

Guidelines for Reviewers

The following commentary provides suggestions for *RSWP* reviewers in the preparation of their written comments concerning manuscripts submitted to the journal. However, reviewers are expected to use their own professional judgement in preparing their comments and are not required to adhere to these suggestions.

The Tone of the Review

The purpose of the peer review system employed by *RESEARCH ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE* is to encourage authors to continue their research as well as to select manuscripts for publication. Therefore it is important that reviewers' comments convey respect for an author's research efforts and include suggestions for improving that research, as well as detailed reasons for suggested revisions or the recommendation that the manuscript be rejected. The tone of a review is as important as the quality of the suggestions given for improving the research. Below are some suggestions of format and wording that may help assure that the tone of a review is not harsh.

The first sentence or paragraph of your review is very important. It should summarize the manuscript and express appreciation for either the research area, the efforts of the author, the difficulties of working in that area, or an aspect of the manuscript that the reviewer liked. In subsequent sentences the recommendations to the Editor (accept with or without revision, reject, etc.) can be conveyed.

Try to minimize use of words that convey a very negative impression (e.g., irrelevant, inadequate, poor, sloppy).

Avoid sarcastic or accusatory comments such as, 'Is this finding even worth mentioning?'

Conditionals help soften the tone of a review, e.g., could, would, should, might—in short, words that suggest rather than command.

Below are four examples that contain essentially the same information, but do so in differing tones:

- 1a Most of the introduction is irrelevant to the rest of the manuscript.
- 1b The introduction could have been more directly related to the aims of the study.
- 2a It would be impossible for anyone to replicate the procedures.
- 2b A more adequate description of the procedures would be necessary for replication.
- 3a The use of the term "co-operative clients" is very deceiving.
- 3b A more accurate definition of the term "co-operative parents" is necessary to avoid

confusion.

- 4a Why didn't you assess the reliability of your measures?
- 4b It is necessary to report the reliability of your measures in order to allow one to judge the impact of your findings.

Guidelines for Evaluating Outcome Studies

Introduction: The introduction should explain the relationship and importance of the study to the field of practice-research, setting the work in the context of the current empirically-based literature from social work and related disciplines. The introduction should conclude with a clear statement of the research questions/hypotheses being addressed, articulated in a testable manner.

Clients: The methods by which clients were obtained for the study should be clearly described, along with a description of their salient characteristics. Usually this will involve reporting the age, gender, race, and other pertinent features (e.g., diagnosis) of the client(s). Whenever means are used to describe clients, each mean should be accompanied by the appropriate N and standard deviation. Authors should include statements describing how they obtained informed consent from clients, protected their identity, and insured against other risks possibly associated with the study. If it appears that review and approval by a formal Institutional Review Board was appropriate (e.g., the study was authored by a faculty member operating under university auspices), a brief statement noting that this was obtained should be included. However, some forms of practice evaluation may not fall under the purview of IRBs. For example, certain non-experimental evaluations of routine social work practices, single-subject investigations, chart-review studies, secondary analyses of data, policy analyses, etc., may be better construed as 'evaluation' or as 'quality assurance' studies, rather than as conventional 'research' investigations. Some latitude is permitted here, so use your best judgement in dealing with this 'gray area' (evaluation studies on practice).

Procedure: The procedures/intervention program should be described in sufficient detail to allow the reader with some background in this area to replicate the methods. A valid alternative in the case of lengthy narratives is for the author(s) to refer the reader to a publicly available treatment manual/protocol.

Measures: Particular attention should be given to the development of clear and operational descriptions of the outcome measure(s). Self-report/questionnaire dependent variables should have some mention made of their reliability and validity. Behavioral measures should be accompanied by a description of how interrater agreement coefficients were assessed and what these agreement levels were. The description of the dependent variables should allow the informed reader to similarly assess these measures in a reliable manner.

Design: This section should include a clear description of the research design(s) employed. It is recognized that classical experiments may only rarely be conducted in practice settings. However, the design used must be adequate to answer the research question(s)/hypotheses addressed in the

introduction. Innovative social work interventions/programs, or reports of established interventions applied to new clients or systems, may require designs of less internal validity than those of previously well-researched methods of practice. In all cases, social importance and innovation must be weighed against the level of certainty of demonstration reached. Practice research may involve ethical and legal issues to which reviewers should be alert and which should be fully discussed by the author.

Results: When inferential statistics are employed, use of the appropriate test is essential. Exact probability levels may provide more information than less precise reporting practices (e.g., $p < .05$). Reporting the proportions of variance explained by each inferential test, or effect sizes, helps to prevent undue emphasis being placed upon statistically significant but meaningless differences (see page 24-25 of the 5th edition of the APA manual). Please insist on this, whenever appropriate. Conventional alpha levels should be used in reporting statistically significant results. When multiple tests are resorted to, the alpha level should be appropriately adjusted to take into account the numbers of these tests.

The presentation of results should be as descriptive and as free from unwarranted interpretation as possible. Figure captions and labels should be descriptive rather than interpretative. Figures should be self-contained with little reliance on the text for their understanding. The reviewer should always check to see that the presentation of the results in the text corresponds with the results portrayed in the figures; discrepancies should be brought to the authors' attention. The conclusions should be based firmly on the results obtained.

Discussion: The discussion section should integrate and interpret the results and relate them to previous research. The author may be allowed some freedom to develop generalizations, but the reviewer may wish to warn the author about statements which appear to go well beyond that which is warranted by the data or which may become embarrassing in the future. The discussion section should contain some clear applications to social work practice which may be of use to social workers, not simply tentative implications.

The Discussion section is where the author should discuss the various threats to internal validity which may bear on their study, rival hypotheses which could explain their results, and a limited number of suggestions to improve future studies in this area.

Overall Importance: Will a reader of ***RESEARCH ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE*** learn something helpful about helping clients/agencies in dealing with a socially important problem?

Guidelines for Reviewing Evaluations of Outcome Measures

RSWP welcomes well-crafted, empirically-based reports on the design, development and validation of outcome measures useful in research on practice. When appropriate, it is preferable that such studies employ samples of real life clients, as opposed to college students (i.e., the sample should reflect the intended audience). Reliability may be reported in terms of internal consistency, test-

retest, split-half, and so forth. Validity may be reported in terms of concurrent, predictive, discriminative, and factor structure. Recommendations should be conservative and not go beyond the data. For example, do not recommend a newly developed instrument for use in practice if only its reliability has been demonstrated, not its validity.

Guidelines for Evaluating Literature Reviews

RSWP welcomes well-crafted empirically-based reviews of the literature. Such manuscripts should present either the evidence regarding a particular psychosocial intervention or various interventions for a particular psychosocial problem. Review articles should have a clear social work focus, and cite the relevant social work literature, if any exists. Articles which present a particular viewpoint in a proactive manner in the absence of derogatory commentary regarding other perspectives are more desirable than those characterized by the latter. Manuscripts of this type should provide the RSWP reader with clear and compelling applications to practice, not untested implications.

Note:

Please conclude your review with a **clear recommendation** to Accept as Is, to Reject, or for the author to Revise and Resubmit. If you have serious doubts about the overall quality of the project, you should recommend REJECT. *RSWP* should only accept for publication work of genuinely high quality.

[Portions of the above guidelines were adapted from those employed by the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. The Editor gratefully acknowledges the helpfulness of E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., Past-Editor of JABA, for permission to make use of that journal's guidelines].

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