

Mentoring for Publication in the American Journal of Public Health

As members of the *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)* editorial team and editorial board, we are honored to contribute to this online-only supplement devoted to *Innovations in Public Health Education*. The word “education” was added to the mission statement by the current editor-in-chief (M.E.N.), so that it now begins, “Promoting public health research, policy, practice, and education [emphasis ours] is the foremost mission of the *AJPH*.”

Regardless of whether we interact with students and early career professionals in academic institutions (M.E.N., R.E.Z., and M.R.G.) or public health agencies (D.H.), we are convinced of the need for mentoring in public health¹ as one vital element of educating. Indeed, in April 2009, *AJPH* published an entire supplement devoted to mentoring entitled, *Mentoring for Diversity in the Mental Health of HIV/AIDS*. Among the outstanding papers in that collection was an essay by Manson that advanced a conceptual model of factors that influence the development of a research career.² And among the long-term outcomes of persistence in navigating the crossroads of a research career that he identified were first-authored, peer-reviewed journal articles. Our focus here on first-authored, peer-reviewed journal articles is thus deliberate. The intellectual reach and attendant credit for the published ideas accorded to first authors is paramount in the pursuit of a more intellectually diverse and equitable research community.

During her tenure on the *AJPH* editorial board, our student

representative (C.D.B.) has been engaged in seeking ways to ensure our mission serves students and early career researchers. This has led to conversation and reflection on how best to promote early career trainee- and student-authored publications in *AJPH* and what our role ought to be in advancing this desired outcome. Hence, we elected to move forward on a number of initiatives that she either conceptualized or reinvigorated, including this editorial.

THE ONGOING MISSION TO ADVANCE PUBLIC HEALTH

Publishing a first-authored paper in *AJPH* is more than a cause for celebration. It means that a writer (with perhaps mentors or coauthors) has identified a critical public health problem, designed a rigorous study that sheds light on the issue, employed appropriate research tools, and interpreted the results in a way that serves to advance public health.

Successful publication is an endurance event. It is essential to persist despite rejection.³ While there are no shortcuts to the writing process, there are useful strategies.⁴ According to Manson, various mechanisms can be used to address the requisite tasks and acquire related competencies; proactive mentorship is preeminent among them.²

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF MENTORSHIP

At the time of this writing, crowds of protesters are staging “die-ins” across the United States following grand jury decisions in

Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City not to indict White police officers in the killing of unarmed Black men. If we are to change the status quo and make real progress on social justice and health equity, then we need to critically evaluate who is writing, reviewing, and editing our public health research, policy, practice, and education papers in *AJPH*.

Accordingly, we place deserved emphasis on mentoring historically underrepresented and first generation graduate students and early career faculty. Research has found that mentoring relationships require trust and the valuing of intellectual contributions.⁵ Mentoring is a life course experience for many of these colleagues, yet they are not always aware of what it means or what it can offer.

No wonder. Mentoring has been defined in any number of ways depending upon the underlying assumptions and desired outcomes.⁶⁻¹⁰ Our own view is that mentorship, like critical thinking, is irrevocably context bound.¹¹ Likewise, learning to write convincingly, as with learning to think critically, is an irreducibly social process.¹¹ As a social process bound by context, both sides—mentor and mentee—must come together and work together to achieve any desired outcome. Here we direct attention to publishing in *AJPH* per se, even as our guidance may be useful in publishing elsewhere. For example, while it may have been more efficient to select a single author to write this editorial, we used our fellow authors as critical mirrors in subjecting our viewpoints to scrutiny, encouraging them to reflect

back to us what they understood our stances to be.

NAVIGATING THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Especially for early career historically underrepresented and first generation scientists and scholars, authors may need direct advice and a recounting of basic principles that would not be easily known in their world of consciousness. With regard to *AJPH*, editorial insights are regularly published in our pages, as with this editorial. More than two decades ago, a short piece on seven fatal flaws in submitted manuscripts appeared, with the first flaw being that the topic is not of direct public health relevance.¹² While most of this guidance still holds, the seventh flaw (i.e., that the paper is a literature review) is no longer cause for immediate rejection. Rather, *AJPH* now publishes systematic reviews and meta-analyses, but again, public health policy and practice priorities gain preferential editorial attention.¹³

Beyond basic publishing advice, experienced mentors may play a strategic role in guiding mentees through the oft-times overwhelming, convoluted, and time-consuming path to peer-reviewed publication. Peer-reviewed publication begins with the posing of a problem.⁴ From the genesis of an idea that represents a “solution,” seasoned mentors may guide mentees in focusing on an argument that is worthy of pursuit, then help them hone in on an answerable research question. As important, credible mentors will carefully steer mentees away from ideas that have been repeatedly vetted in the scientific literature or are unlikely to bear meaningful results

that may be used to advance public health.

The online document, *Instructions for Authors* or “*What AJPH Authors Should Know*” (available at <http://www.ajph.org>) is filled with a wealth of information, from the mission statement at the outset to ethics compliance at the end. Yet trusted guidance from *AJPH* editors and staff is no substitute for the one-on-one give-and-take between mentor and mentee, nor the inevitable iterations of a paper that is revised and revised again before it meets submission standards. Indeed, the act of writing is an act of discovery.¹⁴

LEARNING TO ASSESS AND SURMOUNT REJECTION

Pursuing peer-reviewed publication means that, at times, even carefully analyzed and persuasively written papers will be rejected. When this editorial decision is received, the authors will be in august company.³ While a mentoring relationship may not eliminate the possibility of rejection, it does help in learning how to surmount it rather than feeling deflated by the process. Mentors can help to dissect the criticisms received and underscore lessons for their mentees. At times, the review process is overly long, exacerbated by a lack of attention on the part of peer referees, editors, or both. Mentors can place these experiences in perspective and encourage mentees to either stay the course or contact the *AJPH* office. Finally, mentors can reassure mentees with a well-known but frequently unacknowledged assertion: editors are fallible.¹²

Not all faculty members should be mentors, and not all early

career trainees should be mentees. Too often, however, undue emphasis is placed on the personalities of those involved. In Manson’s conceptual model of factors that influence the development of a research career, institutional and program characteristics such as academic support and research infrastructure are key, as are social and ecological trainee processes, including the climate for diversity and social integration into the university.²

PASSING THE TORCH TO THE NEXT GENERATION

At *AJPH*, we value the fresh perspectives and technical savvy of our mentees, be they members of the editorial team, editorial board, or staff. And while we welcome first-authored student submissions at any time, clearly this is not enough. A survey recently conducted by one of us (C. D. B.) of student members of the American Public Health Association failed to reach the response rate of 60% that we recommend for a study published in *AJPH*,¹² but it nevertheless gave us pause for reflection. The majority of students responded that they would like to publish in *AJPH* (“I mean yes, who wouldn’t?”), but they were not confident that their work would be accepted (“*AJPH* seems to be an ivory tower with clear, precise, and high thresholds that only distinguished individuals can publish in.”).

In other words, our students reflected back to us a version of ourselves and of our actions that came as a surprise. One step forward is the inauguration of an *AJPH* Early Career Trainee Paper of the Year Award, to augment the *AJPH* Paper and Reviewer of the Year awards initiated in 2005

by two of the authors (M. E. N. and M. R. G.)¹⁵ and currently championed by a third (D. H.).¹⁶

This experience affirmed for us that successful mentoring relationships entail trust, humility, and critical thinking. According to Brookfield,

Critical thinking entails adults understanding that the flow of power is a permanent presence in our lives. In our personal relationships, work activities, and political involvements, power relations are omnipresent, though often submerged. Uncovering and questioning these power relations so that we might redirect the flow of power in a circular or democratic manner is an important part of critical thinking.^{11(p18)}

Mentors in cross-race and cross-ethnic relationships would do well to acknowledge these power relations and have their mentees reflect back to them what they see and hear. In this way, mentors may be alerted to any judgmental ways of seeing. To be most effective, mentors must genuinely value the intellectual contributions of their mentees and continually seek self-knowledge. Further guidance on mentoring historically underrepresented faculty is available from The Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland, College Park (see <http://www.cрге.umd.edu>).

The rewards for all involved are transformational. Kudos to our editorial colleague, Hortensia Amaro, PhD, for being a 2014 Elizabeth Hurlock Beckman Award Recipient, in that she inspired former students whose work has conferred a benefit to the community at large. And unending thanks to our own mentors, who support us through triumphs and tragedies alike. You have made our lives richer and our world more just. ■

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This editorial was accepted December 26, 2014.

doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302543

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