

# Beyond the Ivory Tower: Toward a More Inclusive Approach to University Scholarship

Peter Olusoga

*Sheffield Hallam University*

Academia, as we know it, has been shaped by a history of exclusion based on class, race, and gender. By extension, that history has moulded our conceptualisations of what constitutes knowledge and scholarship. This article challenges academics to consider how, as keepers of knowledge, we can simultaneously be agents of scholarly change in novel ways that are expansive and inclusive.

**Keywords:** Academia, inclusive scholarship, gatekeepers of knowledge

Academia is an exclusive club. In this article, I attempt to critically examine the impact of academia's exclusionary roots and consider whether we, as academics, can take a more inclusive stance on what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Can we, for example, critique our veneration of the peer-reviewed academic journal article and, at the same time, expand our concept of "the literature" in our scholarly work? How might we learn to explore findings from, make connections between, and draw conclusions from different types of knowledge? And how might we be more inclusive in our methods of broadcasting our scholarship outside of the Ivory Towers we find ourselves in?

## Look, Dig, & Dig Deeper

If you take a look at Wikipedia, the modern-day fountain of all dubiously sourced knowledge, the first "real university" is generally considered to be the University of Bologna, Italy, founded in 1088. It is credited as being the first university, largely because it was the first to use the Latin word "Universitas"—meaning 'the whole', or in Roman law, meaning a number of persons associated into one body, a society, company, community. Now, if you think about it for more than half a second, this seems like something of a circular (and, thus, very silly) argument, but we can let that go for now.

**CONTACT:** Dr. Peter Olusoga, Sheffield Hallam University, Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Heart of the Campus, Room HC.1.48, Sheffield, United Kingdom, S10 2BP.  
E-mail: [p.olusoga@shu.ac.uk](mailto:p.olusoga@shu.ac.uk)

If you dig a little deeper, you will find the oldest university in the world is thought to be University of Al Quaraouiyine, founded by a Muslim woman, Fatima al-Fihri in Morocco in 859 CE (Common Era). Originally founded as a mosque, it became a leading spiritual and educational centre, awarding degrees in religious studies, grammar, and rhetoric, growing to include subjects like mathematics, medicine, and astronomy.

Dig a little deeper still and you will find that places of higher learning go back much, much further. You might find your way to Nalanda, a Buddhist monastic university in 5th Century India, offering fine arts, medicine, and politics. You might find your way to the Great Library of Alexandria, Egypt, founded sometime between 323–246 BCE (Before the Common Era), and perhaps to the Ancient Egyptian Per-ankh, dating back as far as around 2000 BCE. In fact, you will probably discover many, many other ancient centres of learning across India, China, Africa, and the Middle East (Alemu, 2018).

"That's borderline interesting," you might be thinking, "but what has that got to do with anything?" Well, this is an example of how, despite acknowledging the existence of these historically global centres of learning, our ideas about what higher education is and who it is for, are coloured by a very particular, very Western, very White, and very elitist set of lenses.

## Academia's Ugly Historical Roots

Academia is, by its very nature, an exclusive club. It always has been. If, for argument's sake, we do take our European medieval "universities" as the starting point,

women were effectively barred from earning degrees because priests, lawyers, or doctors were not allowed to have ovaries in those days. The first colleges established in the British American colonies, including Harvard and Yale in 1636 and 1701 respectively, were, rather unsurprisingly, major beneficiaries of the slave trade and were only available, again rather unsurprisingly, to privileged, White, male-identifying students, who often brought their enslaved Black people along with them—presumably to carry their heavy, heavy books, fetch them their Bud Lights, and adequately season their food.

The university, as we know and love it, was built on exclusion by class, race, and gender, among other things. In fact, the language of higher education was still Latin right up until the later part of the 19th Century! What all this exclusion has left us with is a very specific and very archaic way of doing things in academia, which stems from an age that no longer (in theory) exists.

**Figure 1.** Proof from the inside: Even we academics recognize the irony



**John F. Cryan**

@jfcryan

Follow

...

Happy Father's Day!

"Daddy works in a magical, faraway land called Academia."

A classic from @dsipress



"Daddy works in a magical, faraway land called Academia."

03:55 · 6/20/21 From Earth

<sup>1</sup> Mostly. I snuck a few past the censors!

## The Ivory Tower

We are tied to an anachronistic form of writing and broadcasting our work which (a) let's face it, is often deathly boring, and (b) only serves other academics. Even our use of grammar is heavily scrutinized and must conform to standards. When drafting this piece, I originally used several contractions, deliberately for emphasis, yet they have all been removed by the editorial team to conform to the style of this journal and academic writing<sup>1</sup>. Contractions (don't, can't, shouldn't, etc.) are unacceptable in academic writing because they are colloquial and, thus, too informal. But formal and informal are just made-up concepts. Academia is often referred to as an Ivory Tower, or as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it: a state of privileged seclusion or separation from the facts and practicalities of the real world. Within this Ivory Tower, we continue to write in particular ways and express ourselves via narrowly prescribed and largely inflexible methods, deliberately indecipherable and inaccessible to those not on the inside.

Consider the peer-reviewed original research paper, the bane of many an undergraduate's existence. Often written and structured in APA 7th Edition format and style, the research paper is the standard way of broadcasting our scientific findings. But can we all just admit they are mostly pretty dull? Do I honestly have to read about Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis in every qualitative research paper for the rest of my life? While we are on the subject, I am honestly not really that bothered about your ontological perspective either, I just want to know what you found out when you asked those people about that thing. And I am pretty sure athletes, coaches, parents, and anyone else interested in the psychology of sport, exercise, and performance, couldn't give a rat's ass about whether your journal titles are in italics in your reference list. Seriously, who's got the time to care about that?

I digress. I am obviously not suggesting that we do away with academic writing and publishing altogether. The detailed descriptions of methodology and methods, the presentation of statistical analyses, and the peer review system all serve as forms of rigor and protection against the publication of methodologically "iffy" research and potentially spurious findings that can cause real harm. Although . . . now that I think about it, the extensive back-catalogue of published, peer-reviewed psychology research describing the supposed inferiority of non-White "races," the very foundation of Scientific Racism that continues to drive the discrimination

faced by minoritized groups to this day (\*takes breath, inserts reference at the request of the journal editors\*) (Shannon, 2021), is perhaps evidence that peer-review within the Ivory Tower is not all it is cracked up to be! And let us not even get started on the whole Autism/vaccines thing!<sup>2</sup>

### As Keepers of Knowledge

What I *do* think, is that we should perhaps be more cognisant of where our elitist, exclusionary style of scientific communication comes from, and that even though it might be uncomfortable, we should take a good look at what we consider to be legitimate forms of knowledge and why we consider them to be so. To disappear down a rabbit hole for a moment, Steven Roberts and colleagues (2020) examined the editorship and authorship of six top-tier psychology journals from 1974 to 2018 (i.e., *Cognition*, *Cognitive Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and *Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin*). Their analysis showed that during that time, only 5% of editors were people of colour. A quick look at the editorship of major journals in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., *The Sport Psychologist*, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise, and Health*; sorry if I have left yours out) also reveals a distinct lack of colour.

But that is not the interesting bit. The interesting bit is that Roberts et al.'s (2020) data also suggested an editor-in-chief's race predicted the publication of research that highlighted race. When editors were white, 4% of all publications highlighted race. When editors were people of colour, the publication rate of articles concerned with race almost tripled. Again, I am using race as the primary example here, but this aptly demonstrates that if the peer-reviewed journal article is the gold standard, then the gatekeepers in academia—reviewers, editors, and the journals—really do influence what is considered and accepted as “knowledge” and what is not. And if those gatekeepers operate within a system of exclusion, and let us be absolutely honest here, academia is a system of White, male superiority, then just like those ancient centres of learning in Africa and Asia, certain types

and forms of knowledge are delegitimized. So, while I obviously generalise here, we are left with a situation in which a largely homogenous group of people in terms of class, race, and gender become the arbiters of what is and is not considered legitimate knowledge, and in which that knowledge is communicated in ways that are designed to exclude anyone else.

### Bravery From Within the Ivory Tower

When people ask me what I think needs to happen in academia, they usually raise at least one of their eyebrows when I say, “Burn it all to the ground and start again!” But I am deadly serious. Well, not literally, there are some really beautiful buildings on university campuses that I would hate to see damaged—mostly built with money from slavery, now that I think about it. So yeah, perhaps I am serious after all<sup>3</sup>. In lieu of arson, what I am suggesting is perhaps we can be a bit more expansive in what we consider legitimate scholarly work. That can happen in two ways.

First, if I interview a two-time world champion athlete and write it up as a blog post, or publish an article in a magazine, or produce a podcast—are the insights from that interview not meaningful, not useful, not legitimate, just because I didn't carry out a thematic analysis and note down my epistemological position? We can and should still look to academic research as being vital in driving progress in the field, but to elevate the peer-reviewed article to God-like status *without real consideration of why*, and to denigrate other forms of knowledge as less acceptable, useful, or trustworthy, is to do a disservice to all other work that might inform our thinking and our practice. We must be deliberate about this though. We must make a concerted effort to include and acknowledge other forms of knowledge in our own writing, which takes a certain amount of bravery when students are regularly shamed for not having enough peer-reviewed journal articles in their reference lists.

Second, within traditional “academic” writing and publishing, can we, as reviewers, editors, gatekeepers, be more expansive and inclusive in the types of writing that we consider? Can we be less particular about the way that people express themselves, instead focusing

<sup>2</sup> In 1998, British physician Andrew Wakefield and colleagues published a study in *The Lancet*, suggesting a link between the MMR vaccine and Autism in children. Despite the poor design (only 12 children in the study) and speculative nature of the findings, the paper passed peer review. Even though it was widely discredited and eventually retracted, its publication is responsible for the persistent myth that vaccines cause Autism, even though every shred of available evidence suggests they absolutely do not. Peer review ain't all that!

<sup>3</sup> To clarify, I am not serious in a literal sense. Arson is bad. Do not set fire to things.

on the quality and usefulness of the output? Can we challenge ourselves to look beyond our own exclusionary academic roots? As writers and thinkers, can we be brave enough to express our ideas in other ways? Poetry. Art. Storytelling. Imagine opening the *Journal for Advancing Sport Psychology in Research* to find pencil drawings capturing the frustration of elite coaching, or a series of Haikus on the pain and triumph of being an early career practitioner. Is there a sample-size calculation? No. Is there inspiration, provocation, the spark of an idea? Absolutely, and there is so much benefit in that, even in the stuffy, whitewashed walls of academia.

**Figure 2.** Academic Frustration Haiku by Dr. Pete



"That's all very well and good," I hear you mumble, "but the academic journal isn't the place for that sort of thing." Why not? Because you say so? Because this is how it has always been in the Ivory Tower, so this is how it should always be? Because we must preserve the sanctity of yet another White, male, supremacist institution? Yeah, I said it.

Look, people like and seek out things that are like themselves. It is an affinity bias, or homophily. In other words, people who are in charge of stuff basically really like their own shit. Therefore, conventional, conservative reviewers (which is most people in academia) will prefer conventional, conservative ideas (Brezis et al., 2020). More innovative reviewers (of which there are fewer) are more likely to be interested in and accepting of

novel ideas. So, because the more innovative, inclusive, expansive reviewers are far fewer in number, we get this sort of regression to the mean, whereby daring to try something different is punished, and sticking to tried and tested formulaic work is rewarded. And, thus, nothing changes. Nothing changes.

But I quite like change. Change is good.

## ORCID

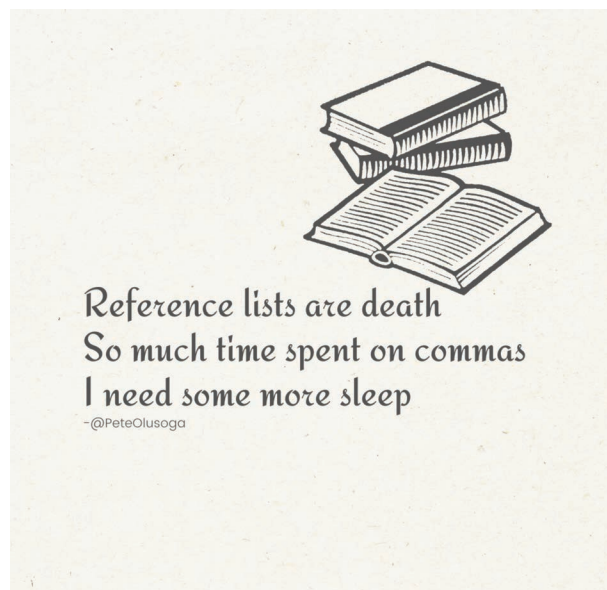
Peter Olusoga

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8431-3853>

## References<sup>4</sup>

- Alemu, S. K. (2018). The meaning, idea, and history of university/higher education in Africa: A Brief literature review. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 4(3), 210–227. <https://doi.org/10.32865/fire20184312>
- Brezis, E. S., & Birukou, A. (2020). Arbitrariness in the peer review process. *Scientometrics*, 123(1), 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03348-1>
- Roberts, S. O., Bareket-Shavit, C., Dollins, F. A., Goldie, P. D., & Mortenson, E. (2020). Racial inequality in psychological research: Trends of the past and recommendations for the future. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(6), 1295–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620927709>
- Shannon, L. (Director) (2021). *Subnormal: A British scandal* [Film]. British Broadcasting Corporation.

**Figure 3.** One more Haiku, dedicated to all PhD students, just because I can ☺. Dr. Pete



<sup>4</sup>In APA Style 7th Edition, as is Tradition, with every comma, period, and use of *italics* carefully considered and placed so as not to offend the Gods of Pedantry.