

Editorial

Peer Review Week 2021: Identity in Peer Review

The Journal of Neuroscience will celebrate Peer Review Week this year by thanking some of our most dedicated reviewers personally and acknowledging a few of them publicly. That acknowledgment of the time, effort, and commitment our peer reviewers contribute is the best part of Peer Review Week. Our reviewers and editors have been stretched past previous limits by the demands that the COVID-19 pandemic put on us as scientists, mentors, teachers, clinicians, parents, caregivers, and human beings. This year the theme of Peer Review Week is “Identity in Peer Review,” which is particularly appropriate, since combining our identities as peer reviewers and all the other roles we take on has been especially challenging during the pandemic.

One of the reasons I agree to review manuscripts is that my identity as a scientist includes providing feedback to other scientists before their work becomes part of our collective “permanent record” in the published literature. However, my identity as a peer reviewer is often in conflict with my other identities. The time I spend reviewing manuscripts is sometimes at the expense of the time needed for my identity as a principal investigator who needs to meet with, write, and edit manuscripts from laboratory members, as a teacher and mentor who needs to lecture or provide feedback on thesis work and career development, or as a human being who needs to take care of family members, cook, eat, sleep, and just take time to enjoy other aspects of life. And yet, when a request comes in to review a manuscript, our reviewers step up to help our colleagues improve their work, maybe because of a sense that it contributes to the field, excitement to read about what interesting things are being done by our colleagues, and the satisfaction of being at least a small part of that work by suggesting how to control for confounds or present outcomes more clearly.

As we have tried to keep our work as scientists and our lives as human beings going during the pandemic, the intersection between scientific identity and ethnic identity has also made disparities in opportunity and privilege starkly clear. Racial disparities in COVID-19–related deaths and violence against Black Americans have re-emphasized the disproportionate physical and emotional burdens borne by scientists of color. Meanwhile, efforts to address racial inequities tax the time of those who are most affected by those inequities, leaving less time for other work.

The identity of caregiver of young children or other family members is also often in conflict with our identity as scientists. The time spent doing scientific work felt very precious to me when my child was young and day care hours were the limit of

my time available to work. Providing care for an elderly parent or someone who is ill or disabled can be overwhelming and is often at odds with time spent doing scientific work. During the pandemic, many parents with young children found themselves in an impossible situation with no support and multiple identities merging and requiring the same chunks of time. For some families, the burden of childcare fell disproportionately on women, and the consequences of the pandemic on the careers of young female scientists is a major concern.

This raises the question of how to make sure that the peer review process benefits from the diversity of opinions of the scientific community while recognizing that the burdens of life as a scientist are not shared equitably. First, it is critical to include scientists in the peer review process who represent our field in all its diversity. This includes scientific discipline, ethnicity, geography, gender, career stage, and sexual orientation, among others. Next, we must recognize that those who are underrepresented in neuroscience also face increased demand for service on task forces, committees, editorial boards, and as peer reviewers. That means that invitation into leadership positions based on service should recognize that contribution to any one of those activities should be judged on quality rather than quantity to any one activity. We must invite all our constituents to the table, and accept with gratitude the time that can be devoted, or the decision to decline if another obligation is simply too much. Finally, it means that we should include diverse voices in the conversation as we discuss changes to peer review, and what the peer review process will look like in the future. This has been a period of innovation in peer review, with greater discussion between peer reviewers to get to consensus and more openness in the peer review process. These changes may have disparate effects on reviewers with different identities. For example, de-anonymizing peer review can have very different outcomes for those with power in the scientific community compared with those who are marginalized. As we continue to work toward greater equity in the peer review process, it will be important to remember that multiple solutions will be necessary to accommodate the many identities represented in the scientific community.

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