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Issues in Publishing, Editing, and Reviewing

Publishing in Scientific Journals

We're Not Just Talking to Ourselves Anymore

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ABSTRACT—Increasingly, psychological research is part of the integrative science that spans multiple disciplines, but variable publication standards undermine some of the integrative progress that might otherwise be made. Word limits for articles, norms for shorter reviews (which would improve turnaround time), electronic availability, and appropriate marketing of research will bring psychology closer to the central role it could play in integrative science.

The face of scientific publication has changed over the past decade, and psychology has kept pace with these developments for the most part. Online publishing is increasingly common; posting articles on the Internet once the work has been peer reviewed is now a norm (when permitted by the journal); and articles throughout the sciences have moved to shorter, tighter, more accessible formats. Still, psychology has some distance to go to match the publication norms of related sciences, and there are good reasons for going that distance.

Increasingly, psychology makes a vital contribution to science that is integrative across multiple disciplines. We are read not just by our fellow psychologists, but, depending on the breadth and focus of our articles, by researchers in economics, political science, sociology, medicine, and biology, among other fields. This transformation has come about because each field has increasingly implicated the others in its findings and conclusions. For example, it is hard to imagine the field of behavioral economics without the input of social cognition or social cognitive neuroscience. Medicine is increasingly utilizing health psychology perspectives for insights regarding illness prevention and patient care. Biologists are recognizing that when animal models are stepped up to the human level, psychological construal processes become essential for generating predictions and interpreting findings. Experiences, such as loneliness, and psychological resources, such as optimism, need to be inte-

grated into mechanistic studies designed to explore the interaction of psychological and biological processes related to mental and physical health outcomes.

Yet, in some ways, psychology can be less accessible than the other biological and behavioral sciences. As one who publishes in journals ranging across sociology, psychiatry, immunology, and medicine, and as an avid reader of scientific journals such as *Science* and *Nature*, I have observed some trends that psychology might well consider.

Many of our papers are simply too long. Does anyone actually read them? For example, the flagship journal of social psychology, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, is often characterized by multiple studies that differ from each other in tiny ways, making the review process tediously long and the articles tediously dull. Other journals are increasingly adopting a word limit between 2,500 and 6,000 words, and psychological journals might profitably do the same. Some investigators will counter that theoretical exposition, which is a strength of psychology, is sacrificed to word limits. No doubt that problem sometimes occurs, but many *Psychological Science* articles provide excellent examples of brief but clear theoretical exposition that generates compelling data. We don't always need all those words. We can save the long papers for review articles or book chapters where they are more likely to be read by those directly in one's field.

A second issue that is dependent on the first is turnaround time. Many scientific journals turn articles around in 3–5 weeks. In my home field of social psychology, turnaround time is more often 3–6 months or longer. Nothing so implicitly suggests a lack of centrality to scientific progress than a long delay to getting reviews and a long lag to publication. If it doesn't matter whether an article is published 3 months from now or 2 years from now, how vital is it to the field? Other scientific journals publish quickly because the editors believe the work is important and because other scientists need the findings to make progress on their own problems. When psychologists have articles that are important, when time is of the essence, when we fear being scooped unless publication is prompt, then turning to a journal outside psychology is sometimes necessary.

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Reviews in psychology are too harsh and too long. When your articles have been repeatedly pounded by people in your own field, it is refreshing to send them to journals outside the field where they are greeted with interest and balance, and rejection is matter-of-fact, rather than rancorous or mean-spirited. When the cumulative reviews of an article exceed the article's length, something is wrong. We might well take a cue from other journals and write short, up-or-out reviews that state the main problems that need to be corrected or the main reasons for rejection. Reviews that are written primarily to celebrate our own perspicacity waste other people's time.

Moreover, the length of the review process contributes directly to lag time: When one anticipates writing an 8–10 page review, one will put it off as long as possible, whereas providing a short review for an up-or-out decision can be done almost by return mail. The relatively young journal, *Psychological Science*, which has already leaped to an enviable citation status, does all of these things well. The articles are short, reviews are short, and consequently, turnaround time is short. This means that the best science gets out to the field quickly, and that rejection is known rapidly so that additional research can be conducted promptly or the paper can be turned around to another journal where its reception may be warmer.

Finally, marketing papers, a concept alien to some scientists, is increasingly important if we are to reach the multiple fields to which our work may contribute. For example, a social cognitive neuroscience paper that is relevant to behavioral economics needs to get there. A health psychology paper that is relevant to medicine needs to move outside the confines of the relatively small field of health psychology. Although such con-

siderations clearly dictate the choice of an outlet in the first place, they should also dictate what we do after a paper is accepted.

Short, clear, and well-timed press releases are a vital part of this process. If you don't control what gets said, then you don't control what gets read. There are few greater frustrations than seeing one's work butchered in a newspaper or magazine article, but such fiascos can sometimes be avoided by a well-written press release that makes the nature of the work, its methods, and implications very clear.

We can send our papers out to a target audience that might otherwise not read the journal. Authors might be well advised to create a list of people in other fields unlikely to otherwise encounter the paper and e-mail it to them. These are two of the simplest marketing techniques, yet, surprisingly, they are often ignored. They can make the difference between one's research getting the attention it deserves or sinking like a stone amidst the mass of published scientific papers that now spew forth every week.

Shorter papers with faster turnaround times, reduced expectations for the length of reviews (without compromising quality), electronic availability, and appropriate marketing would seem to promise not only that psychological research will be promptly accessible to the field but also to those in related sciences. In so doing, other scientists will more readily see that we're not just talking to ourselves anymore.

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