

Editorial

Science Has a Racism Problem

We are the editors of a science journal, committed to publishing and disseminating exciting work across the biological sciences. We are 13 scientists. Not one of us is Black. Underrepresentation of Black scientists goes beyond our team—to our authors, reviewers, and advisory board. And we are not alone. It is easy to divert blame, to point out that the journal is a reflection of the scientific establishment, to quote statistics. But it is this epidemic of denial of the integral role that each and every member of our society plays in supporting the status quo by failing to actively fight it that has allowed overt and systemic racism to flourish, crippling the lives and livelihoods of Black Americans, including Black scientists.

Science has a racism problem.

Look to the history of human genetics, a field that has been used repeatedly as scientific rationale for the definition of human “races” and to support inherent inequalities. Proponents of eugenics use the alleles we carry as reason to declare racial superiority, as if expression of a lactase gene has bearing on one’s humanity. Race is not genetic.

Look to the exploitation of Black research subjects. Acknowledge the sheer volume of past and current scientific research made possible by cells stolen decades ago from Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman with cancer. Remember the Tuskegee syphilis study that intentionally withheld appropriate treatment to hundreds of Black men. Think about the issues of consent, of ownership, and of medical ethics and do not overlook the shared role of race in these violations.

Look to the extreme disparity in the genetic and clinical databases scientists have built, with the overwhelming majority of data from white Americans of European descent and the resulting dearth of understanding of health and disease in Black individuals. Read statistics about morbidity and mortality disparities in hospitals around the country, highlighted by the current pandemic—ask why Black women are five times more likely than white women to die during pregnancy, or why Black infants are twice as likely to die as white babies born in the US. Black health has never been the priority.

Science has a racism problem. And it is not limited to scientific discoveries and their attendant usage. The scientific establishment, scientific education, and the metrics used to define scientific success have a racism problem as well.

Black Americans face a mountain of challenges built on centuries of systemic structural racism and the United States’ history of slavery and racial oppression. Educational opportunities, mentorship and representation, and our ingrained, often unconscious attitudes all play a role. The gatekeeping system in academia, industry, and scientific organizations was not designed to correct for centuries of compounded disadvantage and oppression. It is time for renovation.

We urge our community members who have the means to enact change to do so. Hiring committees, educators, mentors,

admissions committees, classmates, researchers—what can you do to raise up Black students and colleagues in your communities and institutions? None of us individually can stem the tide of racism or rebuild an unjust society, but every action helps.

We are part of the problem, as are all of us who do not press for change on a daily basis. It should not have taken the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery for us to speak and to act. We are asking ourselves what we can do to be stronger allies, stronger anti-racists.

Cell stands with our Black readers, reviewers, authors, and colleagues. We are committed to listening to and amplifying their voices, to educating ourselves, and to finding ways that we can help and do better. We alone cannot fix racism. But we have the advantage of having a platform, so we will put in the work, we will listen, and we will act.

As a start, we are committing to the following actions to highlight and increase representation of Black scientists:

1. Representing – we will feature and amplify Black and other underrepresented minority authors of *Cell* papers on social media. If you are a person of color and you wish to be highlighted in this way, please tell us. Email the editor of your paper with the subject line “Faces of Cell” at any point in the publication process, and we will be honored to post about your paper with your photo and/or your Twitter handle and to re-tweet and amplify your own posts and stories.
2. Educating – we are committed to featuring issues of importance to the scientific community in our pages. We pledge to purposefully highlight Black authors and perspectives in the review and commentary content that we commission and publish and to share these with the greater scientific community. Has your department or institute already made changes or launched successful initiatives? Tell us, and we will try to find ways to share those stories. Have new ideas? Let us know.
3. Diversifying – we pledge to improve the diversity of our advisory board and our reviewer pool, using our experience with gender equity initiatives to increase representation of non-white scientists, which is far too low. We are actively investigating ways to improve diversity through our outreach, recruiting, and hiring efforts, at *Cell* and across Cell Press. If you are a Black scientist with an interest in editorial careers, get in touch. We’re eager to talk.
4. Listening – we are editors because we want to learn. If there are ways that we can use our voice and our platform to help the Black scientist community, we want to hear them. Please email us if you have concrete ideas for

perspectives you want to see or creative ways that you think we can help. We promise to hear them.

We and our colleagues across Cell Press hope to serve as one small part of amplifying Black voices in STEM, and this is just the

beginning. We are learning, and we will almost certainly make mistakes along the way. But silence is not, and never should have been, an option.

Science has a racism problem. Scientists are problem solvers. Let's get to it.

The Cell Editorial Team

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