Perspectives on Psychological Science

Publishing in the Psychological Sciences: Enhancing Journal Impact While Decreasing Author Fatigue

Issues in Publishing, Editing, and Reviewing

Publishing in the Psychological Sciences

Enhancing Journal Impact While Decreasing Author Fatigue

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ABSTRACT—*The publication process in the psychological sciences is unduly tedious and would benefit from the adoption of a publishing model typical of the neurosciences and basic sciences. The author argues that such a change would result in higher impact publications in the psychological sciences and would also conserve the time of busy scientists.*

Published research findings are the currency of the scientific community, including the psychological sciences. Over the past decade, I have shifted my own research program from an exclusively cognitive–behavioral perspective to what is now almost exclusively a cognitive–neuroscience orientation. As a result of this, I increasingly publish my work in journals primarily oriented to the neurosciences. I have found the publication process utilized by journals focused on the neurosciences to be quite a positive experience, in contrast to the typical process associated with psychology publication. I propose that the neuroscience model is an ideal direction towards which to shift the publication process in the psychological sciences.

What is so great about the neuroscience model (a model also shared by many other scientific disciplines)? Actually, a lot. The journals are typically of much higher impact than psychology journals, the review process is efficient, the publication lag is brief, and the articles are shorter. These factors result in a much higher yield for authors relative to the effort expended, as the time invested in the actual process of getting one's findings published is considerably less than it is for typical psychology journals. Moreover, the visibility of the published work is usually greater than in the psychologically oriented science journals, largely, I believe, because many more people read short, accessible articles than long, jargon-ridden ones.

Most of you reading this will note immediately that the single most successful journal in the field of psychology (at least in my estimation), *Psychological Sciences*, has all of the characteristics mentioned above and was modeled on the premier scientific publication *Science*. *Psychological Sciences* began publication in 1990, and, after this relatively short existence, it has an impact factor of 4.57, exceeded only by four other psychology journals, all of which involve reviews or articles which are not primarily empirical in nature.

Based on the success of the neuroscience and the *Psychological Sciences* model, I have begun questioning the typical publication enterprise in the psychological sciences. I find myself increasingly unenthused to prepare lengthy journal articles that will take, quite possibly, years of review and revision to publish in a relatively low-impact journal. I would estimate that the amount of total time devoted to the preparation (not data collection and analysis) of a neuroscience or *Psychological Sciences* publication is five times less than other much lower impact journals. I have considered that the move to more journals of this type would both enrich the discipline and save considerable editorial, review, and author time. Thus, as long as such changes do not make the field worse (which seems very unlikely), there is considerable gain to changing the publishing model in psychology. The impact factor of journals might even increase in psychology if we followed a model more typical of other sciences. Below, I detail a series of recommendations for journal policies that I believe would enhance or maintain the quality of publications in psychology and confer considerable advantages of various types across a range of domains and subgroups.

1. Shorten articles. The easiest way to do this is by limiting articles to a specified word count and requiring a concise statement of the problem under study. I do not necessarily advocate increasing the number of articles in journals. Obviously,

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if all the journals decreased word count and maintained or increased pages, the net effect would be to have more and more articles published, which would not necessarily improve the quality of the journal or the discipline.

2. Use Web-based information more freely. It is certainly the case that some of the shortest articles in other science journals appear to be written in something approximating telegraphic speech. I am not advocating poor writing, and I believe, in fact, that journal article clarity could be improved with shorter articles. At the same time, I recognize that it is important that all of the information necessary for replication of a study be available to others. The most effective place to present and maintain this information, however, is not in a print journal, but on a journal-sponsored Web site. Authors would provide additional information and details about methods on this site, with the URL clearly indicated in the published article.

3. Editors should decline to send out a significant number of submitted articles for review. Any editor worth his or her salt recognizes an article at the time of submission with no probability or a low probability of success. Rejecting this article at the time of submission provides the author with timely feedback so that an alternative path to publication can be pursued expeditiously. This also greatly reduces the burden on the number of reviews that investigators will be asked to perform and reduces the amount of editorial time spent on a manuscript. Finally, I believe that the "quick rejection" model enhances the number of submissions a journal receives due to the recognition that quick feedback will be provided.

4. Encourage reviewers to focus on critical issues and big ideas, and limit the length of reviews. Most of us have received a disheartening package of reviews from an editor whose sum length is considerably longer than the actual manuscript we submitted. I think this is a practice that simply needs to stop. We need to move the review tradition in psychology toward focus on significant issues and the substance of an article. We also must develop tolerance for speculation, when clearly stated as such, about the meaning or possibilities that the findings suggest, as it is often such speculation that moves the field to the next level.

The present practice of many-page reviews that suggest a total reshaping of an article (often along the lines of a reviewer's own model or key findings) needs to become considerably less fashionable.

5. Editors should be cautious in requesting revisions, and multiple revisions should be deeply discouraged. A huge amount of editorial, author, and reviewer time is wasted by endless revisions. The manuscript is a presentation of the authors' work—not the reviewers' or the editors'. If after a first revision, it is far afield from an acceptable product, then it should be rejected. In my view, a second revision should never be requested unless it is accompanied by an "acceptance pending suitable revisions." I believe that third revisions are unacceptable and represent either poor initial editing or insecurity and indecisiveness on the part of the editor. I also believe editors should try to shorten the review process by not sending revisions out for review if at all possible, with editors making the judgment themselves about the suitability of a revision.

6. Review turnaround time needs to be short. This is a significant problem in the discipline. I plead guilty here myself of providing tardy reviews, but I am most guilty of it for journals where I have been involved in a protracted review process as an author. A relentless barrage of e-mails from a computer is actually pretty effective in motivating my behavior to prioritize a review.

7. Emphasize translational implications, if any, of results. Impact of journal articles will be improved if they provide a direct line of reasoning for how findings might translate into useful information for real-world behaviors or technologies. This will enhance the probability that the article will affect public policy and thus increase its impact.

I recognize that adopting the changes advocated here is not a universal panacea for enhancing the impact factor of psychology journals and, even more importantly, enhancing the impact of psychological research in the real world. At the same time, I would venture that journals adopting such policies would see an increase in submissions and citations and an enhancement of impact relative to journals that remain mired in a publication process that is outdated.