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Publishing from the PhD: Reflections on My First Experience of Peer Review

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Last week, I received some good news. An article I submitted to a peer-reviewed journal had been accepted for publication. This was my first piece of written work to undergo full peer review. This is an important milestone in the PhD journey for anyone hoping to build a career in academia (or outside of it). My experience of this has been enlightening and challenging in equal measure. I've found the experience brought opportunities for personal growth, as well as moments of frustration and dismay. In the days since I received my acceptance email, I've been reflecting on this balance between positivity and negativity. I've taken four key lessons from these reflections – which I'd like to share in brief. Either, to stimulate conversation with colleagues regarding the merits (or otherwise) of the peer review system. Or, to shed light on aspects of the undertaking ahead, for other postgraduates looking to publish their first article. Peer review is one of the hottest (and most contested) issues in academic discourse. Nonetheless, I am hoping this write-up might highlight lessons which haven't been covered so vocally within that discourse (lessons which I hadn't been aware of).

Before I elaborate these lessons, let me provide some specifics regarding that journey's stages and duration. This experience began in a conventional way – with me drafting materials from my PhD research in article form, back in April 2022. I took a month out of my thesis work to write a first draft – which I sent to close colleagues for comment, and which I presented at a series of summer conferences. I used feedback from readers and discussants to inform a pre-submission article redraft, which took me a further two weeks. I submitted my redrafted manuscript to my journal of choice. After nine weeks of review, I received a 'revise and resubmit' decision, with comments from three reviewers. I spent a further three weeks revising my manuscript in line with reviewer comments. Then, I re-submitted. Following eight more weeks of review, I received an acceptance email at the end of March 2023.

Take-home one: peer review forced me to enter a 'growth mindset' vis-à-vis my research

In total, I spent nine weeks actively writing, re-writing, and re-re-writing my manuscript. My article spent 17 weeks with the journal (a quick turnaround, for which I'm very grateful). Factoring time where my article was being read by colleagues, or where I was letting it rest before further revisions, it took me exactly a year to get from first draft to publication. As I say, that period has brought some frustrations. At times, revisiting my paper after a fresh round of comments, I felt like a vulture circling the carcass of my once-exciting research project. I've found it depressing being forced to return to old work to tease out scraps of additional value. This is obviously the major challenge of peer review: maintaining the perseverance and resilience necessary to keep reworking a project, even when it feels like it's past its sell-by-date. Frankly, this is a challenge I haven't enjoyed. On the other hand, this iterative challenge of revisiting my project has also been positive for my wider PhD. This positive is the first lesson I draw from my experience of peer review: the exercise has forced me to take accountability for the quality of my research, and to address its weaknesses.

Like all research, my PhD project suffers weaknesses. These include gaps in my knowledge of relevant literatures, shortcomings in my conceptual framework, methodological vulnerabilities, or simply problems in my argument's communication. Prior to writing my first article, I had been able to avoid tackling these weaknesses. Partly, this is because of the nebulous temporal horizon associated with a PhD. Put simply, there's been no pressing need to

confront shortcomings, because I knew I could delay this difficult task until that unspecific point in an indeterminate future which I call 'thesis submission'. The lack of immediate time pressures in my PhD work has made me complacent when it comes to addressing challenges. This neglect also has something to do with the limited audience that has read my work so far. Though I couldn't have asked for better primary and secondary supervisors, they remain only two people. Supervisors (a) can't be expected to respond with expertise to every part of my contribution/methodology/findings; and (b) are individuals with whom I have formed personal relationships – and who are, therefore, likely to err on the side of kindness and generosity when reading my materials (more so than anonymous reviewers, at least, as I'll discuss below).

One of peer review's strengths is that it blasted a hole in these barriers to me either noticing, or resolving, weaknesses in my work. On the one hand, peer review brought my deadline for making changes much closer. Peer review speaks in the language of weeks or months – rather than years (or longer), as in the PhD journey. Moreover, peer review brought my work to a wider audience – specifically, an audience of individuals chosen for their relevant expertise, to shed light on different elements in my article. That these individuals were chosen precisely for their lack of prior relationship to me also removed any predisposition for generosity that closer colleagues or supervisors might feel. Finally, peer review crystallised any adjustments advised by this new audience as compulsory. If I wanted to get my article published, I had to address reviewer comments. Failure to do so was a sure-fire way of pissing off individuals who had carved time out of their schedules to read and respond to my research (without remuneration).

Combined, these pressures forced me to take greater accountability for my research's quality, within a more immediate timeline. The work I undertook to address problems flagged by my reviewers has added an additional 5-10% of quality to my research – both the specific article under review, and (in turn) the wider thesis from which it arose.

Peer reviewer recommendations haven't totally changed my argument, or the empirical materials I've used to justify it. But they have forced me to consider texts/authors which were missing from my literature review, make important clarifications to my conceptual design, and reframe my contribution. In each case, peer review has forced me to confront weaknesses which have always been present, but which I've been able to swerve (thus far) under the different pressures of a PhD. Complying with reviewer demands gave me no choice but to enter a 'growth mindset': recognising weaknesses in my work, and taking time to progress through them. My work is better now. And that's a valuable thing.

Take-home two: no article is the exclusive work of the named author(s)

So, my work has grown under peer review. And that growth points to a second lesson: that no paper/project/monograph is the sole work of its named author(s). In some ways, this is a strength of peer review. As I've said, my reviewers added 5-10% to my work as it stood pre-submission. This includes relevant questions my reviewers asked, perspectives they provided on my contribution's parameters and scope, and useful recommendations they made for me to read/cite texts I might not have found independently. It does credit to peer review that the insights of multiple reviewers play a substantial role in getting work to a high, publishable quality.

Conversely, peer review's 'hive mind' disposition may be a weakness. It may water down the integrity of the author's original voice, or stifle their individual creativity. Conformity with multiple reviewers' styles/expectations, as a precondition to publication, constrains authorial freedoms. Namely, freedoms to think/write innovatively, or to depart from the existing conventions of a disciplinary community. In the past, I've criticised authors who cite the same old names in their work, or who write formulaically/without creative flair. Now, I known these limitations are not necessarily of the author's own making. It may have been an author's reviewers who required a citation to that dead white man, on the one hand. Or, who encouraged the kind of non-meaningful/tokenistic/half-hearted reference to decolonising/feminist literatures which is often read as false allyship, on the other. Alternatively, it might be the reviewers who suggested using the prosaic language and structure of 'scientific writing', foreclosing stylistic innovation. As flagged above, getting a paper published usually means conforming to these requirements/suggestions. This is especially the case for PhD students/candidates who face pressures to build a publication record in advance of our entry into a post-submission job market – and who cannot afford to piss off

people with a partial veto over our work.

My Mum often reminds me that 'too many cooks spoil the broth'. Having done so much to redraft my work in light of others' feedback, I now realise how many 'cooks' are involved in publishing research. And, moreover, how much scope there is to lose a paper's original flair and flavour in making those redrafts. Although my final article is in my name, large parts of its structure, bibliography, and stated contribution are outcomes of peer review. They're all adjustments I made to get the thing published. On balance, as stated above, I think these adjustments improved my paper. But I'm sure peer review could have made the work worse by requiring me to lose important references to new scholarship, for example, or flattening my authorial voice. Either way, I now understand that publication is the work of more individuals than are listed on the lintel. And I'll bear this in mind when reading future articles (including being kinder whenever I feel they fall short).

Take-home three: we should find ways of recognising reviewer input

Published work being more than the labour of the author's hands brings me to my third take-home: the need for both transparency and recognition in peer review. Here, I'm talking about peer review's most common critique: reviewer anonymity.

In my introduction, I promised to confine this article to lessons which hadn't been widely covered in previous commentary. Of course, review anonymity falls into the category of widespread comment. Many others have taken issue with the lack of accountability that anonymity confers. Anonymity gives reviewers license for unkindness. This is not a new idea. But it is a problem. Years of research and emotional investment can go into a paper. It's doubly painful, therefore, when that paper receives harsh feedback. Being an academic is a bit like whack-a-mole. You spend 99% of your time underground, working on something meaningful to you. And when you pop up to share findings, others are all too ready to whack you back down again. Why people have to be so unkind is a mystery to me. Systematic unkindness only impoverishes us as individuals, and as a community, in the absence of a culture of exchange and collegiality. Removing anonymity would be one step towards nurturing that culture: taking reviewers' freedom for unaccountable trolling out of the equation. That point has already been made. However, I'd like to add further thoughts on anonymity – which emerged from my first peer review experience.

Anonymity circumvents any pathway for authors to acknowledge reviewers' contribution to their work. Reviewer feedback plays a crucial role in growing authors' work – both developing individual publications, which are so central to our careers, and strengthening our wider projects'/personal development. The time that goes into that impact is thankless, unpaid, and unaccounted for in our work schedules (as with so many parts of academic life). Upon receiving my article acceptance, I wanted to thank my reviewers for their engagement with my work – having taken time to read it, reflect on its argument, and make recommendations for advancing it. Anonymity made that impossible. Whereas I've been able to acknowledge the support other colleagues have given me during my PhD, my reviewers remain shadowy figures who have given me a lot but whom I am unable to repay (if anyone reading this happens to be one of my reviewers, feel free to reach out).

Abandoning anonymity would enable authors to recognise reviewer contributions. It would also centralise reviewers' contributions to their wider disciplines. Our disciplines do not move forward without the work of reviewers. Reviewers deserve accreditation for this. Imagine this possible scenario: You've read a great article. You know that article was not just the work of the author, but also of its reviewers (who helped develop its qualities, per reflections above). You also know that those reviewers were specifically selected for their relevant expertise. You'd like to read more of the reviewers' work, so you follow a hyperlinked accreditation to the reviewer's own publications page. This accreditation opens the door to related published works for you, as well as rewarding those who made the present work possible (by way of new readers).

Properly crediting reviewers would resolve the link between anonymity and unaccountable unkindness. But it might also enhance the act of reviewing itself: providing a reason for people to undertake review (prestige and new readers), as well as an incentive *to* review well. First, because having served as a reviewer on a 'great' piece of work is evidence of the kind of impact job applications/grant providers/regulators/assessors expect. Second, because an

incentive to develop greatness in every submission would optimise reviewer stewardship:

1. Encouraging reviewers to make insightful, relevant, and innovative reading recommendations;
2. Challenging them to maximise (rather than undermine) the scope of the paper's stated contribution; and, most importantly,
3. Ensuring reviewers provide as much support and care as writers need to reach paper acceptance.

Non-anonymity could bring benefits to authors and reviewers alike. It would ensure authors receive the care they need to realise their submission's potential. And it would provide a path for recognising/rewarding review, as an essential contribution to scholarship. Numerous journals have reported a 'crisis' in reviewer numbers. Perhaps enhancing transparency is one way of making peer review something to seek out – rather than to avoid or to accept half-heartedly.

Take-home four: publication is a process

The final reflection I've taken from my first experience of peer review is that academic writing is an ongoing process – with no perfect end-product, and no final endpoint. Before going through peer review, I had (perhaps naïvely) assumed that successfully getting through this process would mean producing a 'finished' piece of work. I never expected to feel the piece was 'perfect'. But I thought, through investment of my time and energy (as well as readers'/reviewers'), over multiple rounds of drafting and review, I would end up with a contented feeling: that the work was a more-or-less complete and self-contained articulation of the ideas I had originally come up with. That, like someone who makes a thing or builds a house, I would be able to consider that project 'achieved' – and move on, to a new (and different) one.

Reading through the final proofs before publication, however, my abiding feeling was one of restless dissatisfaction – even, some disappointment. My article leaves so much unsaid, and still contains so many holes. Even after the rigorous peer feedback process through which I've arduously laboured, I still feel there remains so much to work on – to realise the promise of this thought I'd had, before I can call this particular research journey 'complete'. In fact, with the benefit of a few weeks' distance, I felt that the article was significantly less complete than I'd felt upon initial submission. With my article finally published, it actually feels more like the start of a project than a conclusive outcome.

Perhaps this is how everyone feels after finishing a project – including after 'making a thing' or 'building a house'. With one milestone passed, perhaps we inevitably end up looking ahead: to see how we can build on it, or develop our wider portfolio. Don't get me wrong, I think we should always take time to celebrate successes, and acknowledge the end of one period of exertion. I was really delighted when I received my acceptance email. I took time to enjoy that feeling, and I don't want to fall into the trap of never thinking my work is enough.

What I'm saying is slightly different to that – which sounds like a sure path to unhappiness and over-work. Instead, what I'm suggesting is this: this article's publication doesn't feel like a terminus for the research informing it (its final destination). Rather, it merely feels like the most recent station-stop in a wider journey. (Hopefully) that journey will be full of such stations: moments to pause and celebrate, but not yet moments to alight from my train of thought… For alighting too soon might mean forgoing the rest of the trip. (A trip which definitely doesn't have to be within the confines of academic research; but one which will continue to involve me communicating my thoughts to the world around me, through my writing.)

This sense of my work being part of a continuing story, rather than a final product, is not intended to cause me (or you, as my reader) any stress or pressure. Nor, is it intended to make it feel like what I've/you've produced is never good enough to be 'the one'. Rather, for me, it *alleviates* the pressure to write that 'one' in the first place: to say whatever I want to say 'just right', as if there won't be another opportunity to say it. If each writing project is part of a wider journey, rather than an attempt to produce the magnum opus, then whatever that project creates doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be an end to my thought process. It only has to be my wider writing practice's latest iteration: the next line in an ongoing, evolving, unfolding tale. Personally, I find that a comforting thought.

I've gotten a bit literary with this final take-home. So let me end by saying this: My favourite story-teller produced their works not with the intention of publishing, but because they loved writing (so much so, that the vast majority of their writings were never published – and it was the work of separate lifetimes for others to turn fragmentary remains into something readable). This author's writing was their sanctuary. They returned to it regularly, out of pleasure – rather than with a view to some predetermined 'output'. In doing so, they gradually built a corpus of works. Not with a pre-arranged destination in mind, but because they were enjoying the places to which their writing took them. In the end, by revisiting those places again and again, gradually refining those places' stories with each visit, this author ended up creating a unique and meaningful universe – which generations of readers have come to love.

I don't have any pretence of creating as meaningful a set of stories as this writer – nor of enjoying a fraction of their readership. But I do want to learn from their attitude to writing. Not, as the pursuit of something 'finished'. But as something I do again and again: out of love or enjoyment, until the story ends up producing itself – through critical mass.

I don't feel my first published article is perfect. But it's good enough for now. And I'll keep working on the ideas I've started forming within it, because those ideas are important to me (and I suppose because I hope they might also be important to others). If I'm lucky, that work will produce more publications – none of which will be an end-product, or serve as an end-point to my wider train of thought. But, each of which – through the sheer practice of producing them – might contribute to carrying that train of thought to some semi-interesting places.

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