

Big R (versus little r) Reviewers: The Anonymous Coauthor

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Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.

Confucianism. Mencius VII.A.4

One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.

African Traditional Religions,
Yoruba Proverb (Nigeria)¹

R-E-S-P-E-C-T: an act of giving particular attention (Merriam Webster—<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>); Willingness to show consideration or appreciation (<http://dictionary.reference.com/search>).

I was one of those reviewers who early in my career as a reviewer made some people cry. At a minimum, I probably upset many authors, made some angry, some hurt, or at least dejected. Sure, we can all feel that way at times after receiving a review; however, my reviews likely guaranteed these responses. At the time, I thought I was a pretty good reviewer; I was tough. I pushed authors to the highest hurdles of rigor! My reviews, in my mind, reflected my educational upbringing—to be critical. After all, isn't that what reviewing is all about? Wouldn't we want to ensure that every flaw is identified and corrected before research is published? As a graduate student, I was well trained to criticize research studies. Rip it apart! This perspective carried over into the reviews I performed in the early days of my career.

Critical evaluation of research is, of course, part of the review process; however, if I look back at some of the reviews that I wrote in my early days, they were not terribly constructive and often came across as if I took a personal affront to any flaws in the research. While I never came right out and said it, the tone of my comments

essentially had a “how dare you forget to report your reliabilities” or “I can't believe you were so incompetent as to use this analysis technique” tone. Although my reviews may have correctly identified some deficiencies in an article, they were far from helpful and more likely acted to discourage authors from pursuing that particular publication outlet. I was what I will refer to here as a “little r” reviewer.

A couple of years into my career, one of my colleagues shared with me his thoughts on the review process.² He described how he viewed his role as a reviewer as akin to a coauthor on the article. The reviewer's goal as an “anonymous” coauthor was not just to critique the article but also to make every effort to get the article into a publishable form. A good reviewer would treat the article as if it were his or her own. The resulting advice: be the kind of coauthor (although an anonymous one) that you yourself would love to work with. Yes, be critical, but also be constructive and considerate.

In one of my recent Ph.D. seminars, I asked the students, “What constitutes a good review?” The first response I received was “respect.” This one word—*respect*—so succinctly captures the two attributes that I just mentioned: constructive and considerate. While lists of suggestions on how to be a “good” reviewer abound (for examples in various journals, see Lee 1995; Summers 2001; Zmud 1998), these two attributes capture the essence of what I strive for as a reviewer and what I so fully appreciate in the reviews I receive for my own work. These two attributes—constructive and considerate—embody the construct of respect; a reviewer whose reviews reflect these attributes, I will label a “big R” reviewer.

So what exactly then are “little r” and “big R” reviewers? Simply put, a “big R” reviewer is one whose reviews are high on both C dimensions (constructive and considerate). A “little r” reviewer is low on both of these dimensions. “Little r” reviewers may identify flaws in the research but do not distinguish between fatal and correctable flaws and offer no recommendations on how to deal with these (and thus are low on the constructive

dimension); they also show very little consideration or compassion in how they communicate their comments to the authors (low on the consideration dimension). Early in my career, I epitomized a “little r” reviewer.

“Big R” reviewers are those who consider themselves anonymous coauthors; they go “the extra mile” in assisting the authors to produce high-quality, rigorous research. They not only identify weaknesses in the research but make specific, actionable recommendations on how to address them. They are considerate and compassionate in their comments. In short, they show respect for the authors and their work.

What does doing a “big R” review entail? To be honest, it entails a lot of hard work! Even the most basic review takes a great deal of time and effort. However, thankfully, the more reviews you do, the more you realize that many of the concerns you identify are common across articles. A number of journal editors and seasoned reviewers have even listed these common concerns in an effort to assist authors (e.g., Stewart 2002; Summers 2001; Varadarajan 1996). Thus, reviewers become a bit more proficient with each review they perform. Nonetheless, taking a review further, beyond simply identifying flaws, is demanding. It requires generating very specific recommendations on how to address each concern. Of course, this means differentiating between flaws that are fatal and those that realistically can be dealt with in a revision. It can mean such things as coming up with specific suggestions for a stronger positioning or a “repackaging” of the introduction so that it more clearly spells out the research questions and contributions. It may mean referring authors to other research studies. It may mean proposing alternative explanations, suggesting possible mediating or moderating relationships to test, rewording hypotheses, or specific changes to the analysis. These suggestions must be detailed enough to be actionable. They are suggestions that you yourself would incorporate if you were one of the authors—thus, the analogy of the anonymous coauthor. The goal is to assist the authors to develop a strong, rigorous, and relevant article. There is no simple formula; if you want the review to be constructive, it takes a lot of time and effort!

While I always attempt to be a “big R” reviewer, I have to admit that I sometimes find myself writing a “little r review.” This typically happens when the article I am reviewing is not really mature enough to be in the review process. Sometimes the conceptual or empirical development is so weak or so inadequately described that it is hard to know even what to recommend to the authors. Often, however, the “readability” of the article is the catalyst for sending me into a “little r” state. I’m sure there are many reviewers who have read through a complete article and still wonder what the article was about. Thus, not only do I find it hard to be constructive, but also out of frustration, I

become inconsiderate in my comments. I become a “little r” reviewer. (Note that even those who strive to be “big R” reviewers do not want to feel they are doing more work on the article than the original authors. This also implies that mutual respect is required; the authors should strive to be, in essence, “big R” authors—they must respect the review process and not take advantage of the generosity and hard work of the reviewers.) I have learned that when I am asked to review these less-than-mature papers, it is best if I prepare my comments to the authors and put the review aside for a couple of days. Then, I go back and revise my review to couch my comments in a more considerate, and it is hoped, more positive tone. Thus, while my ability to provide constructive comments is constrained by qualities of the article itself, I still strive to deliver on the other important attribute of a “big R” review—consideration.

Is it rewarding to be a “big R” reviewer? After all, you put a lot of time and effort into making a research article a strong journal article, yet your name never appears on the article itself. I would have to argue that it is indeed rewarding. Certainly as an academic community, we all benefit; the quality of work published is strengthened by the thoughtful and constructive comments of reviewers. I would also argue that there are personal benefits in striving to be a “big R” reviewer. The quality of one’s own research cannot help but benefit. It makes you a better researcher and writer. Since “practice makes perfect,” obviously the more you engage in “big R” activities (e.g., generating specific actionable suggestions for the weaknesses you identify), the better you become at them. I also find that I learn a great deal when I review; I have often been prompted to read new articles in my efforts to provide better feedback. Of course, I have also been personally blessed with reviews on my own articles from “big R” reviewers. Their effort and expertise have been invaluable.

Is what I am suggesting new? While the labels of “little r” and “big R” reviewers may be new, the ideas are not. However, sometimes there are things that just need to be highlighted. If this article makes a difference to even a few graduate students or junior faculty members, it will have served its purpose.

I am grateful to my colleagues for sharing such wonderful advice and hopefully making me a better scholar, colleague, and member of the academic community. My advice to others would be similar—strive to be a “big R” reviewer. Be respectful: be constructive yet be considerate. Endeavor to be an anonymous coauthor.

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NOTES

1. Both quotes are taken from *The Golden Rule* (<http://www.fragrantdemon.co.uk/golden.html>).
2. The colleague who shared this advice was Steve Arnold; when I told Steve how much his comment influenced me, he noted that he had received this advice from Alice Tybout.

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