Reviewing as Dialogical Development of Ideas

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Abstract

The third year of *Human Arenas* presents number of developmental tasks. After 2 years of experimentation, *Human Arenas* is becoming an acknowledged interdisciplinary space for intellectual bravery. We discuss peer-reviewing as one of the fundamental parts of intellectual activity. Too often, scholars dismiss this task as a time-consuming and useless activity that has no gain in academic competition. We claim that the peer-review process may be considered a developmental intellectual arena for both the reviewer and the reviewed.

Keywords Epistemic altruism · Peer-reviewing · Intellectual curiosity

Introduction

Is altruism a relevant value in academic work? This sounds strange a question, but it makes sense in a world where doing research, teaching, supervising, receiving funds, and even participating to the life of communities seems to be led only by competitive motives. Someone, at a certain point in recent history, uncritically adopted the neo-liberalist *vulgata* that competition is the solution for any actual and possible malfunction in academia (Carson, Bartneck & Voges, 2013; Fox, 1992). For controversial it may be, the most part of scholars have actively (or passively) accepted the philosophy of publish or perish, or the idea that some distant divinity called “panel” should grant you the *graal* of funding, making you the *chosen one*. The consequences of this ideology are fateful: our fellow scholars become competitors and our time becomes precious. We become less and less available to spend it in unproductive discussions just for the sake of entertaining new ideas, reading, or writing something that is outside the limited horizon of our narrow field. Moreover (here comes the knot of our

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discourse), scholars have dismissed the work of peer-reviewing as a waste of time, unless it is somehow monetized or publicly acknowledged in function of career advancements (Smith, 2016). Academic work is quantified, and we are no longer available to anything that shall not give us “hours”: the new money by which we can buy our “freedom,” mainly from teaching duties. Yet science is a collective enterprise, driven by curiosity, open mindedness, mental flexibility, passion for knowledge, rigor, and commitment to human affairs and justice. These are virtues that cannot be monetized but losing the very meaning of doing science (Singh, 2019). So, what is the sense of talking about curiosity and altruism in academia nowadays?

Challenges

Human Arenas is on the onset of its third year of existence. So far, the development of the journal has been continuous against all odds. In 2019, we had 54 submissions and 36 published articles with a total of 34,335 article downloads. A new associate editor, Paul Rhodes from Sydney University, has widen the geographical representativeness of the universe of social and human sciences that our journal aims at making visible. In the year 2020, *Human Arenas* will face several new challenges. After 2 years of experimentation volumes, with free access, we will now enter the regular Springer access policy, including the Open Access options. At the same time, we have started the indexing process on Scopus that will be hopefully concluded by the end of the year. In view of these big changes, we have decided to begin volume 3 with an issue representing the philosophy of the journal for 2020, since its table of contents. We open with a special section about altruism as a value in contemporary societies, based on the work of Piritim Sorokin (Mangone & Dolgov, 2020), and we close with the acknowledgments to the reviewers of 2019. The special section presents an interesting exchange between psychology and sociology. Nichols (2020) provides an intriguing connection between Sorokin’s scientific project of *integralist* social science and the forms of knowledge developed by artistic activity. Both epistemic modes point at understanding the deep nature of human experience and promote positive values of compassion, altruism, companionships, and love, although with different modalities. Cimagalli (2020) instead discusses altruism as a legitimate object of investigation for sociology. The difficulty arises from the uncertain nature of altruism: is it a personal trait or a form of collective activity. In one of the forgotten theories of altruism, Moscovici (2000) tried to articulate the collective/individual dimension of altruism along a continuum, distinguishing between participative, normative, and egoistic altruism. So, altruism is not just a virtue of moral superiority, but is a complex phenomenon that—like the related emotion of gratitude (Luccarelli, 2019)—creates a system of interdependency between people and between the individual and the collective. Finally, Yoshino (2020) introduces a very interesting link between Sorokin’s and Fromm’s conceptions of love. Yoshino (2020) shows how self-love and altruistic love are two dimensions of the self that complement each other: if one does not love herself cannot love others. Similarly, if one ignores others cannot reach a full accomplishment of the self, thus she cannot really love herself. The message emerging from Sorokin’s philosophy is that the future of science (and of humanity) is enclosed in these two meanings: science requires altruism, as the future of humanity itself (Mangone & Dolgov, 2020), and the intellectual exchange is an example of epistemic altruism.

The issue is completed by four articles that represent *Human Arenas*’ effort to cover the diversity of world thinking. Sarpong (2020) discusses the complex context of migration in

South Africa, overcoming common sense prejudices and discussing how migrants are a propulsive force in the economy of a country, because of their pursuing positive adaptations in their endeavors. Lykkeskov et al. (2020) propose a holistic view of human development starting from the case of psychological support systems for athletes. da Silva & Lyra (2020) present a case study of Brazilian students involved in learning situation about chemical substance. They show the role of reconstructive memory in the meaning making of scientific concepts. Finally, Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh (2020) present a fascinating exploration of Islamic epistemology by studying how a traditional *hadith*, that is a secondary source after Holy Quran concerning psychological and anthropological aspects of life, is able to describe the actual psychological experience of university students.

Altruism and Peer-Reviewing: an Example from the History of Psychology

The 5th of January 1994, Bruner (1994a) wrote a letter to his friend and former student Michael Cole. In this letter, Bruner asks Cole to read comment one of his draft manuscripts. What is noteworthy in this piece of correspondence between two eminent scholars is that within the academic relationship, there is an intense intellectual exchange. Bruner encourages Cole to engage in a frank discussion to “elucidate further” some ideas. Bruner is not just asking for a feedback or reactions. He is first of all acknowledging the role of Cole’s ideas in his own development. Then, he asks for a feedback, which is at the same time a dialog, a shared enterprise to “push tings a little further.” Two weeks later, on January 19, Bruner writes a second letter to Michael Cole (Bruner 1994b), in response to a previous one, in which Cole asks about Bruner’s thought on the educational projects going on in Africa at that time. What is remarkable in Bruner’s answer is that he does not just provide feedback, but makes visible the temporal development of his own thought and line of argumentation. Bruner describes how he progressively realized that “Piagetian ideal” applied to educational development projects in Africa was “an orderly Swiss fantasy rather than a desirable African possibility,” and he turned towards “Luria, Vygotsky, Mike Cole, et al.” The letter ends with an honest comments about Bruner’s being “little surprised at how this letter has developed.”

We think that these are two great examples of a peer-review process, which was not understood as cut-off evaluation of a product, rather as a cooperative process of dialogical development of ideas. This was of course possible in the form of letter exchange. The standardized and anonymous review forms adopted by the most part of the journals reduce the process to a grading along pre-set dimensions. The reviewer is not encouraged, and not willing because of the “hours” system, to engage in an intellectual dialog with the author and to make visible her own thought processes. The other meaningful aspect of the correspondence is the real peer relationship between the two, who engage in a dialectic despite the former teacher-student relationship. We consider this as the original form of peer-review before all the standardized processes, the Publons, etc. Why the review process should not make visible the elaboration of the positions? Systems like Publons make visible only the product, that is the acknowledgement that a scholar performed a review, regardless of whether this has produced the death of the manuscript or its development. In exchange of some intellectual labor, a public reward is granted, in order to push the academics to accomplish such “useless” and unappreciative task. The result is that every journal, including *Human Arenas*, meets increasing difficulties in having willful reviewers. How can we re-think the whole process in such a way that an unwanted *corvée* becomes again an opportunity for intellectual development?

How Reviewing Can Be an Opportunity

The review process may be considered a developmental intellectual arena for both the reviewer and the reviewed. Usually, the reviewer is chosen on the basis of her expertise. This implies some recognition of her knowledge in a given field and at the same time can be a double-edged sword. It generates an implicit (peer) power asymmetry, that can cultivate the reviewer's own narcissism (already activated by the invitation itself). The second risk is to create a short circuit in which the reviewer only reads what is already in her horizon. She is rarely challenged intellectually. It is up to the reviewer whether to open a dialog with the new idea, rather than simply to visa or to utter a judgment of "non-fitness" with the field. The acknowledged expertise of the reviewer may lead to a risk of *ventriloquism*. The reviewer may require that the author barely incorporates her own voice into the manuscript. For these reasons, even if apparently, the journal peer-review relationship is a temporary event, not based on an affective link; in reality, there is a subtle psychological play in course. On the contrary, the review process is an opportunity to reflect upon her own system of knowledge from a different angle. A constructive review process requires an effort to distance from the familiar framework of analysis and create the intellectual space to welcome the idea of the other. The intellectual work is a collective enterprise and we should seriously revise the notion of peer-review and the power game at stake.

Both author and reviewer are peer epistemic subjects involved in an action of knowledge building. This is why the peer-reviewing should become essential part of the young researchers' training, since the doctorate and before. An example of how peer-reviewing is used as a form of intellectual development of students is visible in the institutionalized practice of several graduate programs in Brazil. During the official qualification exams, that occur twice in the curriculum, each student is examined by two persons: a professor and another student, who has to provide a detailed peer-review of the candidate research. The evaluation of the student has the same value for the final grading. In this way, students learn from the very first stage of the research training how to perform critical, detailed, and propositive peer-reviews. The qualification is a public official event. So, this practice is very important in empowering the students, who feel committed and legitimated to express their views in an open dialog with both the authors and the senior scholars. Peer-reviewing should be integrated in academic curricula as a powerful tool for developing critical reflection, gratuitous curiosity, and intellectual commitment. We teach our students academic writing, but we do not teach them epistemic altruism. In this intellectual partnership, the reviewer is not a pruner, but a planter, not a breeder, but a cultivator (Tateo & Marsico, 2019).

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