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**CASES OF HOW SOME EMERGING JOURNALS AND PUBLISHERS  
PROVIDE HOMES FOR ‘ABUSED’ SCHOLARLY WORKS:  
PEDAGOGICAL AND HUMANITY IMPLICATIONS FOR  
‘PREDATORY’ DISCOURSE**

**PHILLIP T. BWITITI**

Lecturer in School of Biomedical Sciences, Faculty of Science, Charles Sturt University,  
NSW Australia

**EZEKIEL U. NWOSE**

Lecturer in School of Community Health, Faculty of Science, Charles Sturt University,  
NSW Australia

**Correspondence**

Dr Phillip Bwititi. School of Biomedical Sciences, Charles Sturt University,  
Wagga Wagga AUSTRALIA.

**ABSTRACT**

Some emerging journals and publishers are often and quickly derogated as predatory and quality research manuscripts are sometimes rejected for reasons that are not clear. What is yet to be articulated is how emerging journals are providing homes for abused scholarly works. This case report presents three examples of manuscripts that were rejected with incongruent reviewers’ opinions. Two were separately rejected twice before accepted by a third publisher and the third example illustrates how an editor may uphold the pedagogical perspective of oversight on manuscript submission and acceptance process. The discussion focuses on unconscious bias in reviews and perhaps the need for clear guidelines and training of reviewers as well as for editors and publishers. Further, stakeholders need to reflect on how the rejection of manuscripts with unclear reasons amounts to ‘predatory’ journalism.

**Keywords:** Manuscript Review, Pedagogy, Peer-Review, Predatory Journals, Reviewers’ Feedback, Unconscious Bias.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Concern over rejection of scholarly manuscripts by journals is long-standing with references predating over 50 years ago (Bonjean & HULLUM, 1978). There is a plethora of peer-reviewed journal articles and social media writings on reasons for the rejection of scholarly manuscripts. Currently, some academic journals reject up to 80% of submitted manuscripts and this is being decried as a problem to fix (Chapman & Slade, 2015). Not all rejected scholarly manuscripts are of poor quality (Chapman & Slade, 2015; Fathelrahman, 2015; Kim, Petru, Gielecki, & Loukas, 2019), and Toor (2007) on the author’s experience in

publishing noted “Given the high quality of many submissions, the decision to reject most of them is as much a matter of taste as anything, and there are plenty of other editors (and admissions officers) with tastes different from my own” (Toor, 2007).

Two reasons relevant to this discourse are reviewers’ over-valuation confounded by editors’ limitations (Chapman & Slade, 2015; Fathelrahman, 2015). For instance, manuscripts with reasonable significance are rejected because of poor reviewing involving over-assessment and bias that may be unconsciously fuelled by a lack of flexibility. Further, the editors’ human limitations constitute a major and probably most important factor whereby “the result of the peer review and the decision taken by an editor comes as a surprise to the authors” (Fathelrahman, 2015).

A major lesson from an Award lecture (Chan, 2019), where the erudite professor expressed the need for individual resilience and tenacity in times of hostile reviews that are often based on unconscious bias. The professor told a personal story of being based in England and starting a project in Asia without funding, and one of the initial ground-breaking reports was rejected until the 30th submission attempt. This story is corroborated by other experiences such as the cases of stiff resistance to the scientific revolution (De Ru, De Groot, & Elshof, 2012).

Thus, manuscript rejections and reasons thereof are known but what is unknown or yet to have a framework for change is a reference catalog of rejection reasons. The objective of this case review is to highlight how the emerging (‘so called’ predatory) journal/publishers are altruistic in providing homes for rejected papers.

## **2.0 EMPIRICAL CASES**

### **2.1 Experiential note on methodology paper**

This paper was submitted as a result of an invitation for a thematic case study ‘research method’ series used as an educational tool to advance learning and a ‘self-reflection narrative paper. The journal’s first advice for the author read “...Reflect on how you did your research, rather than on reporting your research findings. Use lots of rich examples to make sure you are providing the story behind your research and showing readers how real research is conducted. We want cases to be engaging and interesting to a student reader – writing in first-person voice can help to accomplish this”.

The author was happy and revised, inclusive of reformatting the manuscript to include two additional sub-headings to each main section (Box 1). Surprisingly, the revised manuscript was not sent to the original reviewer to re-assess on the basis of the previous recommendation but was sent to a new reviewer who recommended rejection on the grounds that “The peer reviewer has concluded that in its current form, the submission does not meet the aims and scope...”; the ‘current form’ was not defined. The reasons why the manuscript was not sent to the original reviewer to re-assess, based on her/his recommendation, were also not stated. It is important to re-state that the manuscript was by invitation and therefore how it could not meet the aims and scope is worth considering from predatory journalism’ perspective and this perhaps, therefore:

- constitutes an abuse of emerging researchers who honor such invitations, and
- depicts ‘predatory journalism’ by editors and publishers who do the invitations

This submitted manuscript is quite unique. It consists of the author’s self-reflection on being a non-academic researcher, development of a research project, conducting a non-funded research, struggle to form a team of researcher, supervision of PhD theses, experience with reviewers and several other topics. The writing is very personal, intriguing and a bit controversial. The manuscript only marginally focuses on the method and though it aims to present different stages in development a research proposal, the reflection on it is mainly superficial and focus moves to other aspects of personal experience.

- **Response:**

- I realize to have been carried away by the first point of advice under style – re:

“...Reflect on *how* you did your research, rather than on reporting your research findings. Use lots of rich examples to make sure you are providing the story behind your research and *showing* readers how real research is conducted. We want cases to be engaging and interesting to a student reader— writing in first-person voice can help to accomplish this”

- I have now revised the entire document taking cognizance of advice given for the various suggested headings. Hence the research design has been revised. Practicalities, methods in action and practical lessons learned have been edited both in content and formatting.

To be appropriate for publication as a research methods case study the case should either be 1) re-written to focus on the method, or 2) re-written to follow the current narrative whilst bearing pedagogical value in mind. The current description of the author’s experience is very interesting, but there must be clear take-away lessons for the reader.

- **Response:**

- Thanks for the compliment that the experience is very interesting.
- In the revision, the option “to follow the current narrative whilst bearing pedagogical value in mind” has been considered more favourable
- Each of the main sections now start with expected learning outcome and ends with reflective questions

### **Box 1: Reviewers' comment addressed but revision sent to a different reviewer**

The paper was reformatted and submitted to another journal that publishes articles on translational research. After more than 5 months, the editorial decision was communicated with the foremost concern being the reviewer’s preference that senior clinicians should be not just in authorship but the lead author (Box 2).

Reviewer #1: Using cases report to provide experiential note for prospective independent translational researchers in healthcare, especially those who already have ideas without funds is a good idea, but totally this manuscript only presented some ideas without being tested of the practicality and effectiveness.

The recommendations are:

1. This exploring of the experiential note for prospective independent translational research should be done by some senior physician, even some project manager to lead, because it need to be supported by many departments in the hospital, even in different hospitals. Only in that way the method could be have practicality in different circumferences. And the rich experiences in clinics and in research help to avoid as many as mistakes as possible.
2. The case reports during the 6 years have not been described in detail, what results have been got in the finished steps could not advised the reader to trust the following researches.
3. Suggest to write a manuscript after having some significant results, letting the readers get some meaning information through reading it.

## Box 2. Reviewer's comment indicating a preference for author and ambiguity

### 2.2 COVID19 among people living with diabetes paper

This paper was an outcome of the rapid review and a concerted effort to contribute to the discourse regarding COVID-19 in diabetes. Two of the relevant messages included that (1) best management outcome has been recorded in asymptomatic COVID-19 cases with diabetes subgroup compared to those with other conditions, while (2) in symptomatic COVID19 cases: aggravation has been recorded among those with diabetes than in respiratory disease. After submission to the first journal, the editor's feedback appeared positive and only 2 minor queries were requested for clarification. The minor queries were based on the reviewer mixing up points in the text and the authors responded promptly (Box 3).

Editor and Reviewer comments:

The review makes a point that symptomatic people with COVID-19 who have diabetes are not likely to progress to severe stage. Please discuss the reasons for this in detail, is there a role of glycemic control, what is the role of specific antihyperglycemic therapy being used?

- **Response:** It seems the reviewer has misread our point. The review makes a point on 'asymptomatic', but the reviewer has queried 'symptomatic'. However, we have clarified the relevant point in the 'highlight box' and results section. We have also included additional short paragraph to further clarify and delineate this point regarding asymptomatic versus symptomatic

**Box 3. Reviewer misreading authors and reacting negatively to correction**

After the revision, the authors were stunned that the manuscript was rejected within 24 hours with a common template message: “I regret to inform you that the reviewers recommend against publishing your manuscript, and I must therefore reject it. My comments, and any reviewer comments, are below...”

- ❖ “Editor and Reviewer comments: manuscript does not meet the standards required for publication in the journal. The writing is incoherent, and the language needs major editing.”

The authors wondered if the manuscript had been read at all, or just a negative reaction of point of correction. The authors also doubted if the revised manuscript had been sent to the original reviewer based on the fact that response came overnight, hence the question was if the editor and reviewer communicated and when?

The authors submitted the manuscript to a second journal – one of the suites of journals by a leading publisher. After 3 months, the article was rejected without the reviewer’s comments or a reason but with advice to consider transfer to another journal in the suite of the publisher. On following up with the transfer process, an Editorial Submission Advisor advised “could not identify any suitable journals in our portfolio that matched your manuscript. I wish you every success with finding a suitable journal for your work.”

**2.3 Blood viscosity paper**

This manuscript was submitted, and the Editor-in-Chief advised the authors to reformat and resubmit as a ‘brief article’ and on resubmission, the manuscript was rejected with apparent disagreement between the reviewers (Table 1).

**Table 1. Disparities between reviewers with indicating the need for the knowledge**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Reviewer	2 <sup>nd</sup> Reviewer
1	link between CPP and hyperviscosity - had been described...	
2	Strictly speaking the association is between CPP and <u>plasma</u> viscosity	...paper looks at two non-overlapping aspects - whole blood viscosity and calcium/phosphate - which in itself is confusing. What is their relationship?

3	“...don't believe the self-fulfilling technicality of comparing CPP to whole blood viscosity is an advancement for...”	...agree with the final sentence in that the paper shows a relationship between Ca/P and WBV, but without knowledge of this in health its value is unclear
4	...none of the aims of this piece were achieved. (Well, a directional change in phosphate concentration was seen to be fair - but then the CPP association with cardiovascular outcomes is also described as a fallacy)”	

Following the reviewers’ comments, considerations and rebuttals the re-articulated manuscript was submitted to another journal. The authors were however particular that: the first reviewer commented “...self-fulfilling technicality” and “don’t believe... association between CPP and whole blood viscosity” to be “an advancement” and the association between CPP and cardiovascular outcome as ‘fallacy’. The association put forward by the reviewer was between CPP and plasma viscosity hence the expressions used by this reviewer are perhaps evidence of unconscious bias or lack of understanding of what the study was about.

In regards to the second reviewer’s “paper looks at two non-overlapping aspects – whole blood viscosity and calcium/phosphate – which in itself is confusing. What is their relationship?” at the same time “...agree with the final sentence in that the paper shows a relationship between Ca/P and WBV, but without knowledge of this in health its value is unclear”: this was the essence of the work to advance the knowledge and clarifying the value. On the “there is no control group”, the reviewer and editor ignored that this was a valid research method that fell within the journal’s category. Thus, this is a situation where a reviewer expressed a lack of knowledge but acknowledged the need for the scientific information to be advanced.

The paper was submitted to a second journal and was rejected on the ground that two reviewers could not be found. Meanwhile, the one review done appeared to approve of the research quality. Incidentally, a few days later the author was invited by the same journal to submit a general paper and this raises a discussion on rejection and then an invitation to submit another paper. A seemingly ‘rigorous’ review was done by 4 reviewers to justify the final rejection of a manuscript (Table 2).

**Table 2: Reviewer’s report form of a rejected manuscript**

Manuscript review questions set by journal for her reviewers	1st*	1	2	3	4
1. In general, how do you rate the degree to which the paper is easy to follow and its logical flow?	Good	Fair	Poor	Fair	Fair
2. Do the title and abstract cover the main aspects of the work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Plain Language Summary - Explain why the study was done... what the results mean?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Communicate the facts in an interesting way without exaggerating the story?	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Use short and clear sentences, avoiding jargon and complex words?	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Use the active voice rather than the passive voice	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Use sentences phrased in a positive manner rather than negatively?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use person-centred language rather than focussing on the condition/illness or disability.	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
4. If relevant is the results novel? Does the study provide an advance in the field?	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
5a. Did the study gain ethical approval...	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

5b. Does the paper raise any ethical concerns?	No	No	Yes	No	No
6. If relevant, are the methods clear and replicable?	Yes	NA	No	NA	Yes
7. If relevant, do all the results presented match the methods described?	Yes	NA	No	NA	Yes
8. If relevant, is the statistical analysis appropriate to the research question and study design?	NA	NA	No	NA	No
9. If relevant, is the selection of the controls appropriate for the study design...	Yes	NA	NA	No	Yes
10. How do you rate how clearly and appropriately the data are presented	Good	poor	Poor	Fair	Fair
11. If relevant, did the authors, make the underlying data available to the readers?	Yes	No	NA	NA	No
12. Do the conclusions correlate to the results found?	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
13a. Are the figures and tables clear and legible?	Yes	No	No	No	No
13b. Are images clear and free from unnecessary modification?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
14. I have serious concerns about the validity of this manuscript	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
15. Does the paper use appropriate references in the correct style to promote understanding of the content?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



16. If relevant, do any of the authors competing interests raise concerns				NA	No
17. Do you think that the manuscript requires English editing to correct the grammar or flow?	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

### 3.0 DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Making reviewers’ feedback pedagogical

Box 1: In the past, privileged researchers sitting on grant panels have opportunities to review several research proposals and some of the applicants find their failed proposals albeit slightly tweaked and winning other grants years down the track. “Plagiarism in grant proposals is happening among academics at all levels of experience, from assistant professors to seasoned full professors. Some faculty members are simply unaware that the practice constitutes research misconduct” (Markin, 2012). It is cynical but possible that one form of preying is around journal reviewers rejecting articles based on conflict of interest, especially if the manuscript is

- ✚ On a conceptual framework contrary to their research theorem. This may be due to either incomprehension or mere opposition to alternative theory (De Ru et al., 2012). Or
- ✚ Based on a similar framework that the reviewer is working on. At least, it is known that editors do reject a manuscript if it is closely related to one that may be already submitted (Sonia & Michelle, 2016).

In the case presented in Box 2, the reviewer is unaware of the author being a qualified project manager and senior clinician in her/his discipline. However, 2 concerning points from the reviewer’s 3 recommendations were

Unconscious bias: why should ‘experiential note’ report be done by senior physicians, if the work is neither by nor strictly about physicians?

Grammatically unclear feedback: what is the reviewer referring to in point #2 – re: “what results have been got ... could not advise the reader to trust the following researches”? This quote indicates that people who ask authors to get their manuscripts professionally edited may also not write clear English. This point highlights that reviewers sometimes give unclear feedbacks also with grammar/spelling mistakes possibly misleading the editor. Hence, the need for editors to exercise attention to their reviewers’ reports. This is quite imperative when feedback to authors is to be with pedagogical consciousness

#### 3.2 Giving feedback pedagogically is altruistic and truthful even in rejection

Box 3 highlights a situation where the editor probably did not send the revised manuscript to the reviewer. While it is accepted that editors can reject a manuscript without sending it to reviewers (Toor, 2007), this manuscript was rejected with questionable “editor and reviewer comments”. One of the criteria emerging journals are being derogated as predatory is the quality of the review. Therefore, it should be brought to the fore that journal editors are reviewing manuscripts submitted to their journals. The difference is that while ‘big’ journal editors perhaps ‘abuse’ researchers, those of emerging journals (derogated as predatory) are altruistic and provide homes for the publication of abused manuscripts. It has been advised that authors should endeavor to submit to journals appropriate to their work (Paine & Fox, 2018). What probably needs emphasis is that the altruistic nature of emerging journals appropriately provides a home for works rejected by established editors.

This is the crux of the matter, which was communicated to Editorial Submission Advisor: “Concern from that advice is interest in predatory journals/publishers. First, a manuscript was reviewed and rejected without reason/suggestion for improvement. Secondly, an article on 'diabetes and COVID-19' was not suitable for any journal in the publisher’s suite of over a hundred journals, which is surprising.

Perhaps, it is pertinent to emphasize the fact the abusive, unclear, or untruthful feedbacks unknowingly drive researchers to patronize the 'predatory' journals. For instance, an Editorial manager advising that work is not suitable in their publisher’s suite implies the researcher should never consider any of the journals by the publisher. It also creates evidence (or impression) of the need for new journals. That is, this gives impetus to the development of the new/'predatory' journals and publishers, which is detrimental to scholarly works and a phenomenon to proactively defeat.

It is known that “...sometimes journal confidentiality policies restrict editors from providing the reason a manuscript is rejected. For example, editors may not tell if they are entertaining a manuscript very closely related to the one submitted. The editor cannot disclose this information to you” (Sonia & Michelle, 2016). The other side of the coin is that the authors are indirectly referred to emerging journals that altruistically provide a home to their manuscripts. Indeed, some of these authors would rather submit to emerging journals instead of wasting time revising and re-formatting to send to one big journal after another. Also, some of these big journals with confidential policies still engage in mass email invitations for articles. Therefore, it is important for watchdogs to consider that they are just intimidating scholars and overlooking the recognized predatory acts of established journals.

Table 1 indicates a situation where the journal’s invited reviewers appear to have seemingly divergent views. However, the divergence was only in feelings and two are interesting to note. Firstly, reviewer-1 feels the paper adds no contribution (and there are no less than 3 pieces of evidence of unconscious bias that must have influenced the feeling), whereas reviewer-2 indicates unawareness of the relationship. Secondly, reviewer-1 started with an abusive comment that authors embarked on a self-fulfilling technicality and not an advancement, whereas reviewer-2 ended by asking how the knowledge can be advanced and scaled up among professional colleagues. Ideally, the expectation is that the Editor-in-Chief needed to adjudicate (Caon, 2018).

It is a given that poor writing style including unclear elucidation of study significance is a common reason for manuscript rejection (McKercher, Law, Weber, Haiyan, & Hsu, 2007). However, it is also known that many reviewers in biomedical science require a clearer definition of their roles (Glonti et al., 2019). What this paper advances are that journal editors need to be more circumspect to recognize when or where reviewers are in disagreement; as this would reduce unfair rejections that indirectly lead authors to promote 'predatory' journals.

### 3.3 The issue of unconscious bias

Table 2 highlights a case of 'rigorous' review, but furthers the discourse on divergent views as well as expert knowledge of reviewers. Suffice to note various divergent responses of reviewers on the 17-item review questions. In particular, it is interesting to note that the paper under discourse was a study based on paired-contingency table formula for the test of validity with references to support. Therefore, reviewers indicating that statistical analysis was not applicable are probably one form of unconscious bias.

Current diatribes on predatory journals and publishers advance the point of little or no 'rigorous' editing as a characteristic. However, the common adage that there is always the other side has yet to receive more attention. Hence, the objective of this empirical narrative is to advance how unconscious bias in reviewing journal submissions is creating the impetus for submissions to new journals including predatory ones. It is important that journals maintain the highest standards; and it has been a piece of general advice that authors for whom English is not their native language need to engage professional editing before submission (Caon, 2018). While we agree with this, we also note that in some cases lack of professional editing and poor English are cited even if the manuscript has been professionally edited and for some journals, this may now be a default statement and unconscious bias. Perhaps journals need also to have a facility to professionally edit their feedback.

Indeed, research publishing needs to be protected and regulated, perhaps via self-regulation. Journal manuscript editing is a gate-keeper of scholarly publishing to ensure the appropriateness of location, quality, and significance of scholarly work, and the editor oversees peer reviewers' constructive feedback to improve manuscripts (Paine & Fox, 2018). The authors highlight that although peer review is central to scholarly publishing, it is criticized among others for lack of transparency and for imperfections in judging quality and significance of the research.

While the imperativeness to define predatory journals and publishers is being reviewed (Cobey et al., 2018; Cukier et al., 2020; Shamseer et al., 2017), other authors have pointed out a number of issues including the need to improve the quality of peer reviewer report in biomedical journals vis-à-vis editors and peer reviewers lacking formal training and possibly operating on the assumption that expertise in an area by default equates to skills in editor-ship and peer-reviewing (Glonti et al., 2019). Further reasons on why referees reject manuscripts in science and academia publishing are reviewed (McKercher et al., 2007). However, despite the importance of the review process, referees are not formally trained, hence the process can be controversial and involves subjectivity and that reviewing was a negative process bearing in mind that the majority of manuscripts are rejected (Paine & Fox, 2018; Sonia & Michelle,

2016; Toor, 2007). Reviewers and editors by default are educators and authors should be able to take their comments seriously to improve on their work and/or presentation.

Indeed, two recommendations to tackle bias in review-for-publication were possibly stopping the practice of anonymous reviewers i.e. contrary to the current practice of single-blind reviews; and review decision to include two questions: “(a) was a real problem formulated in this manuscript? and (b) is the conclusion – if proven – relevant for practical situations?” (De Ru et al., 2012). It may be argued that stopping the anonymity of reviewers is a safety issue, especially as authors can challenge or confront the reviewers directly. What this paper contributes is additional two suggestions to

1. Recognize emerging journals as being altruistic in providing homes for the unfairly rejected manuscript; and
2. Tackle unconsciously biased rejections of manuscripts to stop researchers from submitting to the supposed predatory journals

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Many top journals are arguably proud to advise their rejection rates. What needs highlighting is that this proportion represents the number of articles searching for homes to be published and such search creates impetus (i.e. market per se) for new journals. Unconsciousness of this impetus, most of these new journals are derogated as ‘predatory’. Perhaps, it is time to discuss how the impetus constitutes a panacea to predatory journalism and publishing.

#### 5.0 DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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