

# **PUBLISHING ON ISSUES OF RACE AND ETHNICITY: WHY MANAGEMENT JOURNALS ARE NOT (RACIALLY) COLOUR BLIND**

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## **Abstract**

Although interest in promoting diversity in business seems unquestionably to be embraced by many organizations, and is currently in vogue in various management discourses, issues of *race* and *ethnicity* are not topics that are favoured in publishing industry, and very few papers on issues related to race/ethnicity have found their way into the major international management journals. The purpose of this paper is therefore to explore the factors that hinder the publication in such journals of articles on issues of race that require large amounts of tedious work. Among the reasons for this identified by the author's literature review on the topic are, on the one hand, the under-representation of (*minority*) authors (Knadler, 2009) writing about racial issues, and on the other factors such as the tendency for personal, methodological and prestige biases to cause the overwhelmingly *white* editors and reviewers to be less enthusiastic about publishing work related to this topic. After a discussion of the results obtained from the literature review, suggestions about how improvements can be made to overcome these challenges will be proposed.

**Key words:** race and ethnicity, publishing, colour blind, peer review, management journal.

**JEL Code:** M5, J2, J7

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## **Introduction and Background**

Although writing is an integral part of a researcher's professional life, publishing scholarly articles in refereed international management journals can be an intimidating experience, especially for novice academics in general and non-native-English-speaking authors in particular. When articles or research papers are on the path to being published in a highly rated international management journal, they are geared towards academic scholars in management and eclectic allied fields such as work and organizational psychology, industrial sociology and applied business anthropology. Effective academic literacy – characterized by a dynamism that is essential but often frustrating for those who are charged with the responsibility for this (Murray & Moore, 2006) – therefore relies

on producing not only papers on randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses, editorials, book reviews, and letters, but also mostly original, profound and scientifically supported papers with complete concepts, facts, figures and statistics.

Nevertheless, before a paper can move through production, peer reviews and publication, the novice writer intending to submit a manuscript is aware that the academic world is an environment with a high degree of freedom that enables researchers to work on whatever topic they find important and interesting. Moreover, academics understand that it might be better to only get involved in a project if the area is one that the author is passionate about and as long as the contributions of the manuscripts add to the wealth of scientific knowledge. Undoubtedly, race is a very crude marker - it is ill-defined, indeed undefined (Bloche, 2004); incorporating race and ethnicity in research is complex, because individuals often identify themselves, or are identified by others, with more than one race or ethnicity.

Without doubt, race and ethnic diversity are sensitive and frequently ignored issues (Petersen, 2008) with deep historical roots that affect all modern black/white or majority/minority relationships. However, what are the factors that hinder papers on research over topics of *race* to have less chance of being published in major management journals?

In business, the pretence is usually that (racial) differences go unnoticed. This is not due to support for the growing consensus among scientists that ‘race, a social construct, is not actually a useful classificatory tool’ (Ng, Zhao, Levy, Strausberg & Venter, 2008), but because we want to reduce the odds of being seen to exhibit prejudice. The dominant model for fostering diversity and inclusion has been the ‘*colour-blind*’ approach, which promotes similarity and assimilation and maintains that people should be understood as individuals, not as members of racial or ethnic groups (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). This idea and the processes that promote racial (in)equality have been referred to as *laissez-faire* (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith, 1997), symbolic (Sears, 1988), and neoliberal racism (Giroux, 2005).

Yet what could be more empowering in relation to ‘issues of race writing’ than to use writing to challenge racism, xenophobia and related intolerant acts of social injustice?

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to explore the factors that hinder the publication of manuscripts for which large amounts of time are devoted to tedious, presumably non-value-added, activities such as writing on issues of race. The article thus addresses the following questions:

- If editorial review boards are predominantly *white* and colour blind as to

race/ethnicity (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick, 2004), can they nevertheless act in a non-biased manner when dealing with issues of race?

- Are blind, peer-reviewed standards unfavourable to manuscripts on issues of race and ethnicity?

A literature review and the observations of the author when conducting research on the topic will enable the questions above to be examined. Then, after discussing the obstacles facing academics and scholars when it comes to publishing on issues of race and ethnicity, suggestions about how improvements can be made to overcome these challenges will be addressed.

## 1 Definition of terms

I assume that most of the key terms used in this paper are familiar to readers, but as my focus is on issues of *race* and *ethnicity*, it is essential to define two keywords that are discussed throughout this article, as everyone has his or her own ideas on the concept of race. Consequently, in addition to conceptual definitions, I also specify the operational definitions of the following terms: race and (racial) colour-blindness.

### Race

In the last few decades, there has been a growth in what is known of the complexities of human genetic variability to the point that it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to categorize human populations in terms of racial groups (Hannaford, 1996).

The term *race* has had a long history of anthropological usage, and can generally be defined as referring to a group of local or breeding populations within species (Mayr, 2002).

Nevertheless, as it is important to note that '*race/ethnicity*' is, on most occasions, interpreted as 'a social and political construction' (Omi & Winant, 1994). Although the definition of race reflects a type of 'self-identification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify' (Wheeler, 2005), it is interesting to note that some authors who have devoted their careers to intra- and inter-ethnic research, such as Shinagawa and Gin Yong Pang, prefer to emphasize that the perceptions of others are key in determining race. Shinagawa & Gin Yong Pang (1988) define *race* as 'a group of individuals who are given a set of values, beliefs, and stereotypical behaviour based upon their perceived visible averaged phenotype, most especially by their skin colour'.

It is therefore possible that individuals who do not identify as belonging to a particular race will still belong to it, nonetheless.

Accordingly, far from its reference to biological origins and physical appearance, over time ‘race has acquired a social meaning in which these biological differences, via the mechanism of stereotyping, have become markers for status assignment within the social system. The status assignment based on “skin colour identity” has evolved into complex social structures that promote a power differential between *whites*, on one side and various people-of-colour on the other (Pinderhughes, 1989).

### **(Racial) Colour-blindness**

Those who are (racially) colour-blind discourage overt references to ‘colour’ as the reasoning for why certain racial groups are ‘ahead’ or ‘behind’ others. Proclamations like ‘*I don’t care if you are black, white, green, or purple*’ and ‘*I don’t see colour*’ are examples of typical phrases that encourage specific behaviour while shaping the framework providing an understanding of prejudice in society.

Colour-blindness is an ideology that prohibits or makes it taboo to draw attention to a person’s race in explicit ways, while hidden phrases such as ‘ghetto’ and ‘welfare mothers’ still persist. Social scientists define (racial) colour-blindness as an ‘ideology in which all people are to be judged as individual human beings without regard to race or ethnicity’ (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007).

The assumption underlying a colour-blind approach is that as long as people do not see categories such as *race*, they are unlikely to present behaviours that are based on race.

Apfelbaum, Sommers & Norton (2008) determined that individuals who manifest colour-blind attitudes may fail to accept their own prejudices, because they tend to define *racist acts* or *racism* in terms which are self-excluding.

## **2 Unfavourable factors when publishing on issues of race and ethnicity**

Like gender, age, and culture, *race* and *ethnicity* are variables that are used throughout research, not only on epidemiology and sociology, but also on diversity management.

Undeniably, the problem is that the majority of us, and this is regardless of our racial affiliations, are taught that issues of race are topics that should not be confronted. It is certainly

true that we are uncomfortable talking (writing) about race. Due to that discomfort in business, the pretence is usually that (racial) differences should better go unnoticed; moreover, we do not always possess the skills required to engage in deep discussions on the topic, leading to us avoiding it at all costs.

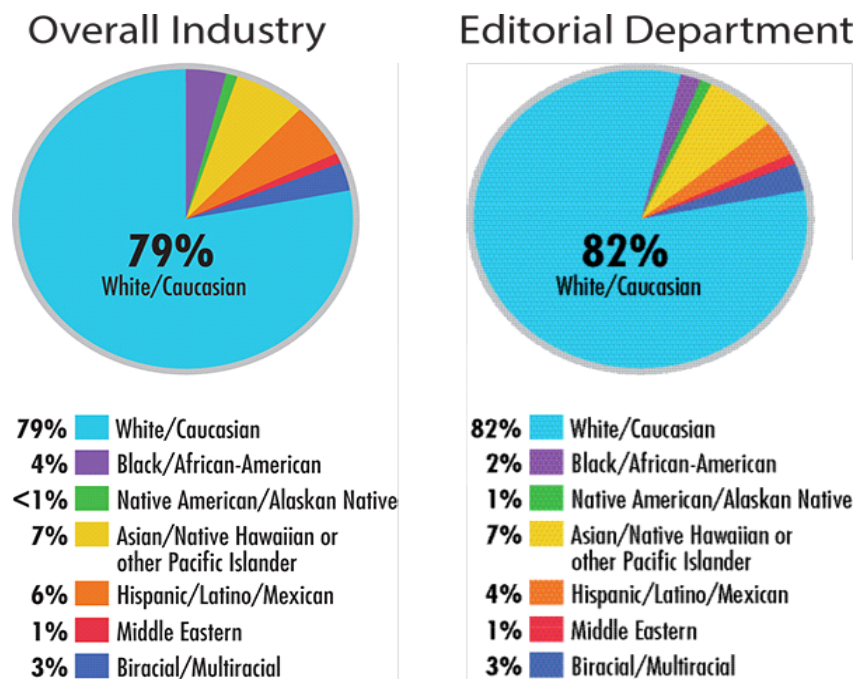
However, the uncomfortable truth, as Frankenberg (1993) argues in her book '*White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*', is that our daily lives are affected by race and diversity, whether we are aware of it or not.

Many *whites* in western countries who engage in racial conversations express honest beliefs that 'racism and racial issues are things of the past, that whites do not harbour racist beliefs, that anyone who works hard today can succeed.' Moreover, the publishing industry in countries such as the USA, where large ethnic groups exist, is overwhelmingly white (see *Graph 1 below*) and, in general, racial issues are mostly considered to be minority issues. Consequently, is there a 'natural' disinterest in manuscripts on issues that are no longer of actual importance for the mainstream white population that controls the publishing industry?

Skrentny (2015), a sociologist and the author of *After Civil Rights: Racial Realism in the New American Workplace*, suggested that it is important to look at broader data when considering why book publishing has such a high concentration of white faces in its ranks. Most jobs in publishing houses require college degrees and, as Skrentny (2015, p. 155) noted, recent census data shows that 73% of Americans with such qualifications are white. Looking at the situation through this lens, the roots of the problem can be seen to extend well beyond the publishing industry itself.

Now, when editors of management journals show less interest on issues of race, is this also because publishers believe that articles on race and ethnicity do not 'sell'?

Undoubtedly, there are other dimensions to consider when examining the reasons for the lack of such articles in current management journals. The fact is that the publishing industry is overwhelmingly white (race), and, by acknowledging that racial issues affect *racial minorities* in western countries with primarily white populations, one can recognize that engaging in writing and publishing on the topic of race is not an easy task for ethnic minority and majority authors alike who are those interested in these issues.



**Graphic 1:** Racial composition of book publishers, based on data from the Diversity Baseline Survey.

**Source:** Jason Low, Sarah Park Dahlen, and Nicole Catlin. "Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results". *Lee & Low Blog*, 2016. <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/>

The system used for selecting papers for publication is ostensibly fair, but in practice tends to be highly biased: the type of article accepted for a particular journal is often based on tradition, but is also influenced by both the decisions (made by the editor) of the referees to whom the paper is sent for an opinion and, indirectly, the status of its author (Fernando, 2015).

It is true that some papers that have been published on issues of race, for example intelligence testing comparative studies in recent years, are racist and misleading. But how can one write on issues of race/ethnicity without giving the overwhelmingly *white* editors and reviewers the impression that 'they' are not necessarily the main reason for such research papers, that they are not merely the objects of examination?

Nevertheless, does a censorship system (or an unspoken device) exist for papers that use the word race (a term merely reserved to biomedical publications and human genetic research) in their title when it comes to management journals? Are these attributional *biases* is termed preemptive processing rooted in the prohibition of articles (and the complaints that followed by some scientists) on controversial issues such as biological determinism and early studies of differences in intelligence among races?

By now it is no secret that the lack of diversity in publishing is obvious. Most of the major management journals publish papers on issues with an emphasis on topics ranging from business economics to treasury management, innovation management, risk management, corporate finance and *diversity* management, to name just a few examples.

Yet, although interest in promoting diversity in business seems unquestionably *to be* embraced by many organizations, completed work on issues of *race* and *ethnicity* remains largely unpublished. Furthermore, even those articles that meet the basic standards of the editor are not favoured in the publishing industry. Indeed, very few research papers on this topic have found their way into the major international management journals. This literature review details the current situation of the overwhelming white publishing industry with editors that continue to show less interest in articles on comparative studies and the results of research on *race*, and this is regardless of the importance of these themes in the social science community.

### **3 Blind peer-reviewed: a fair but biased procedure**

The peer review process is used by almost all scientific journals, and *management journals* are no exception. Each paper submitted to a management journal is reviewed by the editor and, if it is judged to be suitable for the publication, it is then sent to one or more independent referees for a blind peer review. The most commonly known peer review model (Weller, 2001) is the blind review, which can be classified as:

- The single-blind review: in this model, the authors' identities are known to the reviewers, but the reviewers' identities are concealed from the authors.
- The double-blind review: in this model, both the authors' and reviewers' identities are concealed.
- The triple-blind peer review: this model tries to keep both the authors' and reviewers' identities concealed from the editor. A submission management system automatically assigns a number to each paper, deleting the authors' details and affiliations.

Yet, on what basis does the editor act? What influences his or her decisions? Surely, the main influence is the opinion of the experts who review a paper? The editor generally knows the referees' identity, affiliation, gender, and race (open peer review), and undoubtedly, prestige does not protect against the intrusion of bias against an author or the careless reading of a manuscript (Schatz, 2004).

A quick summary of the strengths and weaknesses by Wilsdon (2016) is as follows:

Weaknesses of Peer Review	<i>Strengths of Peer Review</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is slow, inefficient and expensive, although most costs are hidden.</li> <li>• Human judgement is subjective – which may also be seen as a strength (Lee, C. J., Sugimoto, C. R., Zhang, G., and Cronin, B. (2013). Bias in peer review. <i>Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology</i>, 64(1): 2-17. DOI:10.1002/asi.22784.).</li> <li>• It is almost by definition not transparent.</li> <li>• It is inconsistent, sometimes characterized by a lack of inter-rater reliability.</li> <li>• It is a biased process (e.g. biased against negative studies in publication decisions; biased in favour of prestigious institutes; biased in favour of dominant paradigms).</li> <li>• Its bias is strengthened by the Matthew effect (Merton, R. K. , 1968). <i>The Matthew Effect in Science</i>. <i>Science</i>, 159: 56-62; Merton, R. K. (1988). <i>The Matthew Effect in Science, II: Cumulative Advantage and the Symbolism of Intellectual Property</i>. <i>ISI</i>, 79: 606-623).</li> <li>• The process can be abused (e.g. to block competitors, to plagiarise).</li> <li>• It is not very good at identifying errors in data or even in detecting fraudulent research (Martin, B. (1992). <i>Scientific Fraud and Power Structure of Science</i>. <i>Prometheus</i>, 10(1): 83-98, DOI: 10.1080/0810902908629515).</li> <li>• It cannot process the complete research output of a nation and will therefore result in distorted rankings.</li> <li>• It cannot provide information about the productivity and efficiency of the research system.</li> <li>• The selection of peer reviewers may create problems for a variety of reasons (bias, lack of experts in emerging and interdisciplinary areas, lack of experts due to the speed of research areas, etc.).</li> </ul>	<p><i>Its foundation in specialized knowledge of the subject, methodology and literature is relevant for specific decisions.</i></p> <p><i>Its social nature.</i></p> <p><i>The subjectivity of this approach could be seen as a strength (as well as a weakness).</i></p> <p><i>It can help to assess elements of research that are challenging to quantity, e.g. novelty.</i></p> <p><i>It can deliver more nuanced and detailed understandings of research in the context of research production.</i></p>

*Source:* Wilsdon, J. (2016). *The metric tide: independent review of the role of metrics in research assessment*



and management. Sage.

Within these standards parameters, sometimes editors accept or reject a particular manuscript with no input from reviewers (Weller, 2001). In ‘*Eight reasons I rejected your article*’, Thrower (2012), Editor-in-Chief of *Carbon*, the international journal of the American Carbon Society, reveals the top reasons why so many manuscripts do not make it to the peer review process:

- **It fails the technical screening** (*e.g. contains elements that are suspected to be plagiarized, the English is poor, the figures are not complete or are not clear enough to read*).
- **It does not fall within a journal’s aims and scope** (*articles should cover subjects falling within the scope of the journal that are of active current interest*).
- **It is incomplete** (*it discusses findings in relation to some of the work in the field but ignores other important work*).
- **The procedures and/or analysis of the data is seen to be defective** (*the analysis is not statistically valid or does not follow the norms of the field*).
- **The conclusions cannot be justified on the basis of the rest of the paper** (*the arguments are illogical, unstructured or invalid*).
- **It is simply a small extension of a different paper, often from the same authors** (*the work is clearly part of a larger study, chopped up to make as many articles as possible*).
- **It is incomprehensible** (the language, structure, or figures are so poor that the merit cannot be assessed).
- **It is boring (the work is not of interest to the readers of the specific journals)**.

While my own research on race/ethnicity has not primarily been on the topic of the problems and challenges of publishing academic papers, I have been astonished to observe how few articles on racial issues are published. Surely, there are many reasons for their rejection? The editor might have decided that the work does not fit the journal’s general philosophy or purview, or the methodology approach and, therefore, the results are judged to be inappropriate.

#### 4 Recommendations

With reference to the reflections developed in this paper, I recommend:

- To the international management journal editors: more openness to diversity and issues of race and ethnicity; recruit more experts as referees who are open to research on issues of

race; allow more equality in opportunities by making minority issues just as important as other issues of contemporary society.

- To *minority* academic writers: cultivate interest in themes such as race and ethnicity, because with a sufficient research database more research can be repeated; do not accept the social order, namely that most research on issues of race and ethnicity is conducted in the USA, and therefore more researchers from other countries are needed. Do not hesitate, submit your paper.
- To majority (white) academic writers: you could do more, as your chances of being published are higher, and also because you were previously able to publish in highly rated journals, so your contributions to writing on issues of race and ethnicity are of immense advantage to the entire scientific world. You can add to diversity in publishing just by writing on issues that put human differences into the light.

## Conclusion

It is true that parts of academia still offer a privileged existence, but this increasingly comes with a price: ‘Unless you publish regularly in a range of identified journals, you can’t be a legitimate academic’ (Murray & Moore, 2006). So, writing and publishing is – besides accumulating items for your CV – a way to learn (in a contained environment) the basics of a professional academic life, such as the social procedures, the routine psychological and political conflicts, and the ethical issues (Striphas, 1998). Accordingly, we must never lose sight of the importance of continuing to publish in ‘legitimate’ academic journals. Furthermore, most importantly, it is the responsibility of academics to write and research on whatever they are passionate about, and issues of race and ethnicity are not, and should not be, an exception. Race is not the only factor that defines people. Gender, religion, sexuality, trauma history and socioeconomic status (to name just a few) are variables that affect diversity in management and can be the database that aids in population studies that help us to understand the mechanisms of human intergroup relations in business. Promoting colour-blindness is easy, but acting accordingly in the sense of allowing differences to be researched is a better way to achieve an equality of opportunities.

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