From the editor

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The peer review process of publishing academic research means that articles submitted for publication are reviewed by scholars knowledgeable about the topic of the paper—that is, by one's peers. If the reviewers believe the article meets a specified standard of scholarly rigor and is interesting, important and innovative, and if the editor agrees, then the article is accepted for publication.

Soliciting reviewers is a difficult task. It takes a lot of time to identify potential reviewers and to extend the review invitation. In 2014, I made 809 invitations to scholars to review papers submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values*. Two-thirds of those who were invited agreed to review and most provided excellent reports, which helped me make the difficult decision of accepting or rejecting papers for publication. Fully one-third of invited reviewers declined to review. Almost half of those who declined gave no reason for their unwillingness or inability to review the paper. Professionally, it is inappropriate to decline a review without giving a reason.

In 1978, Professor Ellen Langer, of Harvard University, published a study with her colleagues in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (see Langer et al. 1978). In the experiment, a person approached adults waiting in a line to make photocopies and asked, “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine?” Not surprisingly, the request to cut in front of others waiting to use the same machine was frequently declined—in this case, 40 % of the time. When a meaningful reason was

given for the request, however, as in “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I’m in a rush?” the number of persons refusing the request to cut in line declined to only 6 %. Interestingly, when a trivial reason was given for the request, as in “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine, because I have to make copies?” the rate of refusal was almost identical to the case when a meaningful reason was given. This is interesting, because the reason given in the latter case was the same reason that others had for standing in the line. In other words, all that mattered for those waiting in line was that a reason be given for the request that created a burden for them—“even if the reason conveyed no information” (p. 638). Simply stated, people appreciate a reason, even if it is a trivial one.

While there could be many explanations for why the offer of a reason produces a more cooperative response in people than when no reason is given, one is that it shows a modicum of respect for those on whom a burden is placed. It tells the responder that the requester sees him or her as an equal. Making a request without giving a reason is what masters do to servants, officers do to conscripted soldiers, and kings do to subjects.

My point here is that while it is good for an editor to offer a reason for why a person is being asked to review a paper (“because you are an expert and I need your help”), it is also requisite for a person declining a review invitation to give a reason for doing so. Sometimes invited reviewers give trivial reasons, as in “I am too busy now.” I can accept that. That is better than offering no reason at all. Of course, I particularly appreciate reasons that include a suggestion for an alternative reviewer. Nonetheless, the offer of a reason shows a degree of respect for the editor and the work he or she does. Not offering a reason could make an editor think that the invited reviewer sees himself

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or herself as above or more important than the editor. That is not a signal that scholars want to send to editors who may, at some future time, be tasked with evaluating their paper for publication.

This issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* contains the following articles and a unique collection of papers with a focus on China. Noack and Pouw document the simplification of diets among smallholder farmers in Kenya and argue that this is an important cause of nutritional insecurity. Di Masso and Zografos use Q methodology to identify five different types of discourses or visions of people participating in food sovereignty movements in Catalonia, Spain. Schewe and Stuart study how automatic milking systems are used in the US, Netherlands and Denmark and link variations in use to differences in farmer circumstances and characteristics. Kato and McKinney assess the relative importance of constraints affecting the ability of low income, minority communities to participate in alternative food networks. Classens explains the importance of not overlooking nature and the relationship between nature and society in scholarship on urban gardens. Drake and Lawson survey US and Canadian community garden organizations to identify similarities and challenges relating to funding, participation, land, and materials. McGee examines the correlation between acres of organic farmland and total greenhouse gas emissions in the US Cook et al. examine how farmer perceptions about

urban agriculture affect their livelihoods in a case study from Delhi, India. Cleveland, Carruth, and Mazaroli propose alternative ways of conceptualizing local food.

Although not planned as an organized symposium, four papers independently submitted and accepted for publication focus on China. Therefore, I decided to group them together. Si, Schumilas and Scott articulate a typology of alternative food systems (AFNs) and use the typology to describe different AFN initiatives in China. Qi, Zhong and Liu propose and demonstrate a methodology for constructing a relatively objective measure of food insecurity. Schneider examines different ways that peasant farmers are depicted in contemporary Chinese political discourse. Burnham, Ma and Zhu study how knowledge about and strategies relating to water saving irrigation affect the livelihoods and farm management practices of smallholder farmers in China.

The usual collection of book reviews and list of books received end this issue of the journal.

Reference

- Langer, E., A. Blank, and B. Chanowitz. 1978. The mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action: the role of 'placebic' information in interpersonal interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36(6): 635–642.