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A Journey to Accountability

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ARTICLE

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Abstract

The *Journal of Solution Focused Practices* (JSFP) underwent structural changes in 2019 as a result of a new editorial team. These changes occurred as a result of prioritizing equitable access to knowledge and leadership in the SF community. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process of relaunching JSFP as an inclusive international journal. Two major initiatives are described. A renewal and alignment of purpose of the Editorial Board and the development of the journal's Mission and Values statement. Both initiatives took place within the context of developing accountability for inclusivity, diversity and accessibility.

Introduction

The relaunch of the JSFP occurred against a backdrop of increasing demands for the dismantling of structural and institutional inequalities affecting black, indigenous and melanated people in the countries comprising the Global North (typically Western European, North American and former colonial territories, such as Australia). Discourses around the existence of institutional racism are not new and neither are institutional strategies to reduce or eliminate it. What distinguished the recent demands and responses from earlier ones was a shift away from demanding equal rights (which is the responsibility of a small group of legislators), to the demand that *all* people, including white people, take responsibility to dismantle racism.

Liberation movements typically begin within the minoritized communities who are most affected by discrimination and oppression, but despite continued demands for equal treatment and efforts to reduce racism, there has been little real change in inequalities, such as medical, educational and employment outcomes. A particular concern in all Global North countries is aimed at policing and incarceration practices; the background to which the killing of George Floyd in 2019 sparked a worldwide movement and raised awareness of the realities of continuing structural racism.

Within this context, the recognition that minoritized communities could not be expected to bear the burden of dismantling racism on their own has led to a parallel movement for white people to '*do the work*' (Saad, 2020). In essence, this means recognizing and acknowledging '*white privilege*' (McIntosh, 1990) amongst other things. While a highly-contested concept, it is nonetheless a useful term to differentiate the lived experience of those with melanated skin and/or particular ethnic features from the majority white population. Briefly, the idea is that being white does not so much confer special treatment and advantage (privilege) but immunises one against the additional barriers experienced by non-white people who share our social status. For example, a rich black businessman is more likely to be stopped by the police for driving a luxury car than a rich white businessman. Similarly, an unemployed black person will find it harder to gain employment than their white counterpart. It follows, therefore, that all white people are benefitting in some way from structural racism, whether or not they are actively racist, and this difference in lived experience is largely invisible to them.

For white people *doing the work* is built on a willingness to see the difference, to make the invisible, visible. If we genuinely believe that all people should be treated equally regardless of physical features over which they have no control, then we cannot continue to blindly benefit from structural inequality by doing nothing.

Sara Jordan   A Journey to Accountability

A New Name and Open Access

Prior to the relaunch in 2019, the journal was named *Journal of Solution Focused Brief Therapy* (JSFBT). The new editor, and members of the editorial board, wanted to be more inclusive in the scope and audience. The board decided on the new name, *Journal of Solution Focused Practices* (JSFP) to include authors and readers from various disciplines, using SF techniques, conversations, and practices. This change was the first important step to create a more inclusive source of knowledge.

The original journal (JSFBT) was only available in print. This format did not allow for equal access to the materials. Thus, the new editor established an online, open access platform through her university to house JSFP. This change has provided individuals all over the world free access to the content of JSFP. Although the name change and open access were important steps towards educational equity, it was only the beginning of addressing social issues related to a peer-reviewed journal.

Becoming Accountable

The world of academic publishing is waking up to its complicity in inequality, discrimination and oppression. From the publication of early scientific theories on race (now discredited) to the current domination of white (largely male) faces in editorial boards, academic journals show clear preferences to white authors and topics pertaining to the priorities of the Global North (Tyrer, 2005). There are signs that journals are now making efforts to address this problem with editorial commentaries and articles appearing across the sector (e.g. Burrows, et al, 2020; Kmietowicz, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020) and the Family Therapy Magazine dedicating an entire issue to anti-racism (July/August 2020).

Traditionally, anti-racism or diversity training has focused on meeting legislative or rights-based requirements to prevent discriminatory practices or on unconscious/implicit bias. The lack of evidence of effectiveness of such training (FitzGerald et al., 2019; Forscher et al., 2019) has meant that individuals and organizations have sought more meaningful ways to educate and change themselves. It is clear that taking responsibility for meeting one's duties to legal requirements is insufficient (though of course remaining important) for a genuine change in culture around equality. A newer and more promising discourse is that of 'accountability'. In acknowledging that systemic and structural racism has caused and continues to cause harm to black, indigenous and melanated people, the language of accountability means that we are willing to be held to account for our past complicity and our current practices. As Anderson (2021) states:

> "Accountability [...] requires communication, negotiation of needs, the opportunity to repair harm, and the chance to prove that we can change and be worthy of trust again. Organizations committed to racial equity must recognize that this work requires new practices for talking about race and racism and new strategies for addressing acts of racial harm that seek repair and strengthen trust."

To this end, the Editors of the JSFP decided to undertake a programme of activities towards greater accountability. The Editors decided that it would be beneficial to increase the diversity of the Editorial Board and reached out to some members of the solution-focused community. In doing so, we were made aware that purely inviting people of color was wholly inadequate. We were challenged to demonstrate that the journal itself was inclusive, transparent and a safe place for them to participate. We were made aware of concerns, such as the lack of clear criteria for eligibility, suitability or desirability for new members. In effect, criteria for Editorial Board membership were opaque, esoteric and exclusive, perceived as being in the gift of the Editor, rather than based on any particular quality or merit of the invitee. Another concern was that invitations were based on a tokenistic and simplistic desire to appear to be 'doing the right thing', rather than a desire for genuine and meaningful change. It was clear that a very different approach was required; one that was rooted in accountability and transparency of intent and process.

In this article, two of the approaches taken by the Editors towards creating a culture of accountability are outlined. Firstly, a compulsory activity for the entire Editorial Board and secondly a Mission and Values statement for the journal co-constructed by the newly-constituted Editorial Board.

Journal of Solution Focused Practices – 20

Me and White Supremacy: A Co-Learning Process

In 2019, all 26 existing members of the Editorial Board were asked to participate (with the three Editors) in a co-learning activity based on the Me and White Supremacy Workbook by Layla F. Saad (Saad, 2000)[1] to increase understanding and appreciation of how white supremacy could impact editorial board processes and to take an anti-racist approach to our work. The workbook comprises a '28-day challenge', requiring participants to read a short chapter and then write a reflective response. The Editorial Board was informed that participation in this activity would be a prerequisite for remaining on the Editorial Board. Aside from demonstrating a commitment to becoming accountable, it was thought that participating in a co-learning activity would also put all members on an equal footing and provide a shared starting point for change.

Several Editorial Board members objected to the methodology and to it being a compulsory activity. They were removed or resigned from the Board. Some members either did not respond to the request or chose to take the opportunity to leave the Board for reasons other than objections to the request.

1. 6 Board Members retried or opted out pre-activity (20.7%)
2. 5 Board Members didn't respond to the activity (17.2%)
3. 5 Board Members opted out because of the activity (17.2%)

Ten members of the Editorial Board chose to remain and participate in the co-learning activity with the three Editors. It is important to note that the 4 people of color on the board chose to remain.

The remaining members participated in the 28 day challenge contained in *Me and White Supremacy*. Over a period of four weeks, all read the book, made notes of what stood out, and participated in four weekly group calls (via Zoom) regarding the contents of the book and the impact it had on them. It was made clear from the outset that while participation was compulsory, there was no expectation that the participants would all reach the same conclusions or that a common response was required. The discussions demonstrated a broad set of responses, with some participants remaining skeptical of some of the book's claims, while others reported a profound shift in perspective. There was, however, agreement that the exercise had been worthwhile. At the end of the four weeks, it was determined that we should develop a mission and values statement to ensure we were incorporating the learning from our activity.

Mission and Value Statement

Upon completion of the co-learning experience, the editors took the next step toward anti-racism by establishing a Mission and Value Statement (See Figure 1).

Two board members (one Black and one White), appointed by the editors, developed a first draft of the statement. They drew on their own personal experiences, on the conversations from the co-learning experience, and on other board meeting conversations about the hopes and expectations of the editorial board when completing this first draft. It was subsequently decided that the mission statement should be developed in collaboration with the full Editorial Board based on the Values identified in the first draft. These six values: inclusivity; accountability; integrity; courage; advocacy, and collaborative, formed the basis of a survey to develop the Mission Statement. The board members were asked to concretely outline signs and actions they would notice that would let them know the Mission and Value Statement was being realized (a) Among ourselves as a board, (b) Among the board and contributing authors, and (c) Among the board and other external individuals and entities. There was a 77.8% response rate for this survey (note the editors did not complete the survey).

Themes from the board responses were developed using standard qualitative analysis techniques by Rayya Ghul (Creswell, 2007). Adam Froerer and Sara Smock Jordan each independently reviewed the themes for accuracy and provided feedback and additions to the developed themes. This review and discussion served as an inter-rater reliability check for the developed themes. The final themes were:

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[1] The workbook had been pre-published in 2018 as a pdf workbook and published as a book in 2020.

Table 1

Mission and Value Statement Themes

Themes	Illustrative responses (full data available on request)
Respect	• Hearing each voice and remembering, listening with interest • Treat each other with respect (lack of discrimination or stereotypical language) • Don't impose cultural norms on contributors • Preserve their voice in the feedback • Honest and polite responses
Supportive, Developmental	• Helping contributors with grammar or translation • Reviews should be supportive and developmentally appropriate
Transparent	• Decision-making would be more transparent • Strong and transparent process to manage grievances • Transparent processes • Open and up front about our mission and policies and practices • Making information (finances, decision-making, board membership) transparent
Accountable	• Be willing to call out behavior that is against the mission and values • Shared responsibility • Stand up publicly for our mission and values • Keep our promises
Honest	• Honest • Truth-telling
Inclusive of diversity	• Promote diversity of opinions • Accepting different ways of interpreting SF • Seeking diverse authors out
Accessible, welcoming	• Welcoming and inviting of contributor's correspondence • Asking questions about who isn't represented how we can invite them • Keep the journal open access • Have as much translation as possible and sensory impairment aware
Collaborative	• Consensus in decision-making • Working with and respecting the editor • Giving contributors control over editing when possible • Work with associations and other journals on joint events - collaborative
Diverse	• Variety of skin colors and accents • See many different authors • Promote diversity of opinion
Vulnerable, humble	• Be self-reflective • Be willing to be challenged • Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and say when we don't know things
Quality, Standards	• Prompt responses • Follow academic standards,

Journal of Solution Focused Practices – 22

	• Make clear our feedback is connected to the purpose and intent of the journal • Hold rigorous standards of excellence • Evidence-based feedback rather than opinion-based feedback • Act swiftly against plagiarism or dishonesty • Make clear our feedback is connected to the purpose and intent of the journal
Socially just	• Give voice to those who are marginalized • Willing to stand up to discrimination, abuse, and social injustice. Speaking out
Kind	• Kind, open conversations about difficult topics • Honesty with kindness
Innovative	• Innovative ways to present articles/knowledge • Seek out new and diverse authors and innovative/unconventional ways
Proactive	• Seek out new and diverse authors and innovative/unconventional ways • Seeking out and encouraging isolated SF communities

The finalized themes were then returned to the board members for review and approval so that their intended feedback was interpreted correctly. This member-checking process is also consistent with traditional qualitative research techniques (Creswell, 2007). The board members approved the themes and reported that these captured their intended feedback appropriately.

Rayya Ghul then crafted a Mission and Value Statement based on the survey themes and suggestions and submitted the draft for review to the editors of the journal. Once the editors reviewed and updated the draft of the statement, the full statement was then reviewed by the entire editorial board. The feedback from the board members was incorporated into a finalized version. The full version is presented here and it is hoped that readers can clearly see how the survey informed the final words.

Figure 1

JSFP Mission and Values Statement

The *Journal of Solution Focused Practices* (JSFP) aims to provide high-quality peer-reviewed manuscripts including theory, research, practice and other literature to enhance the understanding and practice of all solution-focused practitioners in order to better the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and societies.

We aim to treat each other, our contributors and readers with **respect** and **kindness**: listening with openness and curiosity; actively expressing appreciation and using non-discriminatory language. We will be **accessible** and **welcoming**: maintaining open access to the journal; providing as much translation as possible and being available to contributors and readers. We will strive to be **inclusive**, particularly of diverse individuals and communities as well as **diversity** of opinions and interpretations of solution-focused practice. We will be pro-active in seeking out new and diverse voices, **supportive** and **encouraging** towards all contributors, and adopt a **developmental** approach to peer review.

We commit to being **honest** with each other, our contributors and readers. We will make our processes as **transparent** and **open** as possible to ensure **accountability**. We will strive to maintain the **highest standards** of excellence, both academic and administrative. As a journal, we will welcome **innovation** and support unconventional ways to present knowledge, particularly where this enables knowledge from underrepresented communities to be heard.

We will seek to work **collaboratively** and with **humility**, recognizing the need to be self-reflective, willing to be challenged and find ways to discuss difficult topics. We will actively support principles of **social justice**: giving voice to those who are marginalized; standing against discrimination and abuse and finding ways to support those with less power, influence, money, and academic status.

Concluding Reflections

Several things derived from the restructuring. Not only was the editorial board comprised of individuals who supported an anti-racist, equitable journal but also co-developed the journal's value and mission statement. Editorial Board meetings are now scheduled twice in one day to ensure members from all time zones can attend. Going forward it has been agreed to hold an annual co-learning event focusing on other aspects of equality for Editorial Board members.

Another positive effect of the new vision was to create a new Editor position that oversees abstracts (and some articles) translated in various languages. This was done to recognize authors and readers who are non-native English speakers and to decolonize an otherwise traditional academic influence on the publication process. Typically non-English speakers have been expected to assume the responsibility of learning the language of the oppressor in order to get access to information. It is hoped that we can decolonize this process more and more over time. Only providing resources in English reinforced the ethnocentrism that so many peer-reviewed journals espouse. Table 2 illustrates that some abstracts have been translated into 12 different languages, at this point. The journal is always open to additional translations in these languages or in other languages not currently listed. Anyone interested in supporting the translation efforts should contact the Translation Editor of the journal to coordinate these effects. We wish to thank the many individuals who have already contributed to this important work!

Table 2

Abstracts Translated in Various Languages

Language	Number of Abstracts Available (As of May 2022)
Armenian	1
Chinese	10
Chinese (Taiwan)	9
French	10
German	2
Hebrew	5
Italian	1
Norwegian	1
Persian	10
Russian	5
Spanish	5
Swedish	1

Journal of Solution Focused Practices – 24

So how is JSFP funded? In early talks about the new JSFP, the importance of sustainability arose. From several conversations and brainstorming sessions, the idea arose to allow groups, organizations, and individuals to make donations to the journal. Larger, consistent donations would be recognized as sponsors. Both AASFBT and SFBTA agreed to make yearly donations to support the journal. Other groups across Europe and Asia graciously donated money as well. In order to maintain transparency and allow for donors to "have a say" in how their funds were spent, a sponsors and management group was formed to discuss the business aspects of the journal. This group meets quarterly to discuss the journal's finances, allowing donors to recommend how funds should be spent. JSFP continues to rely on donations and sponsors to keep operations running (refer to JSFP's webpage ways to contribute). This is only the beginning of our journey, to engage with all of our members to increase accountability.

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