Editorial

The Quality and Integrity of Australian Social Work

Three volumes of *Australian Social Work* have now been published by Taylor and Francis and it is 3 years since the process of reforming the Journal began. During that time, national editorial and international advisory boards have been appointed and the institutional circulation of the journal has increased exponentially as a result of changing technology and new marketing strategies by Taylor and Francis. Through global sales of bundled journals and pro bono arrangements with developing nations it is estimated that *Australian Social Work* is now available in over 20,000 libraries worldwide. Indications from online usage are that the standing of the journal has risen with an increase in 2007 of full text downloads to 17,412 in 2007 compared to an average of 8,460 for all Routledge social work journals. Submissions from international authors have increased, particularly with the special issues on ‘Higher Education and Social Work’ and ‘Social Work around the World’. Two more special issues are planned, the first in June 2009 on ‘Social Work, Aging and Diversity’ with guest editors Elizabeth Ozanne and Mark Hughes and the second on ‘Social Work’s Contribution to Disability Policy and Practice around the World’ with guest editors Tim Stainton from Canada and Lesley Chenoweth.

With only a few missing issues all the volumes of *Australian Social Work* are now digitalised and available for download on the journal’s web site [www.informaworld.com/asw](http://www.informaworld.com/asw). This should prove an invaluable resource to students, academics and practitioners. All submissions and the entire editorial process are now handled online through Manuscript Central which is now used by most international journals. An *Australian Social Work* style guide is in the final stages of development to assist authors untangle the complexities of the more comprehensive APA Publication Manual.

Perhaps most importantly for potential authors, a set of Peer Review Guidelines have been developed by the Editorial Board and are included as the last section of this editorial. The guidelines will not only assist reviewers but also authors in setting out more clearly expectations about the type and quality of manuscripts submitted to the journal and the criteria by which they are evaluated. The aim of peer review is not to
find fault but rather to evaluate manuscripts critically and constructively, to improve accuracy, clarity and completeness of the work. Very few manuscripts are accepted without any revision, and research suggests that a majority of authors consider peer review enhances the quality of their manuscript in respect of content, organisation and clarity of conclusions (Purcell et al., 1998; Strayhorn et al., 1993; Benos et al., 2006). A much larger pool of reviewers has now been established for the journal, and where feasible at least one of the reviewers will have an international reputation in the specific field covered by the paper although all are selected on the basis of their knowledge and expertise of the field.

The standard of reviews has increased significantly in the past three years, which means authors can expect to receive more comprehensive feedback. Comments from different reviewers may be contradictory or emphasise different points, and a key role of the editor, in my view, is to summarise and interpret, if necessary, comments from reviewers, and give clear direction about required revisions. At all times however, the manuscript remains the work of the author, who in submitting a revised version and detailing the changes made has the right to put their case against the views of reviewers or the editor.

Nevertheless the final decisions, whether to send a manuscript out for review, selection of reviewers and acceptance for publication rest with the editor who at times consults with members of the editorial board. Various statements exist about the role of journal editors. See for example, detailed expositions by the World Association of Medical Editors (http://www.wame.org/) or the Journal of Marriage and the Family (http://www.ncfr.org/journals/marriage_family/home.asp). All point to the difficult judgements to be made and the professional integrity required to maintain a confidential blind peer review process, ensure manuscripts receive fair reviews, decisions regarding publication are unbiased and avoid conflicts of interest that may arise when manuscripts are submitted by colleagues or students. The Journal has instituted a process whereby an Editorial Board member takes responsibility for manuscripts where the Editor may have or be perceived to have a conflict of interest. It is also suggested that editors must work to improve not only the quality of manuscripts but also the quality of research in the field. Such roles are important for authors to bear in mind in their first throes of disappointment when a major revision
of their work is suggested. I hope the Peer Review Guidelines below will assist authors, who contemplate writing for the Journal. As the majority of research papers submitted use a qualitative paradigm I would draw authors attention to the Guidelines for Critical Review of Qualitative Studies and the appraisal tool for qualitative research developed as part of the Critical Appraisal Skills Program of the NHS Public Health Resource Unit, 2006, both of which are useful guides to ensuring sufficient detail is provided to demonstrate the rigour of qualitative research (http://www.srs-mcmaster.ca/Portals/20/pdf/ebp/qualguidelines_version2.0.pdf; http://www.phru.nhs.uk/Doc_Links/Qualitative%20Appraisal%20Tool.pdf.)

With writing just as with social work practice wisdom often comes with experience, and I would encourage students and novice authors to work in collaboration with their more experienced colleagues.

Christine Bigby, Editor


**Peer Review Guidelines**

**Purpose of peer review**

Peer review is commonly used in journal publications to ensure that papers published meet scholarly standards of quality and originality, making a significant contribution so as to advance professional knowledge. Peer reviewers with knowledge and expertise of the paper’s subject matter validate the accuracy and currency of the information presented and make a determination as to whether it is worthy of publication. In making a recommendation to the Editors, peer reviewers compile a report commending the article, highlighting its strengths, and suggesting revisions where there are errors and inconsistencies, or where plagiarism is detected.

**The review process**

Journal submissions which meet the journal guidelines are sent to two reviewers once they have been ‘cleaned’, that is, once author details have been removed. Each reviewer
is also unaware of the identity of the other reviewer. Reviews should be completed within one month of receipt of the article. The reviewer compiles a report for the author using the prescribed review form. Reviewers are encouraged to give constructive feedback, where possible, and to make recommendations as follows:

- **Acceptance** clearly applies when the paper is deemed publishable in its submitted form.
- **Minor revision** means that small changes to content are required, such as corrections to referencing, title, headings, or grammar and spelling.
- **Major revision** refers to a reordering or restructuring of existing content with minor or small additions from perhaps unacknowledged or misacknowledged sources.
- **Rejection** is recommended when a major rewrite of the paper is required, despite the interesting nature of the topic or its currency, in other words, if the quality of the writing and the way the material is presented requires substantial rewriting, then the suggestion should be to reject. In short, if papers require major rewriting, reviewers are encouraged to recommend rejection.
- **Resubmission:** Most journals do not allow for resubmission once papers are rejected so recommendations to resubmit should be used only in exceptional circumstances motivated by the reviewer.

The final decision to publish rests with the editors who provide feedback to the authors based on the reviewers’ reports. Where there is a discrepancy of opinion, the paper might be sent to a third reviewer. Once authors have made the required changes and responded in writing to the reviewer’s comments, the paper might be returned to the reviewer for a final recommendation to accept outright, accept with minor revision, accept with major revision, or reject.

1. **Selection of reviewers**

Reviewers are selected based on their knowledge and expertise on the subject matter. A request is made and if the reviewer agrees to review the paper as requested, the review is conducted within a one month period and returned to the editors. If a reviewer does not have sufficient knowledge and or expertise then the editors should be informed promptly so that another reviewer can be allocated.

2. **Standards for reviews**

2.1 **Review content**

Each review covers the following areas:

- Identification of the nature of the paper whether research based, or a review of literature or an analysis of policy or critical reflection on practice or a combination of one or more of these.
- Suitability for *Australian Social Work*.
- Significance or importance of the topic and relevance to practice.
- Originality and contribution to the literature/practice knowledge.
- Coherence and consistency of the argument presented.
- Significance and potential impact on education, policy and or practice.
- Scholarly quality of the paper in terms of the following:
Critical analysis or critical appraisal of the subject matter.

Structure and order of material presented: Title that accurately reflects the paper’s content, an abstract of approximately 120 words, key words, appropriately titled headings and sub-headings, conclusion, acknowledgements, if appropriate, and accurate referencing in APA format.

Development of a sound argument.

Conciseness and clarity.

In the case of research articles, particular attention is paid to the suitability of the methodology to the research question. It is important that the research question is clearly stated and the rationale for the study and chosen methodology – for data collection and analysis – is firmly established. It is also important that the findings and discussion relate directly to the research data and the literature reviewed within the content of the paper. Thorough analysis is required rather than copious reporting of direct quotations from data or interview transcripts.

2.2 Nature of paper and suitability for publication

*Australian Social Work* accepts a range of papers, and expects that they meet scholarly standards in so far as they minimally contain a review of the relevant literature on the topic area, and its context such that in the case of Australian articles they are understandable to an international audience and in the case of international papers, they are accessible to an Australian audience. Types of acceptable articles are as follows:

- Research based articles
- Evaluative case studies
- Theoretical papers
- Systematic reviews of available literature and or research
- Policy analysis
- Critically reflective analysis of social work practice
- Analysis of professional issues

2.3 Currency and relevance

Papers should be current—citing most recent statistics (in the last year) and literature (within the prior five year period) sources unless the article is an historical or seminal piece. Information or ideas presented must be:

- Of sufficient interest and importance to the journal’s readership to warrant publication.
- Relevant to social work and or social welfare or social care—if the subject matter concerns a related area or field, its implications for social work must be considered.
- Relevant to contemporary policy, practice and or education.
- Historically significant so as to enhance understanding of the broader context in which the issue or topic arises.
- Advance knowledge on theory and practice approaches and models.

2.4 Originality

Articles must be original papers not previously published elsewhere; should not be plagiarised from the work of other authors; and if it concerns a previously published topic area, it must advance the debate and present a fresh analysis of the issue.
2.5 Analysis of content
The analysis of the content varies slightly according to the type of paper:

*Research based papers* will be accepted from different research paradigms, including empirical research, qualitative research, action research, feminist research, historical research, narrative research, and so on. It is recognised that these different research traditions have different requirements for the style of reporting, and it is expected that articles will conform to these standards. Whatever paradigm is used, the research methodology must be adequately explained, and must be appropriate for the study. Any conclusions must be justified on the basis of the findings. Authors and reviewers might find the Guidelines for Critical Review of Qualitative Studies useful for considering qualitative research or the appraisal tool for qualitative research developed as part of the Critical Appraisal Skills Program of the NHS Public Health Resource Unit, 2006 (http://www.srs-mcmaster.ca/Portals/20/pdf/ebp/qualguidelines_version2.0.pdf; http://www.phru.nhs.uk/Doc_Links/Qualitative%20Appraisal%20Tool.pdf.)

*Evaluative case studies* must do more than merely describe particular interventions or report on specific programs. It is expected that prior applications of the intervention be cited or, at the very least, sound empirical grounding or rational argument is provided as to the thinking that led to the particular intervention being reported upon. There is room for innovative and creative approaches and, in such cases, for example in single case studies – of individual direct practice cases or intervention programs, a thorough review of the literature relating to its development and of the context of the application must be given. Claims to effectiveness or further use must be supported by evaluative data beyond subjective reports of the various stakeholders involved.

*Systematic literature reviews* should contain a comprehensive review of recent literature and a variety of sources discussed thematically to highlight key theoretical concepts, debates, perspectives, and ethical and practice issues. The context in which the literature arises should be made clear so as to enable comparative data on trends in different locations and their similarities and differences. Where reviews of research form the subject matter, details of the scale of the research must be indicated as well as the context in which the study was conducted. Implications for practice, policy, education and or further research should be considered with possible suggestions for further research.

*Theoretical papers* conduct a systematic analysis of the work of particular theorists or theories or perspectives in order to advance knowledge and understanding of theoretical and philosophical issues. Conceptual clarity is important. The structure should include the origins of the theory or a brief synopsis of the theorist’s major work in the area under discussion, key debates and issues, the way the ideas have been imported into social work, the implications for social work practice, and the lasting importance of the
theory for social work. Case examples may be expected for illustrative purposes, where appropriate.

**Systematic policy analysis** should include an introductory discussion of the context in which the policy issue arises, factors which have led to the topicality of the issue it addresses, prior policy, contemporary legislation and accompanying regulations, where appropriate, a brief literature review and or historical perspective on the problem, the stakeholders involved and affected by the policy, the utility or fairness of the policy, the implications for practice, policy, education, and research, and suggested improvements. There are many systematic frameworks for analysing social policy and if one of these guides the structure of the paper, ingenuity of application needs to be considered.

**Critical analyses of social work practice** should go beyond descriptions of particular practice models or programs and include an evaluative component, a systematic literature review, and a clear description of the practice context. There is often a danger that such papers read like reports rather than scholarly discussions of practice applications based on practice literature. Pro formas, sample checklists, and assessment protocols should not be included though a note should indicate that these are available from the author on request. The paper should rather **discuss** these aspects of the practice application indicating why they are important and effective, and what successive applications have indicated in terms of possible refinement and improvement.

**Analysis of social work professional issues** or ethical concerns should be developed in a similar manner to policy analysis papers. The paper should include the following: an introductory discussion of the context in which the professional issue arises; factors which have led to the topicality of the issue being addressed; prior discussions on the issue; contemporary professional legislation and or accompanying regulations, such as codes of practice or codes of ethics; where appropriate, a brief literature review and or historical perspective on the issue; an outline of the stakeholders involved and affected by the issue; the utility or fairness of attempts to deal with the issue; its implications for social practice, policy, education, and research, and suggested ways in which it might be dealt with.

**2.6 Potential impact**
The likely impact on the journal’s readership should be assessed bearing in mind the scholarly debate and theoretical issues involved. To what extent might the ideas presented contribute to positive change to contemporary practice?

**2.7 Quality**
Reviewers perform an essential role in maintaining the quality of journal publications. Minimally authors are required to meet the standards as set out in the journal guidelines. Papers should be grammatically sound, free from spelling and typographical errors, with an orderly, logical structure, conceptual clarity, sound argument, and economy of expression or conciseness. Comments about grammar, spelling, style, and formatting
should be entered on a separate page from the main review with a clear indication that attention to these matters is required.

3. **Helpful hints**
   When completing a review,
   - Be thorough.
   - Check the entire paper, including the reference list, in terms of these guidelines.
   - Be as constructive in your feedback as possible.
   - Provide suggestions as to how the paper might be improved, where appropriate.
   - Recommend rejection if the paper does not, in your opinion, meet scholarly standards.
   - Take your time but do not spend more than eight hours (one working day) on the review; if more work than this is required, the paper should be rejected.
   - Return the review within one month of receiving it.
   - Suggest literature or relevant resources the author has overlooked.
   - Provide a correction list for grammar and spelling, and missing references.
   - Ensure that a range of sources has been consulted and the paper does not draw too heavily from one or two sources.
   - Be precise and clear in your feedback, while remaining polite and respectful.
   - The tone of the review should be objective and balanced and highlight the strengths or positives of the work wherever possible.