On the Future of APS Journals

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In these Presidential Columns, from September 2008 to January 2009, I discussed the implicit understandings and misunderstandings — the urban legends of our field — about our roles in the publication process as researchers, contributors, reviewers, and editors. I looked at how these legends may influence what we do, sometimes in ways that undermine building an increasingly integrative and cumulative psychological science. Today’s column, my last as APS President, turns from our legends to the future of our journals and the ever-growing challenges they must face to assure that they in fact continue to facilitate the progress of our rapidly evolving science as effectively and wisely as possible.

The Way We Are

For many of us, the greatest appeal of APS from its start 20 years ago is that it offers important outlets for disseminating psychological science research, both in its publications and in its annual convention, to audiences not restricted to colleagues in one’s specialty or sub-discipline. These outlets have thrived and continue to provide a sorely needed and enthusiastically welcomed alternative to those otherwise available in our science. Psychological Science, in particular, has become an ideal venue for disseminating the findings of psychology as it has become a hub science” (Cacioppo, 2007), in which traditional disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries are freely crossed, and research at multiple levels of analysis and on diverse phenomena is welcomed. It’s been an astounding success. Then what’s the problem? It’s the success. To quote from a 2007 memo by our APS Executive Director, Alan Kraut:

“Psychological Science is an incredible success story. From its beginnings under Founding Editor Bill Estes, the journal has attracted a wide array of excellent psychological science, and whenever citations statistics such as Impact Factor and more recently $h$ are collected, it has ranked among the best of scientific journals (and not just in psychology, I am proud to say). The APS Board has held discussions about its future. We all want it to continue to be strong as it grows. But there are challenges to face. First, growth in Submissions-Pages-Reviewers: we’ve increased the journal’s pages regularly. It moved from every other month to monthly under James Cutting. It is now moving from 3-4 Associate Editors to 9+ Associate Editors under Rob Kail, and still it grows. 2007 will end with the Journal having received a bit under 1,600 submissions. “

In 2008, that number turned out to be 1,800 and 2009 could easily bring over 2,000.

The Way We Were

To put these numbers, and the challenges they create, into perspective for the publishing decisions APS faces and for policies needed to design appropriate publication outlets and wise stewardship for the future, let’s take a quick look back at the history of some of our main journals in psychology. I’ll focus
on those that I’ve known best, at the intersections, the hyphens, that link and separate abnormal-clinical-
social-personality-cognitive-developmental psychology. Once they were together, now mostly they are
split — which is one of the many reasons that Psychological Science, with its openness for boundary
crossing, is so appealing and suffers now from too much success.

For four decades (1925-1964) social-personality and clinical psychologists reported their best findings in
the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology (JASP), founded early in the last century. The mission
of the journal was to publish work that illuminated basic” and fundamental” knowledge concerning the
pathology, dynamics and development of personality or individual behavior (Katz, 1964).” The review
process used seems unimaginable now: In 1958, its editor, Daniel Katz, accepted my first manuscript
within 3 weeks by postal service mail, with a warm personal note and without revision. It contained, as I
recall, five correlation coefficients, and was five pages long, including references. That’s the way it was.

It’s not 1958 anymore, and the journal world has changed in ways that are mostly obvious, but we are
stuck with our history and need to consider some of the consequences for the field today. The N of
everything has escalated even faster than the consumer price index: the N of psychologists, of journals,
of submissions, of publication pressures on everybody — authors, reviewers, readers, and editors alike.
The explosion of increasingly focused specialties caused the journals to keep splitting and proliferating.
In JASP’s case it began with its renaming in the mid-1960s to the Journal of Personality and Social
Psychology (JPSP). Abnormal-clinical was split away and soon needed its own new set of sub-specialty
journals. That split had substantial fallout that still has consequences. Most people in personality and
social lost touch with work and developments in the clinical-abnormal areas, which previously had been
a source and inspiration for some of the best work in personality and social psychology. Abnormal-
clinical suffered the other side of that disconnect, becoming divorced from what was being discovered
about social cognition, mental-emotional functioning, personality, etc. in the JPSP pages.

In time, JPSP itself was further divided, like ancient Gaul, into three parts that still co-exist, I think
rather uncomfortably, as independent entities within the same covers. Each part has its own editor,
associate editors, and consultant board: attitudes and social cognition up front, personality processes and
individual differences tucked in the back, and the interpersonal relations/group world stuck in the
middle. To me, it feels like splitting nature at its most unnatural joints, disconnecting social from
personality and both from interpersonal relations. These divisions may be how many training programs
and department organizations are still structured, but it does not fit how the phenomena being studied
seem to play out in nature (e.g., Mischel, 2009). Concurrently, the journals in child and developmental
psychology took over when the subjects were younger than first year college students, and other journals
sprang up to deal with aging issues and populations. Health psychology was born, thrived, and split from
social to become its own field, and most recently social cognitive neuroscience burst forth, with its own
brain-image-filled journals escalating rapidly.

The splitting of journals reflected the growth and vigor of the science that demanded outlets for the new
specialty areas that were developing. That’s good news, but it also has its downside. It risks narrowing
researchers’ attention to work in their own sub-discipline and its journals, oblivious to potentially
relevant studies and ideas appearing under different labels in other areas and disciplines. This nourishes
the type of parallel play I bemoaned in my first column (in the September 2008 Observer), and further
undermines boundary-crossing and the building of a cumulative science.
The Future?

As is too often said near the end of an article: the above raises more questions than it answers. APS faces big questions about the future of its publications including the possibility of creating new journals, with the attending missions, editorial structure, and policies. What kinds of journals (or other media) and what kinds of journal policies, devoted to what sorts of missions, can best accommodate the research generated at a dizzying rate within psychological science?

As a start, it’s worth thinking about what kind of science we seem to be on the way to becoming. Discussing the trends in psychology in his APS President’s Columns, Past President John Cacioppo (2007), identified three different levels of organization or perspectives that now partition the science of mind and behavior: the biological substrates, the cognitive level with its focus on information processing representations and operations, and the social-cultural level. While recognizing the importance of the in-depth study of each of these perspectives, he underlines that “a comprehensive understanding of the mind and behavior is likely to be achieved by an integration of what we know and can learn across multiple perspectives” that will be promoted by investigating the perspectives not just in isolation but in various combinations and as a whole.” (Cacioppo, 2007, p. 50).

I agree, and am also optimistic about where our science is going, with research that bridges levels and perspectives, as current work in social cognitive neuroscience does, using tools, models, and expertise from more than one area to understand phenomena and processes that play out in interactions that are oblivious to our archaic disciplinary boundaries. Such phenomena invariably involve interactions, for example in the dynamic interplay of nature and nurture” that cannot begin to be captured without crossing traditional boundaries that split our sub-disciplines and our links to other sciences (e.g., Champagne, 2009). Impressive examples of such boundary-crossing work will be featured in the Presidential Symposium The New Genetics and What It Means for Psychological Science” at the 2009 APS Convention this month.

In thinking about and planning the journal and publication needs for the future, new ways to facilitate such boundary crossing need to be considered. Happily, the movement toward boundary-crossing problem-driven work in psychological science coincides (and not coincidentally) with the revolutionary developments in information technology. The new opportunities for the dissemination of information through the Internet can be harnessed to facilitate the changing nature of our science and the needs of researchers and research-consumers whose interests cross traditional journal and disciplinary boundaries. As a step in that direction, Psychological Science, for example, has been online for some time. It also has always been mailed to all APS Members (now over 20,000), and many have been delighted with that. But with escalating expenses that will be difficult to sustain. APS moved to the experimental option of online-only subscriptions in 2008 and more than a quarter of our members immediately chose it. Perhaps we may go online-only in future years. And in 2009 we began our This Week in Psychological Science” weekly emails to all Members, with brief summaries and links to articles published in Psychological Science that week. Our journals now are also available on JSTOR, a non-profit digital archive that allows access to our science by scholars in colleges and universities around the world. This not only means a lot less paper, but it may ultimately become a better way to get needed problem-driven, rather than discipline-driven, information and cross-cutting connections for boundary-crossing research.
Many other questions have emerged in preliminary APS Board discussions about our publishing future. It is clear that we have lots of questions but no firm answers. And of course, for better or worse, that means we form a committee of experienced experts to undertake, as one says in the committee business, an in-depth examination of the questions and challenges ahead.” Discussing this committee route with an esteemed colleague, he groaned and suggested other disciplines must have figured out ways to solve this problem, and might provide a model for us. A journal like Cell (impact factor 29.8) must have a crazy overload of submissions, yet cellular biology must have figured out some sensible system of excellent, widely-accessible next-tier journals for rapid publication of research reports. (Surely) some encouraging point can be made by looking over at other fields that had informational explosions decades ago.” I thought it was a good idea and looked over at other fields that use journals like Cell, consulting with an informant in that area. The response was rapid and passionate, and I quote it in full:

“The biomedical sciences have not figured it out. There are striking benefits (fame, glory and grant money, as well as newspaper headlines) to the author to publish in one of the general interest” journals that are extremely difficult to get in to, which are Science and Nature (i.e., all science of any type), Cell for biological science, and New England Journal of Medicine for biomedical science. The extreme competition for these journals, and the extreme limitation on page counts for Science and Nature, has lead to the proliferation of a set of spin offs — Cell Aging, Cell Metabolism, Cancer Cell, Nature Medicine, Nature Cell Biology, Science Signaling — many of which are largely run through professional editors” and are also extremely competitive. The papers in these journals are supposed to be distinguished by their general” impact and their novelty, unlike the highest level society journals, i.e., Journal of Cell Biology (Impact 14), Journal of Biological Chemistry (Impact 10), and Cancer Research (Impact 10). These journals are where the bulk of excellent science is published, and are considered more specialized, yet studies in them to do not have the same impact or prestige as the Nature and Cell clones which are career changing and are trumped up through their novelty. Two problems: 1) inordinate editorial control of these journals, as opposed to the society journals which generally don’t have these professional editors rejecting papers on the novelty card, but rather having them reviewed by expert reviewers based on the science; and 2) inordinate focus on novelty leads to overblown conclusions, disregarding of previous studies from other groups, and failure to build a cumulative science. Harold Varmus started the Public Library of Science publishing system to address this issue in part, although the main reason was to facilitate complete open access so anyone can get a paper without having to pay for it (authors largely bear costs of publication). He developed 3 or 4 exclusive journals” within PLOS, — PLOS Medicine, PLOS Biology, PLOS Genetics, etc. — and then developed a rapid” publication forum called PLOS one. PLOS one is designed to be reviewed for technical merit and correct methods as sufficient grounds for publication, which is what the reviewers are told to focus on. The journal is entirely electronic and through web-based tools facilitates post-decision review process by the community, as any reader can post comments. So, here is the state of the art in biomedical publishing – a mess!”

It’s good to know that psychological science is not alone in worrying about the publication future, and I look forward to the deliberations of our committee with renewed enthusiasm. I hope and trust that the committee will wisely guard the features that make Psychological Science so popular, such as rapid review processes, page limitations, and focus on important findings. Realistic planning for the publishing future of psychological science within APS also requires finding ways to enlist and conserve
the volunteer efforts of a multitude of expert reviewers in the hugely time-consuming enterprise of evaluating manuscripts. And we need to figure out how to make that process less time-consuming without damaging its quality. (In an earlier column I noted that reviewers don’t have to rewrite the papers they review, nor write an essay about each that rivals the length of the submitted article.) It will be particularly important to consider ways to appropriately support the formidable labors of our editors. So far, we have relied mostly on their great goodwill and commitment, and we’ve been lucky.

I end my last column in this space to say that as an insider” at APS this year, I have been very impressed by what this organization and its staff accomplishes, while they manage to keep its structure lean and flexible, avoiding bureaucracy like the plague. I hope and trust it stays that way, while continuing to meet the publication needs of its members and providing support in every way for the advancement of psychological science. And I thank Alan Kraut, Sarah Brookhart, Ann Conkle, Kate Volpe, and the whole staff, for making my life during this time a lot easier than I feared it would be.