Differences in Review Quality and Recommendations for Publication Between Peer Reviewers Suggested by Authors or by Editors

Sara Schroter, PhD
Leanne Tite, MSc
Andrew Hutchings, MSc
Nick Black, MD

Peer review plays a central role in determining what research is published. Peer reviewers are responsible for identifying methodological flaws and for improving the quality of manuscripts. Several factors are associated with review quality (reviewer age, being a current investigator, and postgraduate training in epidemiology or statistics).\(^1\) Many journals give authors the opportunity to suggest reviewers for their own paper, but editors’ decisions to select these reviewers vary because some are concerned that they might favor the author. However, many journals find it hard to recruit good-quality reviewers and, as such, are willing to try authors’ suggestions.

The only study to evaluate authors’ suggested reviewers found that these reviewers were less critical than those suggested by editors in terms of the scientific importance of an article and the decision to publish.\(^3\) Many journals give authors who submit papers the opportunity to suggest reviewers. Use of these reviewers varies by journal and little is known about the quality of the reviews they produce.

Context Many journals give authors who submit papers the opportunity to suggest reviewers. Use of these reviewers varies by journal and little is known about the quality of the reviews they produce.

Objective To compare author- and editor-suggested reviewers to investigate differences in review quality and recommendations for publication.

Design, Setting, and Participants Observational study of original research papers sent for external review at 10 biomedical journals. Editors were instructed to make decisions about their choice of reviewers in their usual manner. Journal administrators then requested additional reviews from the author’s list of suggestions according to a strict protocol.

Main Outcome Measure Review quality using the Review Quality Instrument and the proportion of reviewers recommending acceptance (including minor revision), revision, or rejection.

Results There were 788 reviews for 329 manuscripts. Review quality (mean difference in Review Quality Instrument score, \(-0.05\); \(P=.27\)) did not differ significantly between author- and editor-suggested reviewers. The author-suggested reviewers were more likely to recommend acceptance (odds ratio, 1.64; 95% confidence interval, 1.02–2.66) or revise (odds ratio, 2.66; 95% confidence interval, 1.43–4.97). This difference was larger in the open reviews of BMJ than among the blinded reviews of other journals for acceptance (\(P=.02\)). Where author- and editor-suggested reviewers differed in their recommendations, the final editorial decision to accept or reject a study was evenly balanced (50.9% of decisions consistent with the preferences of the author-suggested reviewers).

Conclusions Author- and editor-suggested reviewers did not differ in the quality of their reviews, but author-suggested reviewers tended to make more favorable recommendations for publication. Editors can be confident that reviewers suggested by authors will complete adequate reviews of manuscripts, but should be cautious about relying on their recommendations for publication.

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sent out for peer review were eligible for inclusion. Papers were excluded if
the author did not spontaneously sug-
gest a reviewer, as were reviews con-
ducted by journals’ statistical reviewers.

We needed 92 papers with discordant recommendations between author-
and editor-suggested reviewers to detect a 2-fold difference in the odds of recom-
dendation with 90% power at 2-sided
\( \alpha =.05 \). A total of 110 papers would be
sufficient to detect a difference in review quality of 0.4 (SD of difference, 1.2;
2-sided \( \alpha =.05 \); power, 90%) on the Review Quality Instrument (RQI).

### Procedures

Editors chose reviewers in their usual
manner. Using the journals’ elec-
tronic tracking systems, administra-
tors requested an additional review from
the top of the author’s list of sugges-
tions. If the editor had already re-
quested a review from someone on the
author’s list, the administrator did not
request an additional review. If the first
person on the list declined the review,
the next reviewer on the list was con-
tacted until a reviewer was found.

We did not seek ethics committee ap-
proval for this study because it did not
involve human participants or medi-
cal records. We did not seek consent
from individual reviewers because we
did not interfere with the usual edito-
rial process and reviewers were not re-
recruited into the study. Raters of the re-
views volunteered to participate and
were blinded to the identity and status
of the reviewer.

### Outcome Measures

#### Review Quality

Each review was rated indepen-
dently using the RQI \(^{4,5} \) (BOX) by
2 of 16 trained raters who were blinded
to the identity and source of the re-
viewer. The reliability and validity of
the RQI have been reported previously.

#### Recommendation to Publish

Of participating journals, 6 of 10 ask review-
ers to provide a recommendation about
publication. For the purpose of this
study, BMJ also asked reviewers to pro-
vide a recommendation. We reclassi-
ified the journals’ existing response cat-
gories as: accept (a recommendation
to accept or accept with minor revi-
sions), revise (major revisions), and re-
ject (reject or revise and reconsider).

Papers were denoted as being prefer-
red by author-suggested reviewers if
at least 1 of the author-suggested reviewers
erated the paper more favorably than
the highest-rating editor-suggested re-
viewer, or at least 1 editor-suggested re-
viewer rated lower than the lowest-
rating author-suggested reviewer. For
editor-suggested reviewer preference the
denotation was reversed. A paper could
fall into both categories (eg, author-
suggested reviewers recommending ac-
cept and reject but all editor-suggested
reviewers recommended revise), or in
situations in which the range of recom-
mandations between author- and editor-
suggested reviewers was the same, it
was interpreted as no preference.

### Statistical Analysis

Missing data for individual items of the
RQI were imputed by best subset regres-
sion from the remaining items using
data from both raters. The agree-
ment between raters was assessed using
the weighted \( \kappa \) statistic. \(^6\) To compare
RQI scores, we first calculated the mean
of the 2 raters’ scores. Where there were
2 or more author-suggested reviews for
a study, we calculated the mean and re-
peated this for studies with 2 or more
donor-suggested reviews. The difference
in the mean RQI scores between author-
and editor-suggested reviewers was assessed using a paired \( t \) test.

Differences between author- and editor-
suggested reviewers in their rec-

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**Table 1. Manuscripts and Reviewers by Journal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Total Manuscripts Submitted to the Journals in Study Period, No.</th>
<th>Sent for External Peer Review</th>
<th>Sent for External Peer Review and the Author Suggested a Reviewer</th>
<th>Study Manuscripts, No. (%)</th>
<th>Overall Journal Acceptance Rate, %</th>
<th>Reviews, No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archives of Disease in Childhood</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23 (62)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Journal of Ophthalmology</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13 (46)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Journal of Sports Medicine</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>14 (23)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMJ</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16 (33)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13 (39)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury Prevention</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11 (85)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16 (73)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational and Environmental Medicine</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>37 (60)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and Safety in Health Care</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6 (40)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco Control</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 (70)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3014</td>
<td>1471</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>156 (47.4)</td>
<td>366†</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The following types of papers were excluded after reading the study abstract: resubmissions, companion papers, case studies, case series, animal studies, small clinical studies, and laboratory science. Manuscripts were included only if they resulted in at least 1 review completed by an editor-suggested reviewer and 1 completed by an author-suggested reviewer.
†Authors of 10 studies failed to resubmit revised manuscripts so the final decision was treated as reject.
‡Of the 366 total, 314 were selected by editors and 52 were selected by journal administrators.

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commendations to accept (as opposed to revise or reject) were assessed using odds ratios (ORs) from conditional logistic regression (conditional on the paper) and repeated for a recommendation to accept or revise (as opposed to reject). The data were first analyzed excluding data from *BMJ*. We then examined whether the effect of reviewer source on recommendation differed between papers submitted to *BMJ* (in which the identity of reviewers is known to authors) and the other journals (in which authors are blinded to reviewer identity) by using a likelihood ratio test on the interaction between reviewer source and whether the reviewer’s identity was revealed.

For papers where author- and editor-suggested reviewers differed in their recommendations, we assessed whether the final journal decision (accept or reject) was more likely to reflect the author- or editor-suggested reviewers’ preferences. The reject category included cases in which authors failed to resubmit a revised manuscript.

For all comparisons between author- and editor-suggested reviewers, the unit of analysis was the paper. All statistical analyses were performed using STATA software version 8.2 (Stata Corporation, College Station, Tex).

**RESULTS**

In 48% (1471/3014) of papers sent out for review, the authors suggested at least 1 reviewer (Table 1). There were 329 manuscripts for which at least 1 author-suggested and 1 editor-suggested reviewer were obtained and there were 788 reviews of these manuscripts. Agreement between raters was moderate ($k=0.56$; 95% confidence interval, 0.49-0.63) but consistent with previous research.

Review quality did not differ greatly between author- and editor-suggested reviewers (Table 2). However, author-suggested reviewers were more likely to provide a favorable recommendation (accept and revise) in the 6 journals that solicited recommendations with blinded reviews. The extent to which author-suggested reviewers provided more favorable recommendations for acceptance was even greater for open (*BMJ*) reviews (test for interaction $P=.02$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review Quality Instrument</th>
<th>Author-Suggested Reviewers</th>
<th>Editor-Suggested Reviewers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reviews, mean score</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers, mean paired difference (95% CI)</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>–0.05 (–0.15 to 0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewer recommendation, No. (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>119 (56.9)</td>
<td>115 (46.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise</td>
<td>63 (30.1)</td>
<td>76 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>27 (12.9)</td>
<td>59 (23.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odds ratio (95% CI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept (vs revise or reject)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers with blinded reviews*</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>1.64 (1.02 to 2.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers with open reviews (<em>BMJ</em>)</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>12.4 (1.60 to 95.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept or revise (vs reject)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers with blinded reviews*</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>2.66 (1.43 to 4.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers with open reviews (<em>BMJ</em>)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

*Excluding data from *BMJ* and 3 journals not requesting recommendations (Archives of Disease in Childhood, British Journal of Ophthalmology, and Occupational and Environmental Medicine).

†For decisions to accept or revise there were only 5 *BMJ* studies with discordant recommendations, all of which were favored by the author-suggested reviewers.

Review quality and recommendation for publication

Review quality did not differ greatly between author- and editor-suggested reviewers (Table 2). However, author-suggested reviewers were more likely to provide a favorable recommendation (accept and revise) in the 6 journals that solicited recommendations with blinded reviews. The extent to which author-suggested reviewers provided more favorable recommendations for acceptance was even greater for open (*BMJ*) reviews (test for interaction $P=.02$).
There were 106 manuscripts in which author- and editor-suggested reviewers differed in their recommendations to publish, with author-suggested reviewers giving more favorable recommendations in 75 (70.8%) of these reviews (Table 3). However, the final editorial decision to accept or reject a study was evenly balanced with 54 (50.9%) decisions consistent with author-suggested reviewers’ preferences (30 with more favorable recommendations accepted, 24 with less favorable recommendations rejected). Decisions about the other 52 (49.1%) studies were consistent with the editor-suggested reviewers’ preferences.

**Study Limitations**

There may have been a Hawthorne effect, ie, while editors were instructed to choose reviewers in their usual manner, they were aware of the objectives of the study and may have altered their behavior. In addition, editorial decisions about manuscripts may have been influenced by the existence of additional reviews from author-suggested reviewers solicited by journal administrators. It is unclear what biases, if any, such factors may have introduced. Only a small proportion of the total number of papers sent for review during the study period were included (Table 1). This was largely due to reviews solicited not resulting in a pair of completed reviews. We conducted an observational study and did not alter the decision-making process.

**Study Implications**

Our findings suggest that editors can make use of author-suggested reviewers and expect reviews of similar quality, but with the caveat that the recommendation to publish may be more favorable. The latter is not a problem for many journals, including BMJ, because they do not ask reviewers to make a recommendation. The decision to publish is an editorial decision based not only on the scientific review but a number of other factors.

**Author Contributions:** Dr Schroter and Mr Hutchings had full access to all of the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

**Study concept and design:** Schroter, Black.

**Acquisition of data:** Schroter, Tite.

**Analysis and interpretation of data:** Schroter, Hutchings.

**Drafting of the manuscript:** Schroter, Hutchings, Black.

**Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content:** Schroter, Tite, Hutchings.

**Statistical analysis:** Hutchings.

**Administrative, technical, or material support:** Schroter, Tite.

**Study supervision:** Schroter, Black.

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**REFERENCES**


