

Peer Review

Review of: "The Consequences of Peer Review Bias for Academic Careers and the Progress of Science"

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In my reading, the article is interesting and intellectually stimulating, but it needs to be approached with caution, especially because it starts from a strong premise about how peer review actually operates. The point you raised is very relevant. In its baseline model, the paper assumes that two researchers with the same ability and the same potential productivity receive different probabilities of acceptance solely because they belong to elite and non-elite institutions, with p lower than q due to an institutional bias factor. This is not a secondary detail, but a central mechanism of the argument.

I would not read this premise as a direct accusation of personal dishonesty on the part of reviewers and editors. The article itself frames the issue more in terms of cognitive bias, fast decision-making, post hoc rationalization, and the incentive structure of the editorial system, which shifts the criticism away from individual bad faith and toward a structural problem in human judgment. Even so, your observation remains valid, because the paper assumes that actual evaluation practices diverge from the ideal of impartiality, even when the system presents itself as blind and objective. The article explicitly insists that the traditional assumption of fairness has been challenged by recent studies.

For me, the main merit of the paper lies less in definitively proving this thesis and more in showing a plausible mechanism of amplification. The model connects publication, reputation, and funding in a feedback loop, and this is a real contribution because it captures something many people intuitively recognize in academic careers. The most convincing part is where the paper shows that, even without bias, a highly competitive system that relies heavily on metrics already produces career trajectories strongly shaped by luck, and that introducing a small bias can generate disproportionate differences between elite and non-elite institutions. This dynamic is persuasive and helps frame the problem in systemic terms.

The weaker point, in my view, is that the article relies too heavily on the plausibility of the model and moves beyond what the evidence can support. The author openly acknowledges that the model is not intended as a quantitative predictive framework and that several parameters have not yet been empirically estimated, which is a sign of methodological caution. However, the overall argument can still drift toward a broader conclusion than the model can justify, as if peer review bias explained a large share of the concentration of prestige and productivity in academia. I would treat this as a relevant hypothesis, but still far from being robustly demonstrated.

I also think it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the article itself recognizes competing explanations, such as infrastructure, collegiality, institutional culture, support systems, and individual reputation. This matters because these variables may generate real performance differences without depending exclusively on bias in evaluation. The text attempts to incorporate these dimensions in extensions of the model, but they appear more as later adjustments, while the premise of institutional bias is already built into the core of the framework. For this reason, the caution you suggest is entirely appropriate. The paper opens an important research agenda, but it does not yet resolve the causal distinction between editorial bias and the material and organizational advantages of elite institutions.

Personally, I would write a favorable review of the article as a theoretical essay and as a productive provocation for empirical research, but with clear reservations about the scope of its conclusions. I would emphasize that the paper is valuable because it questions the presumed neutrality of the system and shows how small deviations can be amplified by competition and metric-driven evaluation. At the same time, I would recommend that its claims be framed more cautiously, making it more explicit that the model illustrates a possible and important mechanism, rather than providing a conclusive demonstration that the evaluation system by itself decisively favors elite institutions across all contexts.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.