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# SAJS and the politics of inclusion and exclusion: An editor's reflections (2021–2024)

I have been lucky enough to have been Editor-in-Chief of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* since early 2021. When I learned in 2020 that my application for the post had been successful, I was struck by a mixture of delight and terror. In some ways this mixture will be familiar to any scientist who lands a big research grant – it is wonderful to be successful, but success marks the beginning of a period of hard work. In this case, however, there were some added concerns.

I am a clinical psychologist by profession and training, and shortly before beginning at SAJS I had completed a late-life second PhD, this time in English, built around a creative non-fiction memoir. As an undergraduate at the University of Cape Town in the 1970s, I had completed a combined degree, something which is no longer offered – I did a combined BA and BSc degree in Psychology and English, with sub-majors in Mathematics and Mathematical Statistics. This combined degree suited me perfectly as a young scholar with a strong interest in writing and in the social sciences, but also fascinated by the natural sciences and especially with numbers and statistics and with what they can and cannot tell us. My immediate predecessor as Editor-in-Chief was the globally renowned environmental and science historian Jane Carruthers. Like me, Jane is not a natural scientist, but her leading scholarship on histories of science, and especially histories of science in and of South Africa<sup>1</sup> and her ability to inform the readership of key global developments in the evolution of scientific terminologies<sup>2</sup>, to name two examples, placed her expertise in a special category. For the most part, though, my predecessors were esteemed natural scientists, globally known as Jane was, and though there is much to the cliché of standing on the shoulders of giants, there is also a long way to fall when the giants are tall.

There were longer shadows to my anxiety. I knew that I would be starting work at a journal which was very well functioning (quite how well, I did not learn until I started the job – there is a truly remarkable team at the Journal), so what extra, if anything, could I offer? I was also worried about the inevitable intertwining of the Journal with the broader political history of our country. The SAJS had been around for almost 120 years, and in that time, there had been only two Editors-in-Chief who were (white) women; I was the latest in a very long line of white men. I did not know who else had applied for the position and I was mindful of the fact that I had not appointed myself, so there must be some confidence in me personally. I also knew that the team who had appointed me must have been aware of imbalances in participation in science in South Africa on the basis of race, class, gender, disability and so on. But I could not deny that in my identity I embodied something – a tradition of exclusion and privilege. None of this was caused by any of my predecessors, and I knew many who had done their best to promote inclusion, but by my identity I reinforced the pattern. I was also aware that I was joining the Journal at a time when *debates about race* were particularly 'hot' at the Journal, following the publication of a commentary by Natrass<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, shortly after I started at the Journal, a potential reviewer indicated to me their refusal to review for us, on the grounds, according to them, that the Journal supported racist practices. I was not so naïve as to think that people with different ideological positions would not view my role at the Journal as problematic for a range of reasons; I also thought, though, that there were more important things to worry about than my own identity and how it would be perceived, and that I should focus on those.

I came to my role at the Journal with long experience in journal editorial work, both in South Africa and further afield (a product, as I was well aware, at least partly of my own unearned privilege). But I had been Editor-in-Chief of only one other journal, and this was the *African Journal of Disability*, which was started in 2012 by myself and others. That journal was specifically what may be termed 'developmental' from the start – we were explicitly interested in the work of first-time academic authors, and especially African authors with disabilities. Through my work at that journal and previous engagements with very talented African activists with disabilities<sup>4</sup>, I saw evidence of the harsh realities of processes of exclusion from knowledge – exclusion of people, and also exclusion of different kinds of knowledges. The reality and importance of histories of exclusion have long been recognised in South Africa<sup>5</sup>, and, as an aside, it is only in 2024 that arguably the globally leading journal in my home discipline, *American Psychologist*, published a major article dealing with epistemic exclusion<sup>6</sup>. It is not by accident that African, and specifically South African, scientists and ethicists have been at the forefront of drawing attention to vast inequities in science, as witnessed by the Cape Town Statement on fairness, equity and diversity in research, authored by Lyn Horn and colleagues<sup>7</sup>.

No journal can deal on its own with the enormous challenge of moving the field forward while addressing broader equity concerns, but I believe that it is important to make a contribution. As part of this, at the SAJS we have increased support for new and emerging authors, through free online monthly support group meetings<sup>8</sup>, and at least twice-yearly longer workshops, focusing on issues such as journal writing skills and peer review skills, recordings of which are available on our [YouTube channel](#). These meetings are well attended by people from a range of African countries, and our focus is on helping authors with publishing and peer review issues in a range of disciplines and journals, and not just our own. Although we receive consistently excellent feedback on these endeavours, we have not yet formally evaluated their impact, and this is a drawback, but it is important to recognise that this work is not part of the Journal's formal remit (we are not an educational or training institution, so we do this work, and, I believe, enjoy and benefit from it, as something of an extra). We are aware of the huge issues of imbalance in the pipeline of well-prepared scholars, which starts in the school system and probably earlier.<sup>9</sup> We are also aware of the barriers and challenges within the higher education system itself for progression and development of talented young scholars, notwithstanding important initiatives to address this.<sup>10–13</sup> An added challenge, of course, is that entangled with the generally well-intentioned wish to 'build capacity', there may be, to greater or lesser degree, a

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reproduction of histories of privilege and paternalism, a positioning of the 'emerging scholar' as somehow inherently weak or less competent than those doing the 'capacity building'<sup>14</sup> – an issue I discussed earlier in 2024 in a webinar, using, in part, the work of the SAJS as an exemplar. As long ago as 2001, Deborah Posel<sup>14</sup> noted that, in order to assess progress on employment equity and other important goals of the newly democratic South Africa, the country was resorting to using, and re-inscribing, the highly problematic apartheid 'racial' categories. Similarly, a recent book by Sharad Chari focusing on Durban is fittingly entitled *Apartheid Remains*.<sup>15</sup> All that we hope for, and achieve, in a better present is also inextricably intertwined with and often built on, a past we would sometimes rather forget or dispose of. This is true of all histories, no less so of the history of trying to contribute to changes in our Journal.

In this regard, in 2022, we introduced our new *Inclusive Language Policy*<sup>16</sup> after a long period of consultation and refinement – a document which we hope will grow and change over time. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, our attempt to help authors navigate the complex terrain of how to refer in an inclusive way to markers of race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and disability (to name the main categories we deal with), although widely applauded, was experienced by some as offensive, unnecessary, and patronising. There were also objections to our suggestion that authors should write as clearly and directly as possible, should avoid unnecessary jargon, and should be aware that most of our readership are not first language English speakers or expert in every subject which the Journal covers. Perhaps the most trenchant criticism in this regard was that our policy (which in our view was entirely consistent with and not a dramatic departure from what the Journal already had in place), if implemented, would reduce the level of SAJS to that of *Quest*, an ASSAf publication aimed at a very broad population, with a particular focus on school-level educators and the learners they teach. Although I am clearly not objective when I suggest that there has been no detectable decline in the academic rigour of the Journal since we introduced the Inclusive Language Policy, what I can say is that I believe the policy to be, like all our policies, subject to change and improvement, but also helpful and signalling a commitment to inclusion on our part. We have not done enough about the question of language – although I feel proud that we now share social media posts in a range of languages spoken in South Africa and further afield, we have not yet done enough to grasp the nettle of science communication and linguistic and cultural exclusion. We have been keen to solicit and publish (after our usual quality-control processes) items dealing with issues related to language and science<sup>17–20</sup>, building on a tradition of work in the Journal going back many years. But there is clearly more to do.

I joined the Journal when the world was still in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have had a number of pieces published on COVID-related issues, both before and during my time at the Journal, including the important special issue guest edited by Jonathan Jansen and Shabir Madhi, entitled, 'How to do social distancing in a shack: COVID-19 in the South African context'. Although COVID-19 and its aftermaths (like apartheid, in a slightly different sense) are still very much with us, it is worth reflecting on how the technological changes associated with managing the pandemic have had profound effects on the Journal and how it works. I have never been to the offices of ASSAf in general, or of our Journal, and it was only in my fourth year at the journal that I met most of my closest working colleagues face to face for the first time. I still have not met in person most of our Associate Editors, our Associate Editor Mentees or most members of our Editorial Advisory Board. In spite of this, I feel very warmly part of a collegial group, and supported by all. I feel much closer emotionally to some of my SAJS colleagues than to some people I see regularly in person at my own university. I don't fully understand this, but the issue of virtual versus in-person collaboration, of what communication technologies can and cannot achieve for the progress of science and research more generally, is an important topic for the future.<sup>21</sup> Related to this, I am proud that our Journal was early in developing a *Policy on the Use of AI and Large Language Models*, and to be part of broader ASSAf and SciELO endeavours in this area, but the terrain is shifting fast and we cannot be sure where this will take us.

During the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were two truisms that I often heard expressed. The first of these was that, although a novel challenge, the pandemic exposed issues that were there all along – it shone a light on what was previously in plain sight, but commonly not seen, especially regarding questions of inequality, exclusion, racism, misogyny, disablism, and so on. I think this is indeed so. The second thing commonly said is something I am far less sure about. Many of us have claimed that COVID has permanently and fundamentally altered how we view and live in the world. When I see the empty corridors in the university department where I work, I do see a dramatic change in work practices and social connections, especially as I know how easily I can reach colleagues online, wherever they are. But in other ways, and perhaps in similar ways as I have discussed the inevitability of social reproduction even in the context of deliberate change, I am not sure that COVID changed all that much, despite how it unsettled us all. This is, of course, a question for further research, and I do not feel qualified (nor do I wish) to prognosticate on what lies ahead for the next 120 years of the SAJS (should the Journal, or any journals, still exist). I have found in my very privileged time at SAJS that the balance between the comfort of familiarity and the unsettling excitement of challenge and change has made for a time of huge, and happy, learning for me. For this, unequal though I often feel to the task of being Editor-in-Chief of this Journal at this time in this country on this continent and in this world, I am very grateful.

## Declarations

L.S. is the current Editor-in-Chief of SAJS. There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.

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