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Publish, Don't Perish!: Strategies for Getting Published in Peer Reviewed Journals

Over the last several years I have had the delightful opportunity to collaborate with other journal editors on presentations related to publishing at the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting and the Society for Social Work Research Annual Conference. In order to disseminate what we hope is sage advice that we give in these presentations to a wider audience, I have invited them to collaborate with me on this editorial on writing for publication in peer reviewed journals.

We know that writing is work and is often hard. In fact, Thomas Hood is credited for lamenting, "easy reading is damn hard writing" (O'Toole, n.d. para 1). Scholars strive for accurate, informative, interesting, stimulating, and readable text. Writing as a process and pursuit is time consuming and often simultaneously satisfying and daunting. Academics, in particular, face the persistent certainty of and demand to author a variety of written work. However, manuscripts bound for peer review likely make up a bulk of our writing endeavors.

By now, most of us know *how* we like to write. Perhaps it is in the morning with a cup of coffee, or it may be at the end of the work day, or possibly when all other chores are complete. Needless to say, we may know when we *feel* it is our best time to write, yet, the reality is, we often can't find the *time* to write when we *feel* like it. Writing is an emotional process for many of us because written words represent our thoughts, logic, and position. Once published, they are

like immovable billboards over highways. And if you are writing an academic manuscript, you know that your written work will be judged and reviewed by unknown peers. It is not surprising that the thought of writing can induce panic, anxiety, and a severe case of procrastination. Yet, writing for publication is a key metric used to evaluate and promote your professional career.

Importantly, there is no set rule or schedule for writing. Some authors will advise that you write for an hour or two every day or that you write a page each day. Others may advise that you set specific days or time periods aside for writing. Some will insist that writing in the early morning is the most productive, while late night writing works better for others. Rather than relying on other author's writing schedules, it is important to find the days and times that are most productive for you. And this is the starting point—you must write! We all likely have experienced looking at a blank page realizing that it represents exactly what is in our minds at that time. However, if you put your fingers on the keyboard, more often than not, some words will flow. Face the blank page! It is not a mirror, it's just a blank page. Type your name, type your draft title, and type the date; you have started writing.

Equally as important as starting to write, however, is to have something to write about. An important distinction between just writing and writing for publication is that the latter must have relevance for the professional field—whether it is advancing social work practice, disseminating research findings, promoting advocacy efforts, or informing social work education. Fortunately, there are a variety of manuscript types that are publishable. Some may be based on research, others may be a theoretical or conceptual piece, or possibly a case study for student edification, or even a reflective piece based on your practice. Although these are just a few of various types of manuscripts that you may be thinking about writing, you must evaluate if the work that you want to write is publishable. Some questions you might ask yourself: Does it

bring new knowledge to the field? Is it about a new and emerging area? Can you offer a new or unique way to address an educational situation or think about a social problem or policy? Will your research findings or ideas generate new promises for practice? Thinking that your work will do any of the above most likely suggests that it will have relevance to the field and this will increase your likelihood of having it published.

When beginning to write, it is also important to remember that your first page is a draft of what you will submit for publication. It's really OK if it is lousy. Don't get stuck on creating the perfect opening sentence; in fact, don't even get stuck on writing full paragraphs if that inhibits you. Some find it helpful to first create an outline (this still counts as writing), while others prefer to type quotes or reference lists that they will use within the manuscript (this also counts as writing), and some use a combination of both (yes, this still counts as writing). Think of every page that you write as a draft of what you will submit. You can have fun with your drafts and, during this initial stage of writing, it is fine to simply write. Edits will come later as you tailor your draft work for a specific journal.

Once you find your voice and have started writing, it is particularly important to be clear about the expectations of the journal to which you eventually target your manuscript. All journals have specific page lengths, font and margin sizes, and style criteria. It is critical that you follow the rules. Yes, these rules do matter and reviewers will comment on these points. They will also comment on spelling, grammar, sentence structure, organizational flow and other points in your manuscript that you may not even notice. Some journals may also use rating scales and specific criteria for reviewers. These may include, for example, the clarity of presentation, the manuscript's relevance to the field, and whether the paper makes a significant contribution to existing knowledge. Most journals will ask reviewers to judge whether the paper is conceptually

sound and, for research articles, whether they are empirically sound and rigorous. It is always good practice ask at least one or two colleagues who have been successful at publishing to review your manuscript and give you feedback prior to submitting it to a journal. Then, take any feedback with gratitude and fix any issues brought to your attention.

Fortunately, there is a vast array of journals in which it may be possible to publish your work. Leung and Cheung (2011) have compiled a useful list of 200 journals in social work and related disciplines that you may want to consider. It should be noted that this list is not complete, partially due to new journals coming to the market and other regional journals that have not yet been picked up. This list does, however, provide a very useful place to start to consider your journal selection. Ideally you should choose your journal before you start writing, as this will allow you to check other articles the journal has published in your content area. It is always wise to consider whether you should be referencing these articles and this is particularly true if they contribute something new to your argument. Not surprisingly, editors like to feel that potential authors have considered previous work published in their journals. As noted above, it is also important to check the journal's specific focus and publishing requirements. These issues are best resolved when you first begin writing your manuscript rather than having to address them once the paper is completed.

In choosing a journal you should decide early on whether you wish to write for a more specialist or generalist audience and choose the journal accordingly. Another factor that may affect your choice might be based on who you see as the primary audience of your article. Is it meant for those who work primarily in the field of your research or are you trying to influence a wider audience either in or outside of social work? Importantly, you should also consider whether the journal has a citation index or impact factor. The Thomson Reuters bibliometrics

(counts of journal articles and citations) claim to offer “a systematic, objective means to critically evaluate the world's leading journals” (Thomson Reuters n.d., para 1). Increasingly, this citation index is commonly used to measure the research influence and impact of the journal; the higher the index score, the more prestigious the journal. However, this may also mean that it is more difficult to get a paper accepted as it is likely to attract more articles and have a higher rejection rate. In their examination and critique of the Thompson Reuters system, Blyth, Shardlow, Masson, Lyons, Shaw, and White (2010), lament that bibliometrics have become a proxy for quality and they urge caution in its use. Just because a journal does not have an impact factor does not mean that it will not reach your target audience or make an impact. Nonetheless, in many programs citations and impact factors have become extremely important for those who are seeking tenure and promotion or applying for an alternative position that places value on these metrics. A final factor to consider is the speed in which the journal reviews articles. Again, this can be important if you need to publish quickly or whether you are able to wait for your publication to appear in your journal of choice. It is often quite difficult to identify the average length of time from submission to publication, but an email to an editor can usually help to determine the lag time. However, another important consideration related to this is that some journals offer OnlineFirst, which means that the lag time to publication is less important because accepted articles are published online, complete with a DOI, often long before they appear in print.

Despite some variation, there are fairly standard categories that most journals use when assessing articles for publication. These categories range from ‘accept’, ‘accept with minor revisions’ (also called “conditionally accept”), ‘accept with major revisions’, ‘revise and resubmit’ (also called reject unless revised) and ‘reject’. The decision we all want to see is

‘accepted for publication,’ but this is very rare on initial submission and generally occurs after two or three iterations of the same article. A decision of ‘minor revisions’ or “conditionally accept” can occur following the initial submission or after a resubmission. This indicates that the article is very close to being suitable for publication but still needs some very minor changes or additions to be publishable. The amount of work needed for a minor revision can usually be completed in an evening. In contrast, ‘major revisions’ are more substantive and may include clarification of the author’s arguments, their analysis of the data, missing areas of the debate, as well as the structure and grammatical errors included in the manuscript. It is important that the author addresses each highlighted area in their response to the reviewers, which we discuss in more detail below.

A decision of ‘revise and resubmit’ is probably the most common decision and implies that the article is within the focus of the journal but needs major work to bring it up to a publishable standard. It also implies that this cannot be done quickly and requires a major reworking of the text before the author should resubmit. Although this can be ego-deflating, it is important to remember that ‘revise and resubmit’ is not a ‘reject’ and the author is being given the opportunity to improve the paper. In contrast, when a manuscript is rejected it suggests that the editor believes that your article is not well suited for that particular journal.

If your manuscript receives a “revise and resubmit” from peer reviewers, it is important to first read and consider the reviewers’ comments carefully. In most cases, the reviewers are trying to help the author improve the manuscript and the comments should be taken as helpful recommendations for making it a stronger and more meaningful article. Pay attention to the fine details. Second, after considering all the reviewers’ comments, begin by keeping a list of changes you make based on the recommendations of each of the reviewer’s feedback starting with the

first reviewer. Clearly outline each reviewer's comment, the change that was made and the location of that change (i.e. page number and paragraph) so that the reviewer and editor can easily find the revision in the manuscript. In addition, some journals request that the author highlights the changes that were made within the manuscript. Third, list any additional changes that you make to the manuscript beyond what is requested. There are times when contextual changes requested by reviewers lead to additional changes that you ascertain are necessary in order to make the manuscript more coherent. Fourth, if there are comments that a reviewer requests that may be beyond the scope of the manuscript or would require the addition of several additional pages thus making the manuscript too long for the page limit requirement set by the journal, it may be appropriate to respectfully explain this dilemma in the outline of changes. In other words, you don't have to make changes that you firmly believe would detract from the purpose of the manuscript, but you do have to provide a rationale for not making the changes. Finally, after you have made all the changes and noted them on a separate page, carefully read the revised manuscript for any other changes (grammatical or contextual) that should be made before resubmitting the article to the journal. In most cases, you will have at least one opportunity to resubmit an article for review, therefore make it the best manuscript possible. Including a cover letter with the resubmitted article and outline of changes is advisable.

Perhaps, the most difficult decision to face as an author occurs when a manuscript is rejected by a journal. In these instances, it is important to realize that it happens to every author at some point in their careers. If a manuscript is outright rejected by a journal, it cannot be resubmitted to the same journal. However, do not despair! When rejected, the manuscript should be returned with the peer review attached so that you can make substantial changes and improve the paper. As with a rating of "revise and resubmit," carefully read the reviewers' comments.

This feedback can be invaluable in improving the manuscript for submission to another journal. There are a variety of reasons that a manuscript may have been rejected. The paper may not have been a good fit with the type of articles the journal publishes. It may have contained numerous grammatical errors that clouded the intent of the manuscript and ultimately the readability and outcome of the decision. It may need some major revisions to the content of the manuscript. And, in some cases, a reviewer may indicate that he/she just felt the manuscript did not add to the body of knowledge in social work. There are hundreds of reasons for a manuscript being rejected. At these times, it can be helpful to have a trusted colleague read the manuscript and peer reviewers' comments to obtain an objective perspective regarding the paper. Whatever the reasons for the manuscript's rejection, you have the option of revising the paper and submitting it to another journal. On the other hand, it may be beneficial to put the manuscript aside for a period of time before tackling the changes that need to be made. Given some time, you may gain a fresh perspective on how to improve the manuscript so that it is publishable.

When submitting an empirical article, it is important to follow accepted standards for presenting the required details of your study. As Wu, Wyant & Fraser have noted (2016), there are a number of clear guidelines (e.g. CONSORT-SPI, PRISMA, and TREND) for submitting quantitative articles, but few guidelines exist for qualitative studies. Particularly problematic is that qualitative studies often lack the details necessary for reviewers to make sound assessments of the research. For that reason, we include a more detailed discussion on qualitative articles here. It is critical to remember that qualitative research is an umbrella term for a variety of different methodological approaches that rely on non-numeric data and there is a great deal of heterogeneity between and among these different approaches. Too often conversations about

qualitative research are reduced to simplistic discussions over distinguishing it from quantitative research.

There are a number of sources that authors can consult for guidelines including books and articles, checklists and guidelines, and editorials. There are hundreds of books and articles published on basic qualitative research. Examples include, Padgett's (2016) *Qualitative methods in social work research* and Shaw and Holland's (2014) *Doing qualitative research in social work*. Both tackle qualitative inquiry writ large. Related, are books and articles that take a comparative approach. Examples include Creswell's (2013), *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (which examines narrative inquiry, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography and case study) and Starks and Trinidad's (2007) article comparing phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory.

Another source of advice comes in the form of checklists or guidelines developed by book authors, journal editors, and consulting boards. For example, the editorial board of the *Journal of the Society for Social Work & Research (JSSWR)* has recently issued, *JSSWR Author Guidelines for Manuscripts Reporting Qualitative Research* and the journal has published an article about the process of developing these guidelines (Wu, et al. 2016). Finally, journal editors offer advice in their editorial essays. Particularly useful may be those found in journals specializing in qualitative research. Examples include *Qualitative Health Research* and *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*. Both editors have addressed frequent problems or specific issues facing qualitative researchers (See, for example: Morse, 2015; Staller and Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Staller, 2015a; Staller, 2015b.).

It is difficult for any researcher—particularly those just beginning a research career—to sort through all these helpful pro-offerings without ending up dazed and confused. Because

qualitative research is a generic label that encompasses a variety of different approaches that spring from different epistemological orientations, such studies require methodological designs that are in keeping with their philosophical underpinnings and assumptions. Thus, it is impossible to make sense of generic advice when it is unmoored from these specifics.

For example, grounded theory (GT) can be conducted from a positivistic epistemology with an objectivist perspective like Glazer and Strauss (1967) or from a social constructionist epistemology like Charmaz (2006). It is critical to remember that true GT studies result in the development of a theory, not just a thematic or content analysis. Conversely, GT *methods* may be used for content analysis, but that does not make it a GT study. Researchers interested in content analysis, might consult Drisko and Maschi (2015) only to discover three different kinds, *basic content analysis* (which employs statistical approaches), *interpretive*, and *qualitative content analysis*. Or they might consult Hsieh and Shannon (2005) who discuss *conventional*, *directed*, and *summative* content analysis, while warning researchers that the threat to trustworthiness depends on which strategy is taken. In short, the solution to qualitative quandaries is to pay attention to the overall integrity of the project from start to finish. Good quality qualitative research starts with a deep understanding of the epistemological underpinnings and methodological requirements of the particular and specific approach taken.

So what is necessary when submitting qualitative articles? Here are a few suggestions for maintaining the integrity of your written article.

1. *Know your methodological literature and its epistemological traditions.* There are scholars who specialize in writing about specific kinds of qualitative inquiry. Use them; cite them. Avoid relying exclusively on generic textbooks.

2. *Integrity of design.* Design and implement your qualitative research according to the assumptions and rules relating to your epistemological perspective and chosen methodology. Place yourself within a philosophical tradition and stay there. Don't pick and choose bits and pieces of unrelated traditions without an intelligent plan.
3. *Stay consistent.* Once you have placed yourself within a philosophical tradition stay there. The more consistent you are, the clearer your perspective will be to the readers, reviewers, and editors, and the more rigorous your final product will be. The article will hang together *because* of the integrity of the research.
4. *Align the pieces.* Assemble the pieces of your article into a coherent and well-synthesized whole. This means that there must be complete alignment in framing your question, using theory, collecting data, analyzing data, drawing conclusions, reporting implications, and limitations. However, how these pieces are assembled, how they are framed, and where they are placed in the article will *depend* on your methodology. Nonetheless, the end product must be synthesized into a single, elegant, whole.
5. *A word of caution.* Be wary of generic advice that is not tethered to explicit epistemological and methodological frameworks. If you pick and choose advice from a checklist, you may unknowingly be mixing methods from different traditions. In doing so you run the risk of weakening, rather than strengthening, your final product. Rigor is not constructed from items off of a checklist, it is generated from the integrity of the overall design.

Ultimately, increasing the likelihood of publishing qualitative research starts with well-designed and internally consistent projects. Only then, can you write up the study in convincing, publishable form.

In addition to following accepted formats and all journal guidelines, perhaps the most important thing that you can do to increase the likelihood of your article being accepted is to pay particular attention to “doing the heavy lifting” in writing pieces that your peers will evaluate. There are numerous benefits to doing the heavy lifting so that your paper will be easy reading for its intended audience. So, what does heavy lifting mean? There are three major heavy lifting steps for authors to consider: focus, infuse, and muse.

Focus as Heavy Lifting: Focusing a review of the literature takes skill and thoughtfulness. In describing the literature review for research projects, Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2014) refer to the literature as ‘writing the right stuff’ (p. 68). They state a poor literature review process as, “written as pro forma responses to a purely ceremonial obligation...even when carefully crafted with regard to basic mechanics, they make for dull reading, and when not so well prepared they are excruciating torture for most readers. Much of this problem arises from a misunderstanding of the task served by reviewing the literature (p. 68). On the contrary, a distinguished and useful review of the literature provides the manuscript with a tether to context about its purpose, queries, and findings. Locke et al. (2014) suggest, “the writer’s task is to employ the research literature artfully to support and explain the choices made for [their] study, not to educate the research concerning the state of the science in the problem area” (p. 69).

Infusion as Heavy Lifting: Manuscripts that infuse theory are more readable and interesting. When accomplished well, authors provide their readers with new, provocative, and meaningful ways to examine the complexities and perhaps controversies of lived experiences and context (Busch-Armendariz, Nsonwu, & Cook Heffron, in press). Editors, reviewers, and end users are attentive to and appreciate the heavy lifting or critical analysis about the findings that in the beginning may have been descriptive in nature (Gilgun, 2015). Theory infusion generates

curiosity, questions, and further discussion, as well as the application of the findings to the real world. In a joint editorial published in the *Journal of Social Work Education*, Robbins, et al., (2015) write, “year after year we see that the articles that are theoretically strong receive the most citations.... authors [should be encouraged] to develop their theoretical orientation (p. 202).

Musing as Heavy Lifting: Closely related as a process to the infusion of theory, authors must make interesting and useful connections to practice, policy, and lived experiences. Authors’ heavy lifting includes providing thoughtful, insightful, and reflexive arguments and conclusions that may untangle complex and undefined situations (Wolfer, 2006) and or provide an intersectional, ecological perspective (Robbins, et al., 2015). Greener (2011) provides useful definitions to this point, “an argument is an attempt to support a particular view with reasons why it should be believed by others... a conclusion is, as the name implies, the statement which you are attempting to convey, and for which you are doing to give the reader reasons to believe” (p. 161).

In sum, heavy lifting means that authors take stands and speak with authority in ways to move thinking forward and build upon the knowledge platform. Manuscripts that convey enthusiasm and compassion but devoid of hyperbole are interesting reads and heavy lifting through focus, infusion, and musing occurs when authors make inferences otherwise neglected in the literature or unsaid in their findings.

Finally, if your university allows this, authors should give some thought to placing a personal copy write on any diagrams, figures, tables, or flowcharts that they intend to use in future publications. This preserves your right to use the copyrighted material in any future works that you publish without having to request permission and pay fees to do so. When your article is

accepted for publication, the journal will ask you to sign a form that gives them permission to use your copyrighted material for no charge.

So, take the plunge and start writing! There are no shortcuts or magic formulas to follow and writing takes time and effort. But the more you write, the easier it becomes. A colleague once noted that every manuscript has a home, and it's just a matter of finding the right one.

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