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ECONOMY

Economics Journals Faulted for Neglecting Studies on Race and Discrimination

Some editors defend their records, while others agree they need to do more to diversify their ranks and think differently about race-related work



The recent killing of George Floyd while in police custody has cast a spotlight on issues of racial inequality in the field of economics.

PHOTO: NICHOLAS PFOSI/REUTERS

By [Amara Omeokwe](#)

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Some economists say their field's most prestigious journals haven't been particularly receptive to scholarly work related to race and discrimination, effectively marginalizing such studies and their authors.

The result has been to discourage research on such topics and limit the writers' careers, some people in the field say. That, in circular fashion, limits the diversity of thought at the major journals, whose editors serve as gatekeepers for the profession and whose publications influence national economic policy making.

“These journals are supposed to be trendsetters, they're supposed to serve as the beacon for where the discipline is going,” said Rodney Andrews, associate professor of economics

at the University of Texas, Dallas. “So if you notice a lack of papers in those journals that address [race-related issues], then one could infer that maybe those issues are not as important,” he said.

Some editors at the top economics journals defend their track records, but others agree they need to do more to diversify their ranks and think differently about race-related work.

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The discussions come as the recent killing of George Floyd while in police custody has cast a spotlight on issues of racial inequality. The American Economic Association, meanwhile, has said it wants to improve the profession’s climate, after a survey released last year and other developments revealed concerns about racial and gender discrimination in the field.

The publication process is highly competitive. The five journals widely considered in the profession to be the most prestigious—the American Economic Review, *Econometrica*, the Journal of Political Economy, the Quarterly Journal of Economics and the Review of Economic Studies—each receive roughly 1,000 to 2,000 submissions a year and each typically publish several dozen to around 100 articles a year.

Papers are subject to peer review by so-called referees and to revisions before they are accepted and published, a process that can take months or years.

Between 1990 and 2018, 10 economics journals, including the top five, published 105 empirical papers focused on topics such as discrimination, bias and disparities, according to research by the economists Aislinn Bohren, Alex Imas, Kareem Haggag and Devin Pope.

Of those 105 papers, 58 were about race, according to the economists' working paper, which looks at how economic research may sometimes miscategorize types of discrimination.

Mr. Andrews said that because some of the top journals are housed within elite economics departments—such as those at the University of Chicago and Harvard University—the publishing process can sometimes favor researchers with connections to those places.



Rodney Andrews of the University of Texas, Dallas, said the publishing process can sometimes favor researchers with ties to elite economics departments.

“Given the dearth of Black scholars at these elite institutions and absent those social networks, it can make it difficult to publish on those topics where explicitly you say racism, discrimination, systemic racism are likely contributors to the issues that we study,” he said.

Publication in a top journal typically carries significant career rewards, often factoring into hiring, promotion, pay and tenure decisions at colleges and universities.

The question of how race-related research fares in the publication process received renewed attention recently because of the criticism of the lead editor at the Journal of Political Economy, Harald Uhlig, a University of Chicago economist.

Mr. Uhlig drew fire for Twitter comments criticizing the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements, and for past comments about race-related issues on his blog. He later apologized on Twitter in the midst of calls that he step down from the journal.

Some people in the field said Mr. Uhlig's comments raised questions about his ability to evaluate research on race and discrimination fairly. Lead editors, such as Mr. Uhlig, typically make initial determinations of whether papers are rejected or continue in the review process.

Mr. Uhlig has remained in his editor post and, in an email, called concern over his judgment a "nonissue," suggesting that authors who have reservations about him could have their papers reviewed by one of the journal's other editors.

He said the Journal of Political Economy had published papers on race and discrimination "and welcomes submissions of highest quality in that area."

Samuel Myers, a professor and economist at the University of Minnesota, said the rate at which race- and discrimination-related papers are published is hindered in part by the way the field has traditionally viewed such research.



The top journals ‘have been less willing to take a chance on a theoretical or empirical piece of work that deviates too much from the standard predictions,’ said Samuel Myers of the University of Minnesota.

PHOTO: HUBERT H. HUMPHREY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

“One of the components of race research in the economics profession is the belief that racial discrimination doesn’t exist and that there are other reasons, other factors that could explain differences in” outcomes such as arrest and homeownership rates, Mr. Myers said.

A 2005 research paper from Mr. Myers and fellow economists Patrick Mason and William “Sandy” Darity found that papers with at least one Black author were more likely to report a finding of racial discrimination than papers with no Black authors.

“The top journals historically have been less willing to take a chance on a theoretical or empirical piece of work that deviates too much from the standard predictions,” Mr. Myers said.

Esther Duflo, editor of the American Economic Review, a journal of the American Economic Association, said in an email that journal referees “tend to be very cautious.”

That dynamic, along with the field’s “reluctance to admit that racism exists,” can mean that “a paper that finds evidence of racial discrimination needs to work particularly hard to make its case with the referees; they will always try to find another story,” said Ms. Duflo, a Nobel Prize-winning economist.

“What we must do as editors is to be aware of this bias and mindful of it, so we can correct for it,” she said.

The American Economic Review currently has no African-Americans or Latinos among its 11 editors and co-editors, according to Ms. Duflo. She said the journal is open to race and discrimination research and offered several examples of recently published papers on these topics.

Lisa Cook, professor of economics at Michigan State University, said she became dismayed by a decadelong review process at top journals as she tried to publish a paper that concluded ethnic and political conflict may affect invention and economic growth over time. Her analysis made the point by linking mass violence against African-Americans between 1870 and 1940 to a decline in patent rates among Black inventors.

Ms. Cook said referees objected not to her findings but to certain details and assumptions included in the paper. She said they asked, for example, why she equated lynchings of African-Americans to extrajudicial killings.



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The comments “suggested to me that the referees didn’t understand U.S. history, so they didn’t understand the context,” Ms. Cook said.

The paper was ultimately published in the Journal of Economic Growth.

Lawrence Katz, an economist and a member of the board of editors at the Quarterly Journal of Economics, which is edited at Harvard University, said that the journal has increasingly published work on race and racial inequality since the 2000s but that the rate was still “far too low.”

Mr. Katz said he had reflected on some of the journal’s past decisions concluding that certain research submissions weren’t original enough. Research that may mirror past

findings but put them into the context of U.S. race relations, for example, “might be a really important issue that we should put more weight on,” Mr. Katz said.

He added: “I think being more open to diversity of context of papers is going to be very important going forward, as well as having a more diverse board itself.”

Guido Imbens, editor at *Econometrica*, a publication of the Econometric Society, said he has focused on diversifying the journal’s editorial board. One recently appointed co-editor is a woman, with another starting next summer.

Mr. Imbens said the profession overall has increasingly embraced publishing empirical work, which should allow for more publication of papers that deal with race and discrimination.

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How might the economics profession increase diversity in its ranks? Join the conversation below.

“I’m very interested in publishing papers of that type, and if I see papers like that, I would try to solicit them and I would encourage the authors to send them to us,” he said.

Directors of the editorial board at the U.K.-based Review of Economic Studies said in an email that it “aims at publishing research articles that stand at the frontier of knowledge, with no special focus on particular topics, but without any limitations regarding topics either.”

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