



Reviewer bias or competitive harmful acts by reviewers

Case study 1

Source: Committee on Publication Ethics, [Case 01/24](#)

Submission of a paper by a reviewer

An editor sent out a paper to three reviewers. One of them, who gave the paper a favourable review, enclosed a research letter on the same topic, with, in his view, a better study design. He told the editor that the author of the paper had encouraged him to submit it during a meeting they both attended. He added that he thought its inclusion would make a good complementary pair of papers.

The editor sent the research letter to the two other reviewers who had reviewed the first paper. The paper's design was criticised by all three reviewers and the paper was rejected. The peer review of the research letter is ongoing but is so far favourable.

Did the editor act correctly in having the research letter reviewed as well? Is it fair to reject the paper but accept the research letter?

Discussion/advice

- _ The reviewer had abused his position by discussing the paper with the author.
- _ He should also have declined to review the paper due to the close association with his own research.
- _ A referee might review a paper badly because it is not in their interests to see similar work published before their own.
- _ The paper should have perhaps been sent to new reviewers, although editors often select people in the same areas to review, and if it is a small area of research the choice of referees can be very limited.
- _ No harm had been done as the author of the letter openly admitted his conversation with the other author and had been encouraged to submit it.
- _ The editor was therefore right to review the letter in the usual way.

Outcome

Case closed.