

Episode: Author Interview: “*How Should Educators and Publishers Eliminate Racial Essentialism?*”

Guest: Jenny Tsai, MD, MEd

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Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Jenny Tsai, an emergency medicine physician, writer, educator, and advocate in New Haven, Connecticut. She’s here to discuss her article, [How Should Educators and Publishers Eliminate Racial Essentialism?](#), in the March 2022 issue of *The Journal*, [Toward Abolition Medicine](#). Dr Tsai, thank you so much for being on the podcast today. [music fades out]

DR JENNY TSAI: Yeah, thank you so much for inviting me. This is really exciting.

HOFF: To begin with, what’s the main ethics argument that you’re advancing in your article this month?

TSAI: I do think the main ethics point that I want readers to take away is that the way we think about race and the way we conceptualize race really matters, because when we get it wrong, we cause harm.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

TSAI: I quote from another paper by a social psychologist whose work I really admire, and she gives this example of if two people are new coworkers and they’re driving together in a car one morning on the way to work, and the radio says something about how different medications are more advantageous for different racial groups compared to the same exact situation, but on the radio is a short story about the history of neighborhood segregation in their city, they may well have very, very different impacts to their relationship to each other and their relationship to themselves and the world at large. And so, it kind of gives you a sense of how important. It’s not just about semantics. These are technical definitions. They are ways that we need to be accurate and rigorous in our science. But it’s not just about those technicalities, right? These are enormous problems in racial health inequities. These are enormous things that we have to address, and it changes the way we think about them and also how we think to solve them.

HOFF: Hmm. Yeah, an important thing for everybody, it sounds like. But for health professions students and trainees sort of at the beginning of their careers, what do you think is the most important thing for them to take from your article?

TSAI: Honestly, biologic essentialism is just one example of how medicine gets things wrong, and certainly that’s what this article is about. But a lot of those same principles and powers, a lot of these very muscular forces that allow medical racism to be buried in health care, to be buried in our practice, in our thinking exist for many other things. So, we have

to do more work in our training, in our practices, in our knowledge production to explicitly and actively dig up these other harms and be able to notice them. And I think that's why I'm so interested in medical education. So, this is one example, but I think it's more of an access point to think about how do these things get in our house and what powers allow them to? How do we start digging those up?

HOFF: So, it sounds like there's ample room for expansion on this topic. So, to that point, if you could add something to your article that you didn't either have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

TSAI: In this article, and I think in a lot of my work because I am a physician, I'm addressing the ethics of biologic essentialism within medicine. But I think it's intuitive but something that's not always at the forefront of our minds and in the ways that we act, that health inequity and the harms that we're talking about cannot be solved by medicine. It cannot be solved even by the system of health care that we're in, no matter how much we optimize it. So often, we talk about health policy or policymaking without talking about politics. And I do think all of these boil down to political economy: how wealth is concentrated, how wealth is stratified, what kind of ways does our state redistribute resources? How do we treat each other? What are community fabrics made of, and how do we improve those? That's where we really need to turn our attention to. As much as I obviously am committed to work within medicine and undoing some of these things in medicine, we have to come together across all disciplines and specialties. Otherwise, we're never going to be able to make real progress. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Dr Tsai, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me today and for your contribution to the March issue of the Journal.

TSAI: Thank you so much.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of the March 2022 issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](https://www.journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.