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Researcher's Stories: Corned Beef and Karma: A Story About My Volunteering (Reluctantly) to Review for a Journal. By Irvin Schonfeld (The City College & Graduate Center of CUNY)

When incoming editor Tanya Sidawi-Ostojic asked me to write a piece for the feature Researchers' Stories, I was prompted to write about an experience I had that may encourage readers to volunteer to review papers for journals. My volunteering to be a reviewer, although in the midst of a very busy schedule, led to an unlikely collaboration. And friendships. Let me tell you the story.

In mid-December 2012, I received an email asking me to review a paper submitted to the Journal of Health Psychology. I was reluctant to take the assignment. I was already a reviewer for a number of journals, and I had never before reviewed for JHP. At the time, I was busy revising two manuscripts. And I was working on a book. The semester was ending; my desk was stacked with student papers I needed to grade. In my personal life, my wife and I were planning a New Year's Day party. It was no ordinary party. We invited 80 people to our Brooklyn apartment. In other words, I had a lot to do. I intended to say NO to the journal.

I am not one to feel guilty about either minor transgressions I may or may not have committed or interpersonal exchanges in which I may have been a tad impolite because I am a tad argumentative. I, however, did feel a small—microscopic is a better word—twinge of self-reproach as I sat at my PC, composing an email to politely turn down JHP's request to review the manuscript. An old refrain ran around in my head like the electronic news ticker that runs continuously around the building at Number One Times Square. The old refrain went something like "if no one volunteers to review manuscripts, science would stop."

I peeked at the manuscript's abstract. I found that the subject of the paper was moderately interesting—at least to me. It concerned the symptom profiles of two clinical samples, a burned out sample and a depressed sample, and a group of well controls. The abstract obliged me to remember that about 20 years earlier, I published a paper on the idea that burnout overlaps depression. I think three people read the paper if I count my wife. That was all that I published on burnout-depression.

With my interest aroused, I decided to be a good citizen. I agreed to review the manuscript. I dutifully wrote a review. I liked the paper and recommended that the journal publish it. Publish it, provided a small number of revisions be made. Having fulfilled my duty, I forgot about the paper.

About three months later—it was March 2013—I received an email from a doctoral student in France. He wanted to know if I would collaborate with him on a research project. I didn't know the student, so I put the email aside to think about a polite way to say NO. I waited a day before writing him back. Then another day.... One week later, I received second email from the doctoral student. The second email contained the same request but this time there was an attachment. In order to show me his bona fides, the doctoral student attached to the email a PDF of a paper he wrote that was "in press." To my astonishment, the paper was the one I had reviewed.

I could see from the PDF that the first author, Renzo Bianchi, was the real McCoy. I said YES, I would be delighted to work with you. And like Rick Blaine and Captain Renault, that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Mostly we have worked by email. Almost every day for going on four years our emails have crisscrossed the Atlantic. Often several emails a day. And a very occasional Skype.

On one leg of a long trip to Europe during the summer of 2013, I was in Paris. Renzo visited me there. We met for dinner one Friday evening, and talked shop. Then we met again the next morning before he and his girlfriend had to catch a train back to Besançon, a city in eastern France. He was pursuing a doctorate in psychology at the Université de Franche-Comté in that city. We continued to work via email. We were making progress on research Renzo initiated on burnout-depression overlap in 5,575 French schoolteachers. Renzo, Eric Laurent, Renzo's professor at the university, and I finally published the paper in the International Journal of Stress Management at the end of 2014. That same year, Renzo and I launched a study of burnout and depression in almost 1400 U.S. teachers. We would later publish our findings in the Journal of Clinical Psychology and Personality and Individual Differences. We kept working and working.

I was going to be in Europe again, in July and August of 2015. I arranged to spend five days visiting Renzo in Besançon. He had earned his doctorate seven months earlier, and was about to start a post-doc at the Université de Neuchâtel, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. We used our time wisely, working on a human subjects application to my University's IRB. We kept tinkering with our research design while aiming to get IRB approval to launch a second burnout-depression study of U.S. teachers for the 2015-2016 school year. We got approved but we also submitted two amendments to the IRB because we twice slightly altered our plans. We ultimately recruited more than 700 teachers.

Besançon is also Renzo's home town. I got to meet his mother. I told her what a terrific son she has. That is something I don't get to do very often as a professor although I occasionally take advantage of meeting parents at college graduations to tell them about their fine, hardworking adult children. Renzo's mother took us for a walk around Besançon's UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Citadel that perhaps the greatest military engineer and architect in history, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, designed for Louis XIV. I also got to meet Eric Laurent and a group of graduate students at the Université de Franche-Comté. Eric graciously offered to drive Renzo and me to Neuchâtel, allowing the three of us to spend a day in that city. Besides visiting the city's beautiful old quarter and its Collegiate Church, we spent time at Renzo's new university. There we met Eric Mayor, Renzo's new colleague at that university. Eric Mayor joined us on a research project involving New Zealand teachers. In the spirit of forging collaborations, my CUNY Graduate Center colleague Jay Verkuilen and CUNY doctoral student Venessa Singhroy joined us on a project involving the assessment of depression in U.S. teachers.

In March 2016, Eric Laurent and his girlfriend visited New York City. I had a chance to return some of Eric's hospitality by taking them to dinner at one of the world's greatest kosher delicatessens, introducing them to pastrami and matzah ball soup. These two French people were amazed at how good the food was. I was pleased that they enjoyed the dinner as much as they had. I had figured that because they are French they had high culinary standards.

Call it karma. Call it what you will. All that I described was set in motion by my reluctantly agreeing, in the midst of the traffic jam that ties us up at the end of every year, to review a paper for a journal I never previously reviewed for. Of course, helping out is its own reward. And I'm not saying that if one of the readers of this story volunteers to review a paper, the reader will meet new people, make new friends, and publish 50 articles with those new friends. However, I think that if we help each other out and cooperate with our fellow researchers, we will be rewarded. Not every time. Maybe just in terms of discovering from a manuscript's reference section a valuable, but overlooked, source. But when we make ourselves available to review manuscripts, something good is bound to happen.



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