Our Archival Stance Can Be Costly

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In last month's column [*Observer*, July/August, 2001], I suggested that psychology, in contrast to many adjacent sciences, is characterized by a methodological preference for experimentation, because experimentation, uniquely, is a way of establishing causality. This methodological preference is driven by our meta-theoretical commitment to tracing out the workings of causal processes and our discovery that ordinary observational thinking does a rather poor job of establishing the causal ordering of events. Because we psychologists are so aware of the confusions and false inferences that people are led to in their everyday thinking, we have required demonstrations of causation that avoid these confusions and false inferences.

Experiments, notoriously, are effortful, time-consuming, and costly to do. But we have been willing to expend these efforts and pay these costs because the experimental discoveries of, for instance, the causal role of reinforcements in producing learning, or the causal mechanisms by which the rods and cones of the visual system produced the psychophysiological experiences of color, are universal discoveries that would apply to all humans in all eras.

We organize our scientific practices around our methodological preferences and meta-theoretical commitments. Consequently, we are an article-driven field, rather than book- or essay-driven, because the article is the preeminent method for reporting the results of an experiment or a series of experiments that establishes causality in some particular domain. And we use a reviewing process that subjects these reports of causality to a merciless scrutiny designed to block publication of reports that do not rule out alternate causes of their phenomena.

As this suggests, we have an extreme form of the "archival" perspective, which is driven by the thought that because articles allowed into print document the workings of universal principles which can then widely be relied on, we must not allow into print any articles that do not illuminate the causal mechanisms that produce these universal effects. The "gatekeeping" metaphor is relevant here; we guard the gates of our journals with something like the fanatic zeal with which the Spartans guarded the gates of Thermopylae (fewer editors than Spartans die in the process, although this might not be the case if the wishes of rejected authors were to be realized.)

Our paradigmatic mode of attack has been a powerful one, but has some concomitant characteristics that inflict what might be thought of as limitations or costs on us.

What are some of those costly consequences? First, many of us believe empirical studies that have less than perfect causal stories but demonstrate interesting and potentially important phenomena get sent back to authors for further work to clarify "the causal mechanisms that determine your interesting outcomes," while studies that tie down causal mechanisms, involving what might be minor points of difference between two generally-similar theories, get published because they meet the "clean causality"

template.

The reason the studies done by the "gross outcome-ites" (as I have occasionally heard disgruntled members of that tribe refer to themselves) don't get published is more subtle than is usually recognized: The incredible page pressures on journals dictates it; that is, such studies fall just below the acceptance cut, rather than being gated out as a policy decision not to publish these causally-imperfect reports.

What might be called the hydraulic effects of page pressure on journals caused by the increasing number of scientists busily doing research spreads farther. When Bibb Latane and others initiated the journal called *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, they explicitly wished it to publish the imperfect but interesting empirical papers of the sort given at conventions but that even then did not meet the standards of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (JPSP) It was also intended to publish "theoretical pieces, methodological suggestions, commentary, criticism and rebuttal." Further, it was to be produced cheaply, with author-generated copy that was to be photographically reproduced, and produced quickly.

Today the *Bulletin* has developed into a standard journal, publishing elegantly causal experimental articles, and it has a high rejection rate, not noticeably different from the rejection rate of the JPSP. Theoretical pieces and commentary are few and far between. The *Bulletin's* production values are high, and publication lags are long. It is an interesting case of the way various forces work in our science to "normalize" a publication that originally had a deviant agenda.

Oddly, psychology does not have a publication outlet for "essays" or "reflections" or other opinion pieces. Let me try to point out what we are missing by assembling some ideas around which an essay could be built. Given that I do research on issues that make some contact with legal systems, and am a fan of Jerry Bruner, I read his co-authored *Minding the Law*[1]. In it I found a lovely chapter on narrative that showed me why narratives reveal what it is that matters to the narrator, and reveal how the culture sees the world as working.

Then in a book review essay[2], I found Alvarez commenting on the stiff upper lip tradition that led the often ill-equipped British arctic explorers to keep going long after they knew that they would not succeed and sometimes when they knew that their ultimate fate was death. Alvarez (p. 17) quotes Apsley Cherry-Garrard's diary written during an expedition to, of all things, track down penguin eggs:

> We were quite intelligent people and we must all have known that we were not going to see the penguins and it was folly to go forward. And yet with quiet perseverance, in perfect friendship, almost with gentleness those two men led on. I just did what I was told…..I wrote that night: "There was something after all rather good in doing something you had never done before."

This in turn took me back to James McPherson's[3] book on the letters sent home by those who fought in the American Civil War, often written by men who knew that the odds were high that they would die in the next day's battle. "My country, glorious country, if we have only made it truly the land of the free…I count not my life dear unto me if only I can help that glorious cause along."

McPherson (p. 100) then remarks: "Glorious cause. Lives sacrificed on the country's altar. Hearts

bleeding for the country's welfare. Some modern readers of these letters may feel they are drowning in bathos…mawkish posturing, romantic sentimentalism, hollow platitudes…." In other words, modern readers do not believe that these are true reports of actual motives.

McPherson continues: "Our cynicism about the genuineness of such sentiments is more our problem than theirs, a temporal/cultural barrier we must transcend if we are to understand why they fought….What seems like bathos or platitudes to us were real pathos and convictions to them….These soldiers, on some level at least, meant what they said about sacrificing their lives for their country."

Narratives, remarks Bruner, tell us what matters to the narrator. So these soldiers' or explorers' letters tell us what motivated them, and clearly they expected their narration to ring true with the readers of the letters. Yet they do not ring true with us. Why? Interestingly, both Alvarez and McPherson point to the same event as providing the watershed between our world and theirs: "Cherry-Garrard's style of resigned, low-key, almost docile courage died…with the hosts of young men who were slaughtered like cattle during World War I." (Alvarez, p. 17) "We do not speak or write like that any more. Most people have not done so since World War I which, as Ernest Hemingway and Paul Fussell have noted, made such words as *glory, honor, courage, sacrifice, valor,* and *sacred* vaguely embarrassing if not mock-heroic." (McPherson, p. 100)

So narratives of motives, offered by individuals and accepted within cultures, validate motives and reinforce the narrator's and others' holding of those motives. But large scale events, such as World War I, can discredit certain motives and make culturally plausible other motivational stories. And a plausible candidate for the "real" motive after the altruistic one is discredited is self-interest. As my colleague Dale Miller shows[4], the culturally-validated motive of the moment is self-interest and it too can possess us, leading us to act in our own self-interest at some times when we might not otherwise do so, and at other times to encase the accounts of our own past altruistic actions in narratives of self-interest.

What are the events that discredit a culture's canonical motive and how does the replacement motive gain acceptance? Can a culture go from privileging a motive of self-interest to one of altruism and sacrifice? What cultural institutions play the lead role in encapsulating and forwarding the culture's narratives of motive?

It turns out what we have here is a set of ideas and claims that need exploration in an essay that some historically informed psychologist could write. These are topics for an essay that would be of importance and many of us would read. Many other essays could be suggested by readers. Having them written – and read by a general psychology audience – could contribute to disseminating psychological science to multiple audiences.

But, and this is my point, where would it be published? Do I go too far in my claims that these sorts of writings do not see the light of day? They certainly might be published in an authored book. However, books – authored books rather than collections of chapters or the research program descriptions that the various "Advances" series publish – often do not find their way to our attention. Or at least not with the urgency that the latest articles in our specializations do. Or are not so easily discovered by our highly sophisticated article retrieval systems. And we do not have other outlets for essays.[5]

So for these and many other reasons, broad-ranging essays are not seen as a core way of forwarding

psychology and connecting psychology to events in the worlds of intellectual discourse or public policy choice making. This is a real loss. These sorts of essays do not flow into our collective consciousness, and thus do not provide ideas that our collective ingenuity figures out how to study empirically.

Our archival stance has other costs. Next month, I will talk about what some of these are, about what other costs our generally-useful scientific stance incurs.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Amsterdam, A. and Bruner, J. (2000). *Minding the Law*, Harvard University Press,

Cambridge.

[2]Alvarez, A. "Books on Ice," in the *New York Review of Books*, August 9, 2001.
[3]James McPherson (1997). *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the*

Civil War, Oxford University Press, New York.

[4]Miller, D. (1999) The norm of self-interest. *American Psychologist*

54(12), 1053-1060.

[5]This may be in the process of changing. Robert Sternberg, current editor of *Contemporary Psychology*, has made it known that he is eager to publish multiple book review essays, as has Sam Glucksberg, who edits *Psychological Science*.