

The transparency of the peer-review system of grant applications.

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About one year ago I wrote an Editorial wondering if was it time for open peer-review in the Journal of Oral Research.¹ As I stated in that Editorial, the peer-review system has been widely criticized because it is not effective nor efficient,² but the double-blind peer-review has also been criticized for being “obscure” and lacking the transparency necessary for the development of science. Thus, the open peer-review, a system where reviewers know the names of the authors and authors know who the reviewers are; furthermore, reviewers’ comments are published along with the accepted manuscripts.

The open peer-review makes the peer-review process exceptionally transparent, for the reviewers and authors. The transparency of this system appears to be positive in many ways, not just for reviewers and authors, but also for readers, who can observe how peer-review was performed and how the manuscript improved during that process. However, open peer-review has limitations, because double-blind peer-review has been the method most commonly used by scientific journals, and reviewers are accustomed to and like that anonymity allows them to express their opinions freely. Of course, any excess is bad, and excess of freedom is not an exception, at least in this matter.

The absolute freedom granted by double-blind peer-review leads to reviewers feeling like judges who have the final truth about the subject addressed by the article. Of course, reviewers are chosen based on their backgrounds, and in fact, they are invested with the prerogative to judge the quality of a paper. But, the prerogative includes the right to and the duty to, the duty to be impartial and self-critic about their own capabilities and limitations. As you already know, we all have limitations, even in the subject we are supposed to be experts on. In any case, it is really hard to accept we have limitations in our expertise area.

All above is about the journals’ peer-review system, but what about the peer-review of grant applications? My first thought is there must be no major differences between reviewing journal articles and grant applications. Probably, the reviewing of grant applications is more difficult and demanding because the manuscripts are extensive, they are about research that is not finished, and they include financial and bureaucratic issues. Thus, reviewing a grant requires that reviewers can envision how the project will be carried out if it is funded, and what the results will be (and its impact) after its completions. In short, a grant’s

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peer review seems really though.

However, the difficulty involved in a grant's peer-reviewing is not justification to limit the transparency. In fact, as this matter is really difficult, more and more transparency is necessary in order to avoid any kind of malfunction. Besides, you must consider that the grant reviewers' task is difficult because the applicants' task is even more difficult. I am not sure about the numbers, but if a reviewer spends ten hours reviewing a grant application, the authors of that application probably spent hundred hours thinking, writing and revising the application. Moreover, the applicants not only spend large amount of time, but probably they are experts in the matter of grant application. Thus, the peer-reviewing becomes a dialectic process between experts in many cases. And dialectic needs transparency, which is an ineludible requirement for the process.

Despite my first thought, there is a major difference between the grant and article peer-review systems. When

you submit an article, the editorial decision could be final (acceptance or rejection), but in many (probably the most) cases the decision will be "corrections required". Thus, you can correct your manuscript and submit it again in short time, but for grant's applications the process always get a final decision, at least for the next year; so the large amount of time spent thinking, writing and revising could become a large waste of time, at least during the year to come.

For peer-reviewing system of grant applications, open peer-review must be mandatory. So, when you get a final rejection, at least you will get clarity about the real reasons of that enormous waste of time.

In any case, if you get a rejection because the review panel says you did not send some documents that you actually did send, or they confuse you with another person, just breathe and be patient. In those cases, transparency is not the issue, but is still important.

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