January 2015

Referee Report

Paper submitted to *Economics: The Open-Access, Open-Assessment E-Journal*, MS 1384
Meta-analysis in a nutshell: Techniques and general findings

The paper provides a concise introduction to meta-analysis, which should be accessible for every economist who is interested in empirical research. With this paper as the point of reference, it should be guaranteed that readers of the envisaged special issue will not get lost in the details of actual meta-studies.

If the special issue aims at a non-specialist audience (and if space allows), it may be considered whether the inclusion of a diagram with an idealized and a typical funnel graph could help to demonstrate one of the main features of a meta-analysis. Along the same lines, it may be considered to include a table with typical FAT-PET results. I am sure such additions would help to convince readers that meta-analysis is up to something important.

My remaining quibbles refer to two paragraphs which I found more difficult to understand.

Paragraph on top of p. 7, starting with "When (1) shows a bias …".
1. "from (4)" should be "from (5)"?
2. What is the meaning of "make little sense"? Does it mean "are also biased, in unknown directions?"
3. Does "the estimate (5)" refer to the alphas in equation (5)? If the alphas are biased (in unknown directions), how can they be used to "point to more or less important variables"?

Last sentence of section 4, starting with "It appears that ….".
The argument should be clarified. If the selection of estimators does not make a big difference (I fully agree with the argument), then what does? "Getting models and data right"? If this comes with a *greater* "benefit-costs ratio", why is there a misallocation of talent? [Maybe the problem is just my misreading of the sentence.]

My final comment refers to the question whether top journals publish papers of a higher quality (last full paragraph on p.7). The sentence near the bottom of p. 2: "A simple rule of

thumb is to expect that the true value [of the estimated parameter] is half the published one" appears to suggest that top journals should be expected to publish lower estimates, at least if an otherwise innovative study refers to estimates of an established strand of the literature. How can this argument be reconciled with the "variability" hypothesis? Maybe top journals tend to publish studies that generate new strands of the literature only if these studies report relatively strong effects (which then are likely to be biased)?

The present version of the paper has some typos.