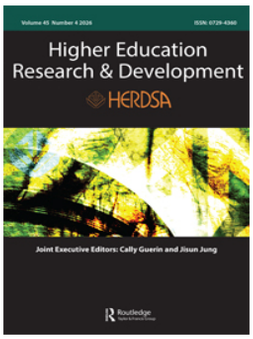

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Academics' perceptions and experiences of demographic influences on peer review: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

The peer review process for scholarly work originated in Eurocentric and hierarchical structures that can perpetuate oppression and harm. Experiences of peer review can vary among different demographic groups, raising equity concerns. Previous studies have also reported academics' emotional distress in relation to peer review. This paper uses data from a qualitative study involving 25 published academics from an Aotearoa / New Zealand university. These academics shared how aspects of their identities influenced their perceptions and experiences of peer review. Most participants felt that demographic factors – particularly gender and culture – influenced either the outcomes of, or their responses to, peer review. However, some were hesitant or uncertain about the impact of demographic factors or felt demographic factors had no impact on peer review or their responses to it. The findings raise questions related to privilege, disadvantage, and intersectionality. Overall, this study highlights the need for greater awareness of current risks and harms, as well as good practices, in order to ensure peer review is equitable, safe, and inclusive while preserving the vital role of research quality assurance.

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Peer review; demographics; equity; academic faculty; qualitative study

Introduction

Landscapes of privilege have historically shaped who was allowed to enter higher education (both as students and as staff) and informed the construction of the ideal academic subject as care-free, able-bodied, male, white, and middle- or upper-class (Locke & McChesney, 2023; Lynch, 2010; Thornton, 2013). In contrast, those who did not embody the ideal academic subject – including women, carers (Lynch, 2010), LGBTQIA+ people, Indigenous and migrant peoples, disabled peoples, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, neurodivergent people, and those from the Global South – faced barriers and discrimination (Atherton et al., 2024; Watt et al., 2021).

In recent decades, much critique has sought to overcome this heritage, reimagining a more inclusive and equitable academy. As well as calls to transform structures and

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practices that disadvantage non-dominant or marginalised groups, there have been calls for higher education to be more widely characterised by ethics of care that stand against neoliberal norms (e.g., Puāwai Collective, 2019; Schultz, 2022). Ethics of care encompass concern for equity, inclusion, and social justice; human flourishing; and caring relations among people (Held, 2018). Nevertheless, inequity and privilege persist in higher education today.

Amid the ongoing tension between powerful neoliberal forces and the efforts towards change, inclusivity, and equity in higher education, this paper considers the extent to which peer review of scholarly work is inclusive and equitable for diverse academics. Specifically, through a qualitative study, we examine 25 academics' perceptions of the impact of their demographics during the peer review process.

Academic peer review

In academic publications' peer review process, authors submit written manuscripts to be assessed by scholarly peers. According to Cranford (2020), the 'reviewer responsibility is to provide unbiased feedback in a timely manner on the scholarly merits and the scientific value of a considered work, with a focus on accuracy, originality, and interest to a journal's readers' (p. 1378). The 'merits' to examine vary between journals based on their disciplinary, ethical, clinical or theoretical focuses. Peer review also includes interactions between journal editors and reviewers (Drozdz & Ladomery, 2024), but for the most part, authors interact in writing with the reviewers and provide a cover letter to the editor.

Peer review processes aim to provide unbiased, expert-informed assessment of scholarly work. Unbiased feedback is most often proposed through ensuring neither the reviewer nor the authors know each other's identities (double-blind peer review). However, some journals offer an open model of review in which authors' and reviewers' identities are known to each other. This is intended to encourage transparent reviews and improve accountability, and sometimes also involves making available reviewer reports and previous versions of manuscripts leading up to publication (e.g., BMJ Open). Thus, in theory, quality peer review processes promote confidence in research findings as legitimate contributions to existing knowledge and to the journals that publish them (Bannister & Janssen, 2019).

Challenges of academic peer review

Despite the hope that the peer review process will result in an unbiased examination of the merits of a piece of scholarship, in practice, peer review can be problematic. Challenges in reviewer selection arise as more senior reviewers turn down invitations to review and/or concentrate more on reviewing for higher-impact journals (El-Guebaly et al., 2022). In the current neoliberal climate, academics may seek to avoid or reduce non-promotable, invisible labour such as providing peer reviews. According to a recent categorisation by Horta and Santos (2025), 'selfish reviewers' (who made up over 60% of Horta and Santos's sample) publish more than they review and tend to give shorter review reports than 'diligent' or 'prolific' reviewers. It can thus be challenging

for journals to secure comprehensive and suitably qualified assessments of manuscripts under consideration.

The peer review process also falsely assumes all reviewers will know how to review and have a common understanding of the journal's requirements (Badenhorst et al., 2020; Samraj, 2016; Swales & Feak, 2011). Early career reviewers may have limited training in peer review (Weaver et al., 2022). Moreover, even for experienced reviewers with relevant expertise, a lack of time to perform the voluntary role of reviewer in sufficient depth (Lu, 2013) can lead to shallow, irrelevant or factually inaccurate feedback.

Peer review requires significant subjective judgement, as (imperfect) people engage in the subjective process of interpreting and examining language. As such, it cannot be wholly void of bias. Bias can be introduced by both editors and reviewers during peer review (e.g., editors may favour Western names while reviewers may be more critical of non-standard English). Likewise, the 'dogma of reviewers' leaning towards particular paradigms or theories can result in delays or introduce 'classical bias' that demands for change (Haffer et al., 2019, p. 671).

Inequitable outcomes of peer review (suggestive of reviewer bias, whether conscious or unconscious) have been documented in relation to various demographic and sociocultural factors. For example, language is shaped by culture, gender, and experiences, and so authors and reviewers may infer a sense of each other's identity positioning (such as demographic, geographic, or philosophical positions) through their use of language (Medical Research Council, 2022). This perception can – consciously or unconsciously – shape interpretations and decisions in some cases. For example, in some studies, blind peer reviewers have been shown to attribute lower scores to work from female authors (Fox & Paine, 2019; Kolev et al., 2019). The academic publishing landscape is also dominated by English-language publications and competitive journal ranking systems that privilege particular journals and the forms of social or linguistic capital that afford entry to those journals. Non-native speakers of English report harsher critique of their language standard leading to rejection of their papers, therefore reducing opportunities for these scholars to contribute to global scientific work (Amano et al., 2023). Indeed, a study by Politzer-Ahles et al. (2020) found that 'abstracts with international academic-standard English may tend to be judged as having higher scientific quality than abstracts with identical scientific content but English that does not meet international standards' (p. 9). Overall, these findings trouble our trust in the peer-review process and raise questions around who decides what work (or whose work) should be published (Amano et al., 2023; Haffer et al., 2019). Greater awareness is needed of how people experience the review process; this can offer insight into how traditional processes can be disrupted and reformed.

The present study: understanding academics' perceptions and experiences of demographic influences on peer review

While inequities in the peer review process have been documented as outlined above, we know less about the extent to which academics from various demographic groups recognise, accept, or resist acknowledgment of these forces. Thus, in this paper, we ask: Do academics feel that their demographics influence their perceptions or experiences of

the peer review process? We draw on a subset of data from a wider qualitative study focused on academics' experiences of peer review and the associated emotions (see Hammond & Trafford, 2023) to understand whether, and in what ways, the participants felt demographic factors were at work during academic peer review.

Methodology and methods

The study took place at one university in New Zealand. Recruitment was conducted by sending an e-mail to all academics at that university in November 2021. Further detail on the research design and recruitment criteria is available in Hammond and Trafford (2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the first author's university ethics committee (ref. 21/350).

Context

Education in Aotearoa New Zealand is based on a Western meritocracy in which success is attributed to individual effort and talent. National identity has traditionally promoted a discourse of equality for all. In reality, pervasive inequalities have tended to favour the White settler while disadvantaging Indigenous Māori, Pacific Island, and other non-White populations (Naepi, 2025; Rashbrooke, 2018; Seve-Williams, 2013). New Zealand's Indigenous Māori cultures were colonised by British Europeans in the nineteenth century, bringing oppression and sociomaterial disadvantage to Māori. While Western influences still dominate Aotearoa New Zealand society, there are increasing efforts to honour a bicultural identity that integrates Māori language and customs; nonetheless, inequities remain. In this context, individuals with demographic privilege may face cognitive dissonance between socialised values of equality and the recognition of any unfair advantages the peer review system may afford them (Watt et al., 2021).

Participants

Participants (N = 25) all had between 12 and 120 peer-reviewed publications (64% had between 31 and 99), dated between 1981 and 2021. We observed that ages ranged from 30s to late 60s, with the vast majority being over 40. As self-identified within the interviews, the academics represented a range of disciplines, including health, science, sport and recreation, education, hospitality, and engineering. There were 16 women and nine men; no participants identified as other genders. Four participants identified as Māori (Indigenous), 15 as Pākehā (New Zealand European), four as White British, one as Middle Eastern, and one as Asian. Academic ranks included: nine professors, five associate professors, ten senior lecturers and one lecturer, reflecting the four primary academic ranks in Aotearoa New Zealand).

Data collection

Each participant completed one semi-structured interview. Participants received the interview questions prior to the interview. The first and third authors jointly conducted and recorded the interviews. Transcripts generated using the AI-powered transcription

functionality within Zoom and Microsoft Teams were checked for accuracy and edited for clarity. This paper focuses on responses to the question: 'Do you feel that your culture, your gender or any other demographic aspect of yourself has influenced your emotional reactions to the peer review process?' The intention of this question was to elicit descriptions of personal awareness of the role of demographic factors. This was the only question in the wider interview that asked about the influence of demographic factors, and so the findings of this one question are the focus of this paper. Data relating to emotions and demographics appearing in response to other questions in the interview were not included in the analysis. Importantly, while this interview question asked about people's *emotional responses* to peer review, the whole of the wider interview had also explored emotion in relation to academic publishing. What made this question distinct was its inquiry into participants' experiences and perceptions of the role of demographic factors. Participants' responses often went beyond just their emotional responses to the role of demographics, as participants talked about how they perceived demographic factors affected the process and outcomes of peer review. We therefore took all the data participants offered in response to this question and analysed it for this paper. Participants were free to refer to any peer-reviewed publication experience, whether from earlier or later in their careers, or for local or international journals.

Data analysis

The first author extracted and anonymised responses to the selected question before transferring this data into NVivo (version 20). Authors 1 and 2 progressed through each transcript collaboratively, identifying and coding any mention of demographic information associated with the experience of peer review. Our unit of analysis was any section of text we could interpret meaningfully. This could be a sentence fragment, sentence, or narrative paragraph (Saldaña, 2021). We built a codebook of definitions which we referred to regularly for consistency.

Although gender and ethnicity were mentioned as examples in the interview question, we allowed the participants' responses to guide which other demographic factors were raised. We coded both the demographic factors that were raised and what participants said about their impact. We also coded responses expressing the view that demographic differences did not impact peer review; uncertain or confused responses; and generalised responses about demographics beyond peer review specifically. Finally, we looked for instances where participants acknowledged intersectionality by bringing more than one demographic dimension (e.g., age and gender) together. We did not seek to aggregate codes into inductive themes; our intention was to build a picture of whether and how these participants felt demographic factors affected their perceptions and experiences of peer review. In some cases, we needed to negotiate an agreement on how to interpret a segment of data, and we were cautious not to over-interpret, particularly where we had each initially read the text in different ways (perhaps because of our own differing experiences and backgrounds).

Positionality and intersectionality

We were conscious of our own positionality as white, able-bodied women, born and educated in Western countries. We are native speakers of English with permanent academic

appointments at differing career stages in social sciences. We have each published in and reviewed for academic journals. We consider that peer review should be robust and include ethics of care. We reflect on and enact these values in our own work, and this stance underpins our shared interest in critically examining academics' experiences and perceptions of the peer review process.

We were also conscious that the ways people's demographic and identity characteristics shape their experiences are complex, and focusing on any single factor may overshadow and obscure the multiple interactions between demographics (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991). We recognise that multiple demographic factors form intersectional combinations that can result in outcomes ranging from total privilege through to total exclusion (Blell et al., 2023; Lahiri-Roy & Martinussen, 2023; Niemann et al., 2020).

Finally, in exploring the impact of demographic factors, we recognise the dangers of essentialism. Although it is important to avoid 'colour-blind' approaches that deny the relevance of demographic differences (Crenshaw et al., 2019), it is also important not to essentialise identity by assuming that all members of a demographic group (e.g., all women, all LGBTQ+ people, etc.) will have the same experiences or views. We present our findings as these participants' perceptions and experiences, seeking to learn from their views without implying that all members of a particular demographic will have the same experiences.

Findings

Participants expressed a range of viewpoints on whether (and how) demographic factors affected their experiences and perceptions of peer review. They drew on experiences of early and recent publications, aiming for local and international journals. We report these varying viewpoints below, beginning with those that felt demographic factors were indeed influential on peer review itself (15 participants) and/or on their responses to peer review (8 participants). We then report views of the five participants who were hesitant or uncertain about the impact of demographic factors, and we conclude with the views of the five participants who felt that demographic factors had no impact on their experiences of peer review.

Perceptions of demographic factors impacting peer review

Fifteen of the 25 participants felt peer review was impacted by factors such as gender, culture and/or ethnicity, academic discipline, and English language. This view was expressed by participants with varying positionalities, including members of dominant groups (e.g., a Pākehā man), members of marginalised groups (e.g., a Māori woman), and people with a combination of advantage and disadvantage due to their intersecting demographic positions (e.g., a Pākehā woman or Māori man).

Participants perceived that power dynamics and gender politics shaped manuscripts' assessment:

> Yeah, definitely … you think sometimes those desk rejections - it's like, come on. If I was different or was in a different country or had a different gender, would you really have just sent me on my way? Probably not. (#15, Woman, Pākehā)

One man acknowledged: 'Being a man I don't have to deal with um, you know, I'm in a privileged state in that way' (#17, Man, Māori). Conversely, two men perceived reverse gender discrimination in academic publishing and felt disadvantaged. One said:

> 2021 is not the year of the man […]. If you are a publishing female academic at [institution], the world is your oyster. If you're a man, you better be pretty damn careful about some of the things you might want to write. (#11, Man, Pākehā)

Awareness of cultural and/or ethnicity privilege in peer review appeared in non-Māori participant descriptions:

> I think being Pākehā means I'm less likely to get racism in the peer review … being Pākehā brings privilege and, you know, the world is set up to suit me, as a Pākehā in this country, because of settler colonialism. So, of course it's easier because chances are I'm dealing with another Pākehā reviewer when it's a local journal." (#19, Woman, Pākehā)

Cultural disadvantage was mentioned in the difficulty of getting papers on Indigenous issues through peer review when world views or methodologies clash. In this sense, Indigenous issues are not just a topic of study, but an embodiment of culturally significant world views. One participant said,

> … the areas that I publish in, particularly in Indigenous issues, and my international Indigenous colleagues, they verify this as well, that it's hard to get Indigenous research published. Although it's starting to get a little better, but it is difficult to get Indigenous research published. People don't really want it because it's quite confronting and challenging. People don't necessarily wanna know. (#22, Woman, Māori)

A Pākehā woman also observed cultural inflexibility in international peer review. She noted,

> I have felt frustration on behalf of one of my [Māori] colleagues, supporting one of my Māori researchers to publish a piece of work that was drawing from Kaupapa Māori perspectives, … there was a lot of people [reviewers] seeking to reduce the Te Reo terms or the cultural framing within that paper … . we had to talk quite carefully about, for example, the rigor and how our principles of Kaupapa Māori methodology informed what rigor and trustworthiness looks like. And they replied to our response to that review, saying, "Well, could you just use this framework" which was … a framework from a very Western-centric perspective. So having gone through even that one experience, the frustration of trying to engage in a different language, and from a different worldview perspective within an international peer review setting was frustrating … and sad. And it just was a small taster, of what I think probably [Māori] colleagues experience all the time. (#24, Woman, Pākehā)

One participant noted her prior lack of concern about English language dominance in academic publication and how she had become more aware of this issue through a meeting she attended:

> … there were lots of Europeans [discussing] the English language bias within peer reviewed publications and what that means in terms of what knowledge is privileged in our world … I am sad to say that it was not something that I had thought deeply about before that particular meeting. (#24, Woman, Pākehā)

Although, as shown above, participants pointed to a range of demographic factors affecting their experiences of peer review, concepts of intersectionality did not come

through clearly except in the sense of listing more than one demographic characteristic. Participants used listing phrases like 'I think it's easier to feel like you do belong if you are a white, English-speaking male' (#5, Man, British) or 'I'm a heterosexual, middle-class guy professor' (#25, Man, British). The only comments that hinted at how multiple demographic positions might combine to produce advantage or disadvantage came from two men who acknowledged the intersectional privilege they each held:

> I do belong in this environment when most of the people that you're interacting with and looking up to … are all the same, white men. And from middle-class English-speaking backgrounds. […] but if I look at it from another perspective, I could see that there might be a difference […]. I think and imagine it is a more intimidating environment, if you're female or if English isn't your first language. (#5, Man, British)

> I'm a heterosexual middle-class guy professor. There's lots of privilege there. (#25 Man, British)

Finally, one woman separately considered whether the three demographic factors of gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity impacted her experience of peer review. She concluded, 'gender hasn't really been a defining characteristic of my experience of this, nor my sexual orientation, but my ethnicity absolutely' (#19, Woman, Pākehā).

Perceptions and experiences of demographic factors impacting academics' responses to peer review

Ten participants described demographic factors impacting their thoughts, feelings or actions in response to reviewers. This happened in a range of unique ways rather than there being clear patterns or themes across these participants.

One woman described having a sense of their reviewer's gender through interpreting the form of the reviewer's comments:

> So even though I don't know the reviewer's gender, I will often apply a gender depending on how comments have been framed and so possibly there's an emotional reaction to their abrupt, pointed comments that feel – or a sense of arrogance about one's own knowledge that comes through, in review. That, I maybe consider would be a 'male' review [does quote marks with fingers]. Rightly or wrongly. That's terrible to say. I feel bad even saying it. (#24, Woman, Pākehā)

Inferring who reviewers might be was also described by a woman who noted the challenges of working in a small field, saying 'in some areas it is personal because you sort of can guess who the reviewers are when you've been around in certain fields' (#4, Woman, Pākehā).

A man described an expectation to be resilient during peer review because of his intersectional privilege:

> I'm a heterosexual middle-class guy professor. There's lots of privilege there … I think in terms of the emotionality, it's almost slightly reversed, because I sort of think: "Oh, I should be able to deal with this." (#25 Man, British)

Another man mentioned his swearing responses as ' … kind of a male thing, which is territorial around the knowledge I've developed' (#6, Man, Māori).

One respondent raised considerations that related to biological sex rather than gender, pointing to how a woman's menstrual cycle might affect her responses to peer review:

> I suppose hormones at certain times of the month. […] A lot of the senior female academics are probably also going through menopause with all the brain fog, emotional rollercoaster ride, that's gonna change things, absolutely! (#2, Woman, Pākehā)

In terms of culture, it seemed that Western cultural assertiveness provided an emotional advantage when addressing reviewers. For example, one participant acknowledged that 'I think [people of my nationality] are brought up with a healthy disrespect for authority, and I have a healthy disrespect for reviewers, which I think comes from being [nationality]' (#12, Woman, Pākehā). A Pākehā participant also observed that her Eastern European and Asian colleagues were culturally more deferential than she towards peer reviewers' suggested changes:

> If I'm in the team, I go, 'No, no, no, no, that reviewer is talking nonsense. We're not going to deal with that one', and they [Eastern European and Asian colleagues] go 'Oh!' You can see they're quite shocked … so maybe there is a cultural thing there for me. (#7, Woman, Pākehā)

A Māori woman noted the struggle in peer-review that ' … if you come from a minority group and you're always fighting, that's kind of like our norm' (#10, Woman, Māori). A Māori man mentioned a feeling – which he implied was common to other Māori academics – of discouragement in the peer review process. He pointed to a historical pattern of colonisation over Indigenous knowledges and peoples which is still affecting academics today:

> Because of the impacts of colonisation and institutionalised racism, things like that, and experiences that we can have as Māori, I think that can definitely add to the discouragement of being rejected in an academic sense. Because Māori knowledge has been rejected in academia for a long time, and Indigenous ways of doing things. And I think it kind of adds to it when we once again face rejection in the peer review process, which is quite a foreign world for us, even as academics in this space. So, I think there's definitely – it can add to that discouragement. (#17, Man, Māori)

Finally, some participants indicated that their age or career stage influenced their responses to peer review. Younger and less senior academics seemed more vulnerable to emotional responses. One woman said, 'I have cried with review in the early days' (#8, Woman, British), and another declared she would 'get frustrated on behalf of people trying to put forward a paper in its own right without feeling like they need to be labelled as an 'early career'' (#24, Woman, Pākehā). In contrast, there was a sense of being less emotionally affected as one got older – 'You become less worried by it, but I think that's an age thing' (#8, Woman, British).

Hesitant and uncertain perceptions regarding impacts of demographics

Eight participants were hesitant or expressed uncertainty about the impact of demographics. All but one (an Asian man) of these participants were White.

Asked whether demographic factors had an influence on their experience of peer review, two men stated, 'I don't think so, but I'm really not sure' (#18, Man, Asian) and 'I don't know. I wouldn't like to [see male advantage]' (#20, Man, Pākehā). Another attributed potential differences to personality rather than demographics, stating 'I think personality probably has a lot to do with it, and I don't know how you can separate out personality from the other stuff' (#13, Man, Pākehā).

Some participants exhibited hesitation in discussing potential biases. One said, 'I don't want to be stereotypical' (#7, Woman, Pākehā), while another indicated not wanting to overstep their cultural boundaries: 'Because I'm Pākehā … because I'm part of the dominant culture I can't really comment on that' (#16, Woman, Pākehā).

Other participants indicated that they had not thought about the question of whether demographic positioning might affect peer review. One participant stated:

> I wouldn't have thought so. I think having experience helps me with the review process … You know, 20-odd years of writing articles … You do get to know your way around the system a bit … I've never felt that … I haven't thought in terms of those stereotypes. (#23, Woman, Pākehā)

Another participant said, 'I have no idea, I don't really subscribe to identity politics' before acknowledging, 'arguably, that response is a typical kind of Eurocentric white male view … white males of my age might be expected to make a comment like that' (#21, Man, Pākehā). Finally, one participant acknowledged that demographics were at work in academia more broadly, but that she had not considered this in the specific context of peer review: 'I have other gendered experiences in academia. I don't know whether it extends to peer review. Perhaps it does. I'm not consciously aware of it' (#9, Woman, Pākehā).

Perceptions of no demographic impacts

Five participants indicated that demographic factors had no impact on their experience of peer review. Two respondents directly stated that gender had no impact on their perceptions of peer review, for example, 'Gender hasn't really been a defining characteristic of my experience of this' (#19, Woman, Pākehā). The idea of intersectional privilege was implicitly considered but disagreed with in one participant's response: 'I know that there are feminist scholars who would argue that as a white male, I have an advantage in the peer review process. I don't figure out how' (#21, Man, Pākehā). The male Asian participant (#18) said there might be some demographic influence for others, but not for him personally.

Seeing the review process as a professional rather than an emotional exercise was a reason two participants denied any influence of demographics on their experiences with peer review. One argued that allowing such influences would be unprofessional: 'It's unprofessional to let culture, gender, other influences change your emotion. […] it's more of a personality thing and not cultural, gender. No, not these, because if you [were] influenced by all this, this is unprofessional' (#3, Woman, Middle Eastern). Another stated,

> if they [reviewers] ask me to do some changes … I'll just do it. It's a process. It doesn't matter. I don't know who they are. I don't have any information of them, and I don't need to know, but what matters is their competence, that's all. (#1, Woman, European)

Discussion

Overall, the 25 participants in this study showed divergent views on whether, and which, demographic factors impacted their experiences and perceptions of peer review. Fifteen participants agreed that demographic factors affected either the outcomes of, or their

responses to, peer review. However, smaller numbers of participants were hesitant or unsure about the impacts of demographic factors or felt that demographic factors had no impact. Bringing these divergent perspectives into view is a key contribution this study makes to the literature on academic peer review, demonstrating that while some scholars can point to the ways demographic factors and inequities shape their experiences of peer review, others are unaware or unsure about these factors being at work. While past literature has explored reviewer and editor biases (e.g., Haffer et al., 2019; Kolev et al., 2019; Politzer-Ahles et al., 2020), and diversity in the population of reviewers (e.g., Horta & Santos, 2025), our study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of academics whose work had undergone peer review.

While the greatest number of participants did feel that demographic factors influenced their experiences of peer review, experiences were not universal even among this group. Different demographic factors were highlighted by different participants, including both more and less privileged participants. This finding reinforces the need for caution not to essentialise experiences (for example, to say that all women feel disadvantaged by their gender during peer review).

Interestingly, participants did not clearly acknowledge experiences where oppression or privilege were compounding across multiple demographic axes. There was a lack of engagement with the idea of intersectionality, which we found surprising given that some of the participants were from disciplines such as education and health where intersectionality is a familiar theoretical and analytic tool. Going beyond just naming people's multiple identity positions, intersectionality theory calls us to think more deeply about complex configurations of identity characteristics and their impacts on people's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Lahiri-Roy & Martinussen, 2023). This was not something we saw in any depth in our data.

One possible reason for both the participants' divergent views and their lack of discussion of intersectionality could be the impact of privilege. Past research has found that members of privileged groups exhibit less awareness of discrimination than do members of marginalised groups (e.g., Dancy et al., 2020; Todd et al., 2023). Some of the participants did acknowledge the privilege they carried and how this impacted their experiences of peer review. However, it is possible that some of the respondents who were uncertain about, or denied, the impact of demographic factors may have been less aware of bias and discrimination within peer review due to their personal privilege. This may also indicate that while some participants were aware of their demographic identity, they were less aware of their positionality.

Privilege could also be at work in other ways within our findings. A few privileged participants seemed defensive about their positions. This is consistent with Watt's (2021) research, which documented a range of 'defensive reactions individuals display in difficult dialogues while exploring privileged identities and interacting across difference' (p. 1), including denial, deflection, minimising, intellectualisation, and false envy. Additionally, the idea of academia as a meritocracy remains strong and can be particularly appealing for those in positions of privilege. Some academics may thus experience a sense of cognitive dissonance or discomfort when critically considering a process they were taught to believe is neutral and fair.

Peer review is, fundamentally, a human-to-human sharing of knowledge and worldviews through writing. Scholarly work can involve deep connection with the author's

worldview and identity as well as passion for the importance of their disciplinary work (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018). Emotional detachment as part of the 'academic armour' has been valued in the traditional scientific method (Lerum, 2001), and indeed, one of the participants described being emotional in the peer review process as unprofessional. However, this stance discounts the fundamentally human nature of scholarly endeavour. The negative emotional impacts of marginalisation of one's world view in academia are powerful (Stewart et al., 2022), and as seen in our findings, can lead to feelings of discouragement and frustration. Focus on Western-centric understandings leads to continued power imbalances for Indigenous scholars (Wilson et al., 2022). Framing peer review within an ethic of care for people and social justice (Held, 2018) offers an alternative value system within which an enduring commitment to scholarly rigour can be balanced within respectful, ethical, and human-centred ways of communicating scholarly evaluations.

Limitations and directions for further research

There are greater complexities to our research question than we can address through this small study. First, although the 25 academics in this study included some gender, ethnic, discipline, native language, academic discipline, and age diversity, they represented a single-institution convenience sample that does not capture the full range of demographic diversity within academia. Recruiting university employees also excludes people not securing academic positions because of structural inequities (e.g., caregivers with full-time caring responsibilities). Future research could thus extend the breadth of the present sample.

Future research could also explore the extent to which peer review norms vary across disciplines, including in relation to the demographic profiles of particular disciplines. For example, do people's experiences of peer review differ in disciplines that are relatively 'feminised' or have higher proportions of Indigenous scholars?

We acknowledge that the two interviewing authors were both visibly white (European ancestry), female, and middle-aged. This may have influenced what participants chose to share. Future research could include interviewers from other demographic positions to support rapport and trust with diverse participants.

The impacts of demographic factors are multilayered and experienced differently across diverse people and positions in the peer review process. Our study has focused on authors' perceptions and experiences, but the roles of editors, reviewers, and publishers are also important to consider, especially given the power that these actors hold in the peer review process. Future research could include questions such as: As a reviewer, how do you feel your demographic positions, either singularly or in combination, impact how you review? Are there times you have a sense of the demographics of the author? If some demographic information is evident within a manuscript (e.g., in a positionality statement), how does this shape your approach to assessing the manuscript? What do you do with that sense of knowing? As an editor, what do you do with responses from reviewers that you feel are biased or discriminatory? As an academic publisher, what mitigation strategies do you use to make the peer review process supportive and inclusive?

Conclusion

We must listen to the stories of diverse peoples within academia so that we can better understand their perceptions and experiences and how these are shaped by demographic characteristics. Our paper contributes to the literature by providing insights into a group of academics' experiences and perceptions of how demographic factors affect their experiences of peer review. Although peer review is intended as a quality, merit-based assessment of research, there are complexities that may undermine this aim and potentially cause harm. Our study confirms that at least some academics perceive that the influence of demographic factors means peer review is not the idealised process it is sometimes assumed to be.

This paper adds to the relatively small body of literature considering peer review through an equity lens. Although our study was conducted at one institution in Aotearoa New Zealand during the early 2020s, our analysis capturing academics' different viewpoints may help raise awareness of the wider social influences that may be at work during the peer review process. Recognising this landscape may help disadvantaged researchers construct more positive views of themselves as authors.

We all hold responsibility to be aware of our own and others' experiences across all positions of the peer review process. Acker (2006) argued that those with institutional power need to dismantle the 'inequality regimes' (p. 443). Although uncomfortable, examining one's own privileged position can be a liberating experience (Zoino-Jeannetti & Pearrow, 2020). Our work invites those with demographic-based privilege to re-examine their advantages to align with equity and ethic of care aspirations. This involves respecting different worldviews and forms of knowledge while reflecting on our respective positions and how we can contribute to navigating, resisting, and reducing inequity in the context of peer review.

Everyone can contribute to navigating, resisting, and improving peer review, and it is through efforts such as these, framed within ethics of care, that we can progressively work towards goals of inclusion, equity and safety in academia. We conclude with the words of one of the participants:

> [We should be] looking after each other and supporting each other more, because we're all connected, irrespective of whether we are the reviewer or the writer or the author, because at some point in time that reviewer is gonna be an author … We're all people. (#14, Woman, Pākehā)

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