



## Issues on Blind Peer Review

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### ABSTRACT

This study discussed issues relevant to the peer review in the science social system. A background discussion was used to identify the significant clamor of biases in peer review. This was identified as the basis of most author and reviewers conflicts during peer review, however, exposition on the purpose of blinding during peer review was provided. This is to avoid decisions based on sentiment as result of connections between reviewer(s) and author(s).

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### Introduction

Scientific communication is a system of communication guided by certain rules and culture. Science communication implies any form of communication that bothers on science; however, scientific communication includes only those communications that the knowledge contained therein has been scrutinized through the mechanism of the science social system. One of the important features of this communication is the peer review system, which was identified by Cronin (1984) to have the important perceived role of ensuring the preservation of standards and screening of knowledge added to the literature. While the objective of peer review is noble, however, the opinion of scholars as reported in many published works shows the peer review system is not a perfect one. Recently, Rennie, (2016) discussed issues relating the history of development of peer review. In the work, sensitive issues on peer review were identified, and a call for scientific peer review was made.

There has been significant clamour of biases in peer review process in academic publishing, especially where important innovations and findings, conflict with current beliefs (Armstrong, 1997). Various studies have been carried out to evaluate the empirical evidence of biases in the peer review process.

#### Blinding During Peer Review

As a way to reduce biases in peer review of manuscripts, one of the approaches adopted is the blind peer review. With this approach, editors of journal publications remove all details that may contain any information for identifying the submitting author. The idea is that, where a reviewer cannot identify the submitting author, the issue of biases is not likely to arise. However, it is important to note that despite blinding of manuscripts, there are still various means through which reviewers may detect some information about the author of a manuscript. For example, by the language of a manuscript, it is possible for a reviewer to know whether an author is a native speaker of English or not.

The tone of the language can also indicate whether the author is of African, Arab, Asiatic descent. Cases of biases are not limited to the peer reviewer. Even some editors have been involved in such cases. Details of submitting authors are not hidden to the editors.

Many empirical studies have been reported on issues of blind peer review. In the studies carried out by van Rooyen et al., (1998) and Schroter et al., (2006); it was found out that blinding and unmasking made no significant difference to review quality, however, the result of the study by Fishers et al, (1994) suggest that blinded reviewers may provide more unbiased reviews and that non-blinded reviewers may be affected by various types of biases. Lee et al., (2012) identified that the evidence for bias against interdisciplinary research is mixed, as is the evidence for bias against female authors and authors living in non-English-speaking countries. However, they believe there is no empirical evidence to buttress or belie such worries of bias in peer evaluations as a function of author nationality; prestige of institutional affiliation and reviewer nationality.

The study by Jefferson et al., (2006) suggested that little empirical evidence is available to support the use of editorial peer review as a mechanism to ensure quality. The process of peer review is considered to be steeped in tradition. In the realm of innovation and science, tradition operates on a day-to-day basis; and the current system of peer review is not perfect! (Benos et al., 2007). Because of the biases, real or perceived, many cases of conflict between author(s) and reviewer(s) abound; as identified by COPE, (2016). To protect reviewers from confrontations of the authors, editors oftentimes decline to reveal the identities of reviewers to the authors, not minding whether the reviewers have acted hatefully.

#### Purpose of Blinding in Peer Review

It should be pointed out that the essence of blinding during peer review is to avoid decisions based on sentiment as result of connections between reviewer(s) and author(s).

If manuscripts are not blinded during review, it can happen that the reviewer(s) know the author(s), and as a result, the decision of the reviewer(s) can be influenced positively or negatively based on this connection to the author(s). The aim of blinding is not to serve as cover to reviewers who may act hatefully. As a matter of fact, Editors do not have any business hiding identities of reviewers after decisions have been made. Most of the reviewers are academics who grade exams scripts of their students. They do not require that their identities be hidden to carry out their duties of grading exam scripts, so why would it be required for manuscript review? There is nothing preventing an author from going headlong confrontation with the reviewers after the reviews. If either (author/reviewer) has acted rightly, the public is there to decide. There is no need to hide reviewers' identities after completion of reviews.

#### Conclusion

The study has shown that the purpose of blinding during peer review is to prevent peer review decisions based on sentiments, and not to serve as a hiding cover to reviewers who may have acted hatefully. It is also believed that there should be no need to conceal the identities of reviewers after completion of peer review, if the reviewer(s) have acted rightly during peer review.

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