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Correspondence

Country information in titles – equality or equity

Kate Wilson ✉

Elsevier, London, United Kingdom
k.wilson.2@elsevier.com

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Asking where someone is from seems, on the surface, relatively innocuous, especially when viewed from my white, western perspective. However, for anyone who is not considered the 'default', that question is considered a micro-aggression, implying a lack of belonging and demoting that person to a second-class citizen. As Knipe and Jewkes[1] illustrated in their correspondence, such a question also applies to reporting the setting of studies. My first thought was to agree with them, that country information should be added to titles on all papers, but then I tested my thinking with the question, 'Are there any unintended consequences of doing this?' There is research on how the gender and country of authors can affect a paper's evaluation, but does bias also apply to the country of research and/or the ethnicity of the participants? Would including country information in a paper title affect not only how that paper was reviewed but also how that paper was read?

White participants are the majority in randomized clinical trials,[2] and their characteristics have consequently become the definition of 'normal' in terms of medical treatment.[3] Knipe and Jewkes' 'recommendations for equitable reporting for studies in human populations' (box 1 of Ref [1]) are that country information be included in the title of papers (as well as in the abstract and discussion), including for those that are western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) and not only for those from low- and middle-income countries (which has previously been the case). Including country information in titles for all countries may result in equality but potentially not equity. Titles are the first source of information for reviewers and readers, including important information they need when deciding how valuable, applicable, and worth their time is to read a paper. Therefore, would adding country information to all titles disadvantage researchers from non-WEIRD populations?

I was not aware of research on whether country information affects quality perception during peer review, so I did what all good researchers do – a Google search. I found only one relevant study, from 2015, titled 'Does a research article's country of origin affect perception of its quality and relevance? A national trial of US public health researchers', asking the question, 'Do they discriminate against sources that they might perceive to be so different from their own, or perceive to be so unlikely to produce good research'?[4] The study found that only one of the four abstracts showed bias, which is encouraging, but acknowledged more research is needed.[4]

Research in psychology journals shows that when the sample's country, other than the USA, is included in the title, that paper is cited less.[5] Kahalon et al.[5] hypothesized that 'Mentioning a specific country in the title might signal that the article's findings lack generalizability and, thus, are less relevant to one's own research. As Knipe and Jewkes[1] pointed out, country inclusion in titles happens more often for research that is not from WEIRD countries.

Taking these different dimensions into account, the discussion of how to reduce country bias does not seem so clear-cut and raises several questions:

- Should all papers include country information in their titles or no papers include this information? Is it different for different fields?
- How important is country information when evaluating a paper? Should country information be included only at the end of a paper, taken out of the methods? Or,

just as some journals anonymize author information during peer review, should country information also be anonymized?
- How can bias against research carried out in certain countries be addressed? Should this be addressed head-on, bringing attention to the potential bias?

Kahalon et al.[5] recommended that the country information not be included in the title and instead 'a proper description of the sample, including country, should appear in the abstract'. Knipe and Jewkes1 recommend that papers include the country in the title.

I have no answers to these questions, but to decrease bias and not accidentally increase it, I am throwing out these questions to people more knowledgeable than me (i.e., you, dear reader).

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