

## Letter from Germany

## What's New?

Jürgen Hargens

**If you are a very attentive reader, you'll immediately ask yourself, 'Hey, is he writing the same letter as last time?'** Good question, and my answer is a definite 'No!'

I was thinking about how come we can read in our journals some kinds of information ('news of difference', as Bateson put it) but not other kinds? This got me thinking about which papers usually get into journals. I thought back to my time as an editor of a German professional journal [*Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie*]. I thought about how hard I had to work to get the pages filled. It was ages ago, I know, but something in this experience, I think, is still relevant for all of us now.

Basically — from Meyn point of view — there might be two different kinds of potential authors: the ones who write and do or don't get published, and the others, who don't write at all. Thus, as an editor or as a journal reader, *I will read only stories about writers*. What about all the other people who do great work — but no one ever hears from/about them?

I vividly remember a meeting of editors of professional journals, where someone made the statement that the quality of a professional journal has to be high and one way of maintaining this is the so-called 'peer reviewing process'. Today I see that issue quite differently. For a constructionist, one basic, innocently-phrased question raises its head: 'What do you mean by quality?'

That's the point: quality, as I see it, is something socially agreed upon — it has no independent existence. And peer-reviewing — seen from this perspective — could not be anything else than the reviewer's check on how well the author measures up to the agreed upon definition of quality. Nothing more and nothing less — at least from Meyn point of view.

'And — that's all?' you may ask. 'Yes' I would answer, 'that's all'. And I think there might be some kind of Catch-22 involved. If we accept my definition of quality as something socially agreed upon, it means we will only read the same stuff over and over again, with slight variations — because only if the paper fulfils the agreed upon requirements will it be published. A closed circuit... That's neither good nor bad — it is just the way things are, and necessarily so: we need social confirmation and one way to become confirmed is by consensus. It's basic to our nature as social

beings. And that's another social construction, I believe — our belief that we are dependent upon social confirmation. And to go one step further, that's why information just informs: it puts something said or done in its *consensually* 'correct' form. It's 'in-talk'.

I am writing about all this because I have been thinking about what I usually prefer to read — which is stories. They don't have to fall into certain standardised categories (referring to all the stuff that has been said before again and again) — I prefer stories that are told in a manner which keeps my curiosity alive.

This brings me to another story — which news *doesn't* get through? Doug Flemons wrote a book on this issue, *Completing Distinctions*. If I separate what I can read from what I cannot read because it is not printed, I can only do so by drawing a distinction: all that I *cannot* read 'is' also there. So what is missing? I am sure you've already got the point — because this distinction is also another agreed upon distinction and each distinction we make will bring forth a whole world.

So I am wondering about the goals we want to achieve and how we do so. I think, as social constructionists, we always take as a given the importance of social influence but it is usually not foregrounded in a professional journal. The debate about how we live together and how this influences our work and thinking and seeing is mostly omitted.

That omission is all too often reflected in the therapeutic categories we employ. Let me give you a very brief example: racism, oppression, power, and domination. I know — each single term has to be seen as yet another social construction. Think about the difference between working as a therapist in Germany and in Australia, in a private practice and in jail. Think about working in Afghanistan or in Palestine — or in Israel. How would that shape our practice? How come we export many of our socially (and culturally) constructed ideas into other



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cultures? My answer is — because we control most of the media that convey news. Lynn Hoffman once wrote about the ‘colonialism’ of the helping professions and Bateson wrote about humility (which I sometimes translate into ‘being humble’).

That’s where my thinking brought me. It’s not new, is it? But then, there is nothing new under the sun, is there?

## Why *Systema* Chooses not to Referee: Agreeing with Jürgen Hargens

Wolfgang Loth


The Weinheim Institute for Family Therapy has been publishing *Systema* since 1987 (16 years). At *Systema* we have five managing editors, with three of us being responsible for an issue in turn, but all of us prepared to be contacted by authors. No shared office, doing our jobs at home, mailing, phoning, meeting sometimes. Some kind of materialisation of virtual realities it seems... But it’s fun and we enjoy our cooperation very much.

There is no blind refereeing process: we discuss our questions and suggestions with authors and with the other editors. This approach makes us very attractive for *young* authors writing for the first time, who are mostly practitioners describing their clinical experience. As you can imagine the ‘established’, more ‘scientific’ journals don’t treat us as serious rivals. But we regularly get feedback from people in the field, praising our fresh style, our relevance for everyday practice and so on. And, in contrast to the ‘refereed journals’ here, we are taking care of our authors, giving feedback to them as early as possible, encouraging them, giving them the opportunity to try themselves out. ‘Semiprofessional’, I’d call our journal, but if the alternative for an unknown author is to wait half a year or so before he/she gets an answer from ‘professional’ journals, the ‘semi’ might be an attractive alternative (it may be different with known authors: some ‘peers’ are more equal than others, and I always asked myself who assesses the articles written by editors themselves!)

Our aim is therefore to be helpful to authors. For me, that is a very important goal, but it’s not always easy. I know from my own experience the inner struggles involved when writing down ideas that seem to be more complex than the words I’m able to use. Having managed to find a form for those ideas, my initial reaction, in the first years of my ‘career’ as an author was to curse and mess around with the paper when some assessor wouldn’t agree to my ideas!

Later on, I would write up to ten revisions of some papers, getting them finally into a form I was proud of. In recent years, I have been able to deal with the experience of assessment more calmly, but it still seems to be some kind of

### References

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challenge. Knowing that makes it easier for me to offer authors alternative ideas about their paper. Easier because I know that they could benefit from those ideas, provided they can manage to feel respected by me! That’s the crucial point: respect. However, I too need respect! And respecting authors isn’t the same as printing everything they write. Sometimes it’s more respectful to make clear to an author that in my opinion she or he has not yet reached the level of competence I know that this particular author is capable of, based

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“And respecting authors isn’t the same as printing everything they write.”

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on my past experience of that author. I myself got such feedback from an anonymous assessor concerning a paper I’d written for a major journal here in Germany. I had waited for an answer for about six months. Such a time of waiting is always a hard time for me. But I got an assessment I really could work with. Moreover I know only a handful of assessors in Germany who will give such a precise and constructive feedback. So I like to think I knew who that assessor was, talked about it to the editors’ assistant, but asked her not to tell me the assessor’s name! It’s more fun in this case to keep the secret. That’s possible, you see. But mostly peer reviewers’ assessments seem to be ungenerous, all-knowing, selfish, really demotivating.

Maybe there’s some ‘rivalry’ going on when submitted papers are too close to interests of assessors themselves?

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Another unfortunate scenario — maybe worse — is where assessors are unacquainted with the author's ideas, and have no intention of getting inspired by ideas as yet unfamiliar to them. I think assessors should be honest enough not to assess when they are not equipped to give a paper proper consideration, for whatever cause.

We could foreground the question, 'What is assessing actually for?' Should the assessors highlight the author's limited capability, given that everybody has to deal with limitations? Should assessors safeguard the editors/the journal from plagiarism or faking of evidence? (This would be a serious consideration when some medication had been tested, and the authors were clearly allied with manufacturers' interests — or might be!) Or should assessors serve as some kind of reflecting team for and with authors (preparing them for the fact that people might react negatively to their writings — it happens

sometimes doesn't it?) Or should assessors help the authors to take their ideas and material as far as it can go, offering honest feedback as some kind of 'coach'? And there are yet other possibilities.

I think it's important to distinguish between assessing as an *ontic* phenomenon (making the truth more true...), or an *epistemic* one (serving as some kind of reflecting team). The first case seems to embody the usual 'scientific' misunderstanding. The second case opens space even for assessors' biases. Why not, when all participants 'know' they are weaving some kind of virtual network? On the other hand: what about authors' motivation to write? Sometimes it's the spur to produce something 'in-dividual' (unable to be divided, unique). And that brings us back to the issue Jürgen raised, of whether refereed journals may inadvertently 'screen out' authors and ideas which fall outside the 'socially agreed upon' notions of what is valuable — and true. ©

## To Referee or not to Referee

Malise Arnstein

**Here I am, a modest and humble assessor, and very occasional writer with only ANZJFT experience to my name, responding to two letters from editors of journals in Germany — Jürgen Hargens, formerly editor of *Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie* and Wolfgang Loth, one of the five current Editors of *Systema*. Now that you are in the picture, I can present my free associations to their thoughts.**

It is true that only some papers get published and others not and only certain people write while others do great work and keep a low profile. However, it is also true that the written word is not the only time colleagues hear from each other. I find myself clamouring that some of us

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prefer to talk and to listen rather than to write and to read. We do have conferences, seminars, workshops, supervision, small discussion groups and most of all, corridor talk. We tell stories, anecdotes, tall tales, endlessly every day.

Yes, 'quality' is a construction, but my construction of the quality of a paper is seldom the same as that of my co-

referees for ANZJFT. Amongst my colleagues are reviewers from so many different types of theoretical and professional backgrounds. Plus, all of us who are primarily clinicians have a very hard time keeping up in a narrow area of interest. No one of us alone could claim to represent the status quo. Maybe I say this because the ANZJFT does not rely only on academics in the field when appointing assessors. Of the three or four sets of eyes that preview anything that gets published, each brings their own richness or interest and scrutiny to the task.

As Wolfgang Loth points out, the experience of being refereed is also subjective for the author. Referees can be viewed as nasty, pedantic, conservative, interfering busybodies or as hard-working, interested, encouraging, supportive, enriching resources. The generosity of my fellow assessors in providing to authors their individual mix of compliments, constructive criticism, references to recent literature, and refining of the author's arguments has often been incredibly impressive to me. Certainly some assessors are terse, judgmental, narrow and harsh. For myself, if I find I do not have the breadth of knowledge in an area, I declare it up front and endeavour to find others who can fulfil the task, to co-assess with me.



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Living in a huge country, it is often a welcome surprise to find out that another clinician spends his/her time considering similar issues and is willing to read and comment on one's thoughts. This is probably part of the Australian experience of geographical distance and professional isolation. We are not so much troubled by competitiveness of co-workers but by the lack of company. Maybe I am also speaking from my position as a private practitioner working on my own. It is not only our experience as therapists, but also as writers, as assessors, which is altered by context. It is easier here to be an interesting or interested fish in a huge pond with very few other fish!

When I write anything, I take enormous comfort from going back to some of my favourite texts and reading the 'thanks to the editor, acknowledgments' section at the front of the book. Maybe editors and referees fall into different categories for others, but they are useful in similar ways in my eyes. Most professionals in our field (or in any other for that matter) are not trained as writers. We all benefit from the care and consideration of our literary betters. Writing perhaps should have a new image as an interpersonal experience, a team effort rather than a solo enterprise.

Surely writers need careful nurturing. Their anxieties need to be soothed, their talents and ideas mirrored and discussed, their knowledge linked to that of their community without being stifled by too much emphasis on consensus.

I agree with the authors of both these letters. I like material that is fresh to read, which teaches me something

new either theoretically or clinically. I like authors who articulate something which has been sitting just under the surface of my consciousness in my clinical work. I love the 'Aha! now I have really got it' reaction, knowing that I can now apply that special 'it' again, with greater clarity. I also like to be amused, entertained. Being converted to the Australian way of being, I do like it when a sacred cow gets logically, efficiently and thoroughly debunked. I do prefer folk who attempt such brave feats to be well versed in the constructions they are challenging. Is this not the task of assessors and referees, to help them be assured of the grounding of their argument?

The *ANZJFT* seems to me to offer a good range of opportunities for written expressiveness. I can assure you that the editors past or present have not paid me for this bit of promotion of our local journal! There is a place in the Journal for authors who aspire to write a formal, academic paper (as long as they keep it as lively as possible, active, and write 'I' and 'we'). The Education Update section is the 'state of the art' section, attractive to authors who like to feel on top of and discourse on the accepted trends of the day. The Practice Notes option is for committed clinicians who know a meaty and thought provoking therapeutic story when they see one. Finally the Explorations part is for flights of fancy and daring, dazzling acrobatics for those fleet of foot and light of touch. 

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