. The reviewer thereby has lost both a potential learner and a potential colleague with whom to interact.

Self-presentation: When a scholar writes a savage review, that scholar presents him or herself in a bad light. As an editor of a book-review journal, a past editor of a literature-review journal, and a past associate editor of two empirical journals, I would want savage reviewers to know that, contrary to what they may believe, good editors are not impressed by savage reviews or reviewers. On the contrary, they are unlikely to seek the services of such reviewers again. Reviews are not good places to take out one's displaced anger or one's bad days.

Reducing funding: In the case of granting agencies, we only hurt our own field when we write savage reviews. Essentially, we are conveying the message that the work we psychologists do is not very good, or downright awful. Why fund it, then?

What I have said is largely obvious. Why even bother to say it? The reason is that, despite the obvious bad taste that savage reviews display, they continue to be written and disseminated. I saw them 26 years ago when I started as an assistant professor, and I see them today. Savage reviews help no one, least of all, the reviewers. Many problems allow no obvious solution. The problem of savage reviews does allow a simple solution. Don't write them, or, if you are an editor, do not disseminate and certainly do not publish them. If you are the author receiving such a review, ignore the ad hominem content and hostile

tone of the comments, and simply make the best use possible of the substantive points made in the review. Really, everyone involved in the reviewing process deserves better treatment and a modicum of civility.