

Addressing Racism in Editorial Practices

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The year 2020 will long be remembered for the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a year in which we were largely isolated from each other, working remotely, and wrapped up in our personal struggles associated with the abrupt changes in our lives. It will also, perhaps more importantly, be remembered as the year in which there was heightened awareness of the long-standing pandemic of racism that pervades nearly all of our work and life practices. As editors, we have not always considered the influence of racism on the work we do to screen, review, edit, and publish papers. We have also not always thought about how racism affects our decisions related to other, perhaps less visible editorial practices, such as the selection of reviewers or editorial board members. As editors, we want to be proactive in addressing bias in all aspects of the publishing process, including practices that result in systemic, under-representation of Black and Brown

individuals in editorial and publishing spheres. Given a commitment to diversity and inclusion and the need to eradicate racism in science, the questions we seek to answer are: How can we develop, implement, track, and report our progress towards ensuring that the diversity of our editors, editorial board members, reviewers, and authors demonstrate inclusion of underrepresented members of the profession? How do we ensure that all authors receive the same fair treatment and opportunity to publish in our journals?

INANE CONVERSATION ON RACIST EDITORIAL PRACTICES

During the August 2020 “Conversations with Colleagues” that was part of the International Academy of Nursing Editors’ (INANE) Virtual Conference, we facilitated a discussion about ways in which the editorial process can promote or impede eradication of racism in science. In particular, we were interested in discussing where and how editors can and should exert influence during the editorial process to help ensure that our journals are as devoid of racial bias as is possible. As editors and scientists, we like to believe that publishing a manuscript is “just about the science.” However, we know that is not necessarily true, and that multiple factors beyond “just the science” can potentially exert undue influence on the fate of manuscripts. Scientists have biases, and thus, so does their science.⁶ Editors have biases as well. Recognizing and dealing directly with these biases is important to reducing the effects of racism on scientific publication. However, there has been little study on the effects of race and ethnicity on publishing. Moreover, there is an impression that reviewer comments have a disproportionately ill effect on authors from underrepresented groups, although it is unclear if it is the topic of the authors’ work rather than the authors’ race that gives this impression.⁴

Some suggestions to reduce racism in our editorial practices that we identified in the literature include: 1) gathering and making public baseline statistics on

diversity within our journals, encompassing our editors, editorial boards, reviewers, and authors; 2) training editors to recognize and interrupt bias in peer review; and 3) developing an actionable diversity plan.³ But confronting racism as an editor is more challenging than those suggestions would imply because the academic publication process, from authors to reviewers to editors, has legitimized scholarship norms that obscure the role of racism in publishing practices. In fact, the bar to publish on racial health inequities is very low since neither authors nor journal reviewers and editors typically have required that racism be addressed as a critical influence on racial inequities.¹ There is no uniform practice regarding the use of race as a study variable and little expectation that authors examine racism versus race as a cause of health inequities. In other words, racism is rarely viewed as a mechanism of poor health outcomes. Although race is often used as a predictor of outcomes, health inequities are not caused by race, a socially constructed, non-biologic variable. Inequities are the result of racism, which is rarely addressed in research.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

So what can we do as editors? Dr. Jean Breny of the Society for Public Health Education has noted that it is time to put racism on the agenda, using strategies that promote equity and justice.²

As editors, we believe that this work starts with our authors. Editors can consider adding information to their author guidelines to help authors address racism in their work. For example, author guidelines can instruct authors to define what they mean by “race” and to specify why they are using race as either a variable or descriptor in their work. Since “racism” is actually the *mechanism* by which inequities, health and otherwise, are affected, it is also important for authors to name the form of racism, either interpersonal, institutional, or some other form, and the way in which the author posits racism has affected outcomes. Both the

APA and the AMA style manuals now include extensive guidance on the use of inclusive, unbiased language; authors can be directed to these resources with the published author guidelines. In many nursing journals, we ask that authors identify a theory or framework that has guided their work. Thus, where the effects of racism are being studied, authors may wish to consider basing their work on one of the many critical race theories or frameworks. In contemporary scientific journal articles, we often see race used as a predictor of outcomes, including genetic interpretations of race. These have no place in current scientific work as race cannot be supported scientifically as a biologic variable. Editors should also consider rejecting papers about racial health inequities where the authors have not rigorously examined racism.¹ Beyond review of submitted papers, editors should also seek reviewers who have expertise in the study of racism and its effects. Reviewers with this experience may be best able to evaluate the quality of the work.

How else might editors work to eliminate the problem of racism in our publishing practices? The *Cell* editorial team⁵ recently made several suggestions, including featuring the work of Black and other diverse authors using social media and other platforms and by diversifying editorial boards and reviewer lists. Diversity should be considered in editorial board appointments in order to reduce bias in the composition of editorial boards. Invited articles and editorials addressing the specific effects of racism for the journal's primary readership may also be useful, especially if written by or commented on by Black and other diverse authors or experts in the area of journal focus. Editors should review the processes used to identify and recruit new reviewers to ensure that diverse reviewers are well represented. Monitoring and improving the diversity among journal reviewers is complicated by the lack of demographic information usually requested and/or displayed in reviewer databases. The diversity of reviewer lists could be furthered by searching for reviewers among the members of specialty organizations such as

the National Black Nurses Association. Seeking input from readers about ways in which the journal may be promoting racism may also be helpful, since readers may be more knowledgeable or alert to bias that is not obvious to the editors and journal staff. Editorials that describe actions the editors are taking to address racism might help draw diverse authors and reviewers to the journal.

During the INANE discussion, participants suggested a number of actions, some of which they had taken or planned to take and others they were considering or had seen used. For example, participants suggested the need for racial health inequality be addressed in author guidelines. They also offered suggestions for ways to identify new members who would add diversity to editorial boards, including considering authors of recently published papers on topics of interest to the journal and direct solicitation via journal announcements, social media, or editorials. Editorial board training on hidden bias and other issues important to racism were also identified as ways to reduce racism in editorial practices. Finding reviewers who are knowledgeable about reviewing papers with racism as a focus of study also generated a number of suggestions including a peer reviewer mentoring program that could be adapted to specifically address reviewing for racial bias. Editors may also carefully consider how the selection of photographs, illustrations, and advertisements might enhance or detract from how welcoming the publication appears to readers and potential authors. Being intentional and having a plan to enhance diversity in background and opinion were noted by many of our colleagues as essential. A new resource editors may find helpful is the Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communications (C4DISC; <https://c4disc.org>). C4DISC has, among other things, published an Antiracism Toolkit for Allies, which is free for use and distribution.

CONCLUSION

Barriers to addressing racism in editorial practices remain. It is past time for editors to make a firm commitment to directly addressing racism by reducing bias in publication processes and enhancing diversity and inclusion. If we are to effect change, our efforts must be intentional, meaningful, and sustained. Along with our colleagues from INANE, we have made several suggestions for action, and we look forward to further discussion about how editors can contribute to eliminating racism in science.

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