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# Indigenous Knowledges and Scholarly Publishing: The Failure of Double-blind Peer Review

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## Abstract

At its core, academic knowledge production is predicated on Western notions of knowledge historically grounded in a Euro-American, White, male worldview. As a component of academic knowledge production, scholarly publishing shares the same basis of Whiteness. It excludes knowledge that doesn't conform to White, Western notions of knowledge, forces conformity to (and therefore reinforcement of) a Western standard of writing/knowledge, and leads to a reverence of peer-reviewed literature as the only sound source of knowledge. As a tool of scholarly publishing and the editorial process, blind peer review, though perhaps well intentioned, is fraught with problems, especially for BIPOC researchers and writers. It fails in its intended purpose to drastically reduce or eliminate bias and racism in the peer review and editorial processes; shields peer reviewers and editors against accusations of bias, racism, or conflicts of interest; and robs BIPOC, and particularly Indigenous, writers and researchers from having the opportunity to develop relationships with those that are reviewing and publishing their work.

*Keywords*: Indigenous Knowledges, Scholarly Publishing, Peer Review, Whiteness, Systemic Racism

At its core, academic knowledge production is predicated on Western notions of knowledge historically grounded in a Euro-American, White, male worldview. Such a system is necessarily exclusionary. As a result, bias against Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) and LGBTQ2+ researchers, women, and other minority groups is commonplace. The global hegemony of Whiteness in academic knowledge production forces scholars of colour and those that consume academic knowledge to frame themselves in the context of Whiteness and the Euro-American values, beliefs, and worldviews it presents. Academic knowledge production presents the White Euro-


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American knowledge system as normal and the status quo, othering different ways of knowing, thereby furthering the underlying racial inequalities by reinforcing White standards of knowledge.

Just as academic knowledge is predicated in Whiteness, so, too, is the standard form of writing used in academia. The scholarly publishing system requires BIPOC scholars to "produce technical knowledge that conforms to Western standards of truth and validity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 6). For example, the scholarly publishing environment is fundamentally at odds with Indigenous Knowledges grounded in the Oral Tradition, and non-Indigenous peer-reviewers and editors overwhelmingly lack the cultural context to critique, let alone understand, them (Vowel, 2016). With this ignorance comes the likelihood of increased rejections of writing and research by Indigenous scholars due to not conforming to the research and writing standards of the Western knowledge-privileging scholarly publishing system. Markers often found in work by Indigenous writers (such as those stemming from writing tracing back to the Oral Tradition, or the practice of locating oneself in the writing) are almost impossible to blind, certainly without diluting or diminishing the intent of the work.

The general consensus on peer review seems to be that it is a time-honoured academic tradition. Double-blind peer review, in particular, is often touted as the gold standard of peer review. However, its history is one of contention. The system we are familiar with today did not come into existence until the 1960s and 70s. Since its inception there have been questions of the system's subjectivity and bias and alternatives like open peer review are gaining traction along with openness (open access publishing, open education resources, and open data) in education in general.

Within the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed literature exists the assumption that scholarly peer-reviewed journals only produce trustworthy, correct, and good research, and the only source for such research is scholarly peer-reviewed journals (Vazire, 2020). This system privileges Western knowledge and means that BIPOC scholars, to be heard, are often "compelled to become complicit with White Euro-American hegemonic knowledge, further perpetuating the hegemony of White knowledge" (Kubota, 2019, p. 1). The reverence of peer-reviewed research along with the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research means writing and

knowledge not passed through the scholarly publishing environment is less valued and presented as less important. Research and writing that doesn't conform to Western standards of knowledge and writing, therefore, are not accepted for peer-reviewed publication, and are then viewed as poor or bad research. All together, this produces a cycle of Whiteness in academic knowledge production, writing, and publishing that

1. excludes knowledge or research that doesn't conform to White, Western notions of knowledge, like Traditional Indigenous Knowledges or other research by BIPOC scholars;
2. forces conformity to, and therefore reinforcement of, a Western standard of writing/knowledge; and
3. leads to a reverence of peer-reviewed literature as the only sound source of knowledge.

Double-blind peer review is often praised for its ability to combat editor and peer-reviewer bias by blinding (or hiding) author and peer-reviewer identities, thus hypothetically allowing BIPOC scholars, women, and other excluded minority groups to participate in the scholarly publishing process on equal footing to those privileged by the system. Unfortunately, double-blind peer review does little to combat the systemic racism inherent in the scholarly publishing environment. As a tool of scholarly publishing and the editorial process, blind peer review, though perhaps well intentioned, is fraught with problems, especially for BIPOC researchers and writers.

Despite being hailed as a panacea against prejudice, double-blind peer review does not unequivocally eliminate implicit bias. According to data from 2014 to 2016, the double-blind grant application process of the National Institutes of Health disadvantaged Black applicants, whose award probability was just 55% of that found for White applicants (Erosheva et al., 2020, p. 1). There is no question that there are numerous contributing factors to this discrepancy, but it belies the claim that simply blinding the name of an author eliminates bias. Racial bias also intersects with gender bias in the academic knowledge production and publishing field, even in blinded peer review. In a 2013 analysis of 8 million papers, West et al. (2013) noted that gender bias and discrimination remain at some level across many disciplines and fields of study. Perhaps unsurprising given the gender gap in published work, the study also highlighted

gender bias in the peer-review process. For example, papers of equal quality are more likely to be accepted for review and publication if men occupy the prestigious author positions (such as first author) rather than women. Another study was unable to conclude that double-blind peer review had any positive effect on female representation in scholarly authorship (Engqvist & Frommen, 2008).

Indeed, blinding doesn't just protect against accusations and retribution, "it protects the vindictive, by concealing evidence of critical explanatory events and by hiding track records of bad behaviour" (Bastian, 2017). This is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1845, referees were described as "full of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness...using the cover of anonymity to advance their personal interests" (Csiszar, 2016, p. 308). For BIPOC scholars contributing within the confines of the systemic racism of academic publishing, the bias can be worse than vindictiveness. Conflicts of interest, explicit racism, and other forms of prejudice can remain undetected, protected by the double-blinding process that offers no accountability for reviewer's comments kept out of the public eye.

Euro-American knowledge grounded in Whiteness is, at its core, individualistic and gives rise to the 'publish or perish' axiom of academia, which places it in stark contrast to the Indigenous methodology of working from the basis of relationships, a key element of all aspects of life, which applies to writing and publishing Indigenous Knowledges in academia (Akiwenzie-Damm et al., 2017). Such a system of relationships, collaboration, and community-minded interactions based on trust and honesty is antithetical to double-blind peer review, because the blinding process actively aims to eliminate it. However, such a methodology is necessary in scholarly publishing when reviewing authentic Indigenous Stories or Knowledges, because non-Indigenous publishers and journals with non-Indigenous editors and peer-reviewers don't understand Indigenous Cultural Protocols, literary traditions, Indigenized forms and genres, Indigenized forms of English, and the ongoing and intergenerational trauma from the colonization process (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2016; Unreserved, 2018). This lack of understanding has severe historical and present-day implications: "Indigenous voices have been and continue to be ignored, suppressed, misrepresented, whitewashed, or stolen by settler publishers who don't understand the protocols" (Taylor, 2020, p. 226).

Altogether, the effects of double-blind peer review and the publishing system in general, rife with systemic racism, present a single narrative privileging Western knowledge and research. The problems of bias and prejudice within scholarly publishing are not exclusive to double-blind peer review, but that particular system does have negative implications for BIPOC writers, scholars, and researchers. Failing in its primary goal of concealing the identity (or identifiable characteristics) of scholars, paired with its shielding of anonymous peer reviewers from consequences for reviewing with bias, prejudice, or conflict of interest, double-blind peer review is a broken system. The reverence of peer-reviewed research along with the binary of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research means writing and knowledge not passed through the scholarly publishing environment is less valued and presented as less important. Reimagining peer review in scholarly publishing, the supposed gold standard in academic publishing, to include an emphasis on relationship building between Indigenous scholar, editor, and peer reviewers allows Indigenous Peoples to present information about themselves and ensure it is published in a culturally appropriate and accurate way, something that double-blind peer review simply does not allow. Developing relationships allows editors and peer reviewers to build knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures (and in particular that of the writer), learn from Indigenous scholars, and thus begin to review with sensitivity, and allows Indigenous scholars to “ensure that Indigenous material is expressed with the highest possible level of cultural authenticity, and in a manner that follows Indigenous Protocols and maintains Indigenous cultural integrity” (Younging, 2018, p. 38). By following Indigenous Protocols and developing relationships based on trust with Indigenous scholars, editors and peer reviewers can begin to challenge the Cycle of Whiteness in scholarly publishing.

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