

Editorial: Editorial bias

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As is often the case, it was short article by another editor that started me wondering about potential unconscious bias in the way the *Education & Self Development* editorial team decides to accept the 'best' articles for publication, asks for revisions on others, and rejects the remainder. In her article, Deborah Bowman (2019) reviews a fascinating account of how the research into the causes of cholera went un-reported in the medical literature of the day, because it conflicted with the long-held views of the majority of the medical profession (see Johnson, 2006).

I would like to think that *E&SD* and its reviewers do not operate any conscious bias against authors from any particular group, or against views that are contrary to perceived wisdom. However, there are a number of ways in which unconscious bias might affect the treatment of a submission. Here are four: there may be others!

Research may find that the effects of an innovation are either not significant or are contrary to commonly held expectations. This is sometimes the case in research into learning technology where it is widely 'known' that the innovation should produce positive results. It is important that sample sizes should be sufficiently large as to generate significant results and submissions may be rejected because they have used such small samples that statistical treatment is rather meaningless. The research should have been reported as a case study. However, what about situations whether the sample size is large but yields negative results? What we need here is honesty. Negative results are useful because they challenge our beliefs. Is there an explanation for the results? Perhaps the theory really is wrong! Some journals and some editors are reluctant to publish negative results but the policy of *E&SD* is that, if the research is sound and the article is clear and well written, they should be published.

It has been suggested that some journals have a bias against female authors. Perhaps there is less risk of gender bias in our field where there is far larger percentage of women researchers than in, say, engineering or physics. Where authors take the trouble to ensure that their manuscripts are anonymised, the blind reviewing process should minimise the risk of gender bias. It is interesting that this is less of a problem in an international journal where authors' names are less familiar to reviewers. Some years ago, I carried out a small and not very rigorous research project to examine whether reviewers could determine the author's gender from their name. Reviewers from Western countries had great difficulty in deciding the gender of authors from South-East Asia and the success rate was around 50% - ie, no better than guessing.

It is easy to apply preconceptions about the quality of a submissions from the country of origin. We may assume that the quality of research in certain countries is much lower than in our own and thus, that the quality of submissions from those countries will also be low. This is just not the case! Good papers can appear from the most unlikely sources and every submission should be judged on its own merits. The article may also give useful insights into the state of education and development in that country.

Finally (for this short editorial) there is personal bias, either for or against the authors, or the ideas that they are presenting in their work. We work in a field where we all know many other researchers. Even when the papers are made anonymous, it is sometimes possible to deduce the names of the authors – or at least the institutions where they work. The reviewer must put aside any personal bias when making their comments and recommendation. It should not matter whether you like the author or loathe them; whether you regard their institution in high regard or believe that it should be closed down! Similarly, it must not matter whether their approach and beliefs agree with your own, or whether you think they are misguided and just wrong! As reviewer or member of the editorial team, you have to rise above your personal views and judge the work on its merits. This may be difficult, but if it was easy then anyone could do it and you would not be a good and respected scholar.

Reviewers need to be aware of, and guard against, the possible causes of unconscious bias. The role of the reviewer is crucial in ensuring that the best, and unbiased research is published – in *E&SD* and other scholarly journals. It is an important task, with important responsibilities.

References

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