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PUBLISHING IN PSYCHOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

This article relies on the expertise of current and former journal editors in order to introduce undergraduate students to important issues relating to publishing in academic psychology journals. These experts have stressed the need for psychology researchers to submit manuscripts that meaningfully contribute to the discipline and are situated within the context of previous research. The importance for undergraduate students of seeking coauthorships with faculty and becoming familiar with appropriate writing style and submission guidelines of the different psychology journals is also stressed. An appendix is included with a list of publication helps for undergraduate psychology students.

Publishing in academic journals is central to advancement in psychology, whether the advancement of knowledge or the advancement of a researcher's prestige. Indeed, those who warn, "Publish or perish!" often prophesy correctly, as many psychology researchers "*must* publish to obtain a desired position, *must* publish to retain their position, and often *have to* publish to advance in the position" (Kupfersmid & Wonderly, 1994, p. 8). Due to the premium placed on publishing, a researcher's ability to frequently publish in academic journals is often considered his or her most valuable asset.

Likewise, publication for an undergraduate student is quite impressive, as well as an invaluable learning experience. In particular, students interested in graduate school and academic careers in psychology would be wise to learn about publishing in academic journals as soon as possible. The purpose of this article is to introduce a few basics of publishing in psychology. I will first demonstrate that researchers contribute to the discipline only through publishing meaningful articles. I will then discuss two ways that undergraduate students can

begin working toward publication: collaborating with faculty members and becoming familiar with the content and policies of academic journals. In addition, I have provided an appendix that contains a list of helps for undergraduates who are interested in publishing in psychology.

Having Something Meaningful to Say

According to several editors of psychology journals, the primary reason a manuscript is rejected is its failure to meaningfully contribute to the discipline. According to Allan Wagner, former editor of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Animal Behavior Processes*, "By far the most common reason for rejection of papers is lack of substance. . . . If [a researcher's] work represents a genuine contribution, then [editors] will often bend over backward to help the author make the paper acceptable for publication" (as qtd. in Sternberg, 1988, pp. 186–187). Scott Lilienfeld, founding editor of *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*,

agrees, stating that one of the biggest mistakes researchers make is failing to make it clear why their studies are important (Tamashiro, 2003).

One way researchers do not clearly convey the importance of their research is by failing to situate it within the context of previous research. According to BYU's Brent Slife (personal communication, September 30, 2003), this failure was one of the most common mistakes he saw as a journal editor. When researchers do not place their findings or theories within a proper contextual framework, they fail to advance knowledge in the discipline. The reason for this is logical: if an article does not relate to other research, then it does not relate to other researchers, and consequently, nobody cares. This lack of contextual support is often the result of the failure to understand how, or to what extent, one's research relates to the previous or potential work of others. As a result, authors often do not realize the redundancy of their studies or are unable to make a strong case for their relevance.

Because such a premium is placed on publication, however, many articles published in psychology journals do not meaningfully contribute to the discipline. Just because a researcher is able to publish an article does not mean he or she has something meaningful to say. In *The Psychologist's Companion: A Guide to Scientific Writing for Students and Researchers*, Yale University's Robert Sternberg (1988)—a prominent expert on writing in psychology—reviewed Tulving and Madigan's 1970 study, in which less than 10% of articles from a sample of 540 publications were classified as “worthwhile,” according to their “contribution to knowledge” (pp. 166–167). This small percentage, according to Tulving and Madigan, “[carried] the burden of continuous progress in [the] field, by clarifying existing problems, opening up new areas of investigation, and providing titillating glimpses into the unknown” (p. 167). The remaining 90%, however, were classified as “run of the mill” or “utterly inconsequential” (p. 166). These articles either had no bearing on future research or were largely redundant. All of them, Tulving

and Madigan predicted, would “fall into oblivion” within one year (pp. 166–167).

Slife agrees that many psychologists publish articles that are not particularly meaningful. He said that many researchers spend their entire careers constructing “pot-boilers,” focusing on what is publishable (where the “pot” is hot) rather than on what they can meaningfully contribute. Slife, who serves on the editorial boards of four major psychology journals, said he believes that psychologists will better advance the discipline by being directed by “a strong sense of mission” than a mere desire to add tally marks to a curriculum vita.

Although it may be some time before undergraduate students become immersed in publishing, it is important for them to understand that many published journal articles have little or no impact on others in the discipline. Understanding this, students would be wise to develop a sense of what constitutes a meaningful contribution to the discipline.

Working with Faculty

To an undergraduate student, publishing something relevant in a highbrow academic journal must seem a daunting task. According to Slife, the key for undergraduates is to coauthor a paper with a faculty mentor, as undergraduate students almost never publish papers in academic journals on their own. Slife also recommends that undergraduates “tap into research programs already available,” rather than pursuing their own ideas. Professors are unlikely to sponsor an undergraduate's ideas because it takes too much time for them to “get up to speed on the literature” for the particular area of the student's interest. It would also require the student to conduct exhaustive research in order to produce an effective proposal. It is far more feasible for a professor to work with undergraduates on research projects in which the professor is already involved or interested. Slife,

who has published over 120 journal articles and books (as of 2003), said that he coauthored about one-fourth to one-third of his published articles with students and that he is currently working with several students on different projects for which they will receive authorship credit with him (personal communication, September 30, 2003).

In addition, working with faculty members can help undergraduate students frame their research within the proper context. A faculty member's expertise and experience can help students learn ways this is accomplished. (Refer to Appendix for more information about working with faculty at BYU.)

Becoming Familiar with Academic Journals

In addition to working with faculty, undergraduate students should become familiar with academic journals. Reading articles in academic journals will help students become familiar with a given journal's prestige, content, and publication guidelines. These aspects are each important considerations in selecting which journal to submit manuscripts to.

In selecting an appropriate journal, researchers often have to weigh a journal's prestige with its likelihood of publishing their articles. Proper selection is important because, according to American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, a manuscript may be sent to only one journal at a time (Sternberg, 1988). According to Sternberg (1988), "journals vary widely in quality. Some journals publish papers that do little more than fill up journal space; other journals publish only outstanding contributions to the literature" (p. 184). A study's prestige often correlates with the prestige of the journal in which it is published; therefore, it is important for researchers to match their manuscript with a journal of comparable quality. Because rejection rates are much higher in top journals,

researchers will be more likely to publish articles in lower quality journals, but their articles will tend to be considered as less prestigious and meaningful (Tamashiro, 2003). Sternberg (1988) recommends sending a manuscript to one's first-choice journal while having alternative choices in mind in case of rejection. As undergraduate students gain familiarity with journals, they can begin to estimate the quality of manuscript that is required for a particular journal's consideration.

In addition, as students read academic journals, they will inevitably become familiar with their content and editorial guidelines. This is important because every editorial board limits the types of manuscripts they accept according to a particular focus regarding appropriate topics and methodologies (Sternberg, 1988). Many articles are rejected simply because they are not appropriate for a journal's audience. Some journals (e.g., *American Psychologist* and *Psychological Science*), for example, have general readerships and therefore contain articles that are of interest to psychologists in general. Consequently, the editorial board of *Psychological Science* gives preference to "articles that are deemed to be of *general* theoretical significance or of broad interest *across specialties* of psychology and related fields, and that are written to be intelligible *to a wide range* of readers" (Association for Psychological Science, 2006, inside back cover, emphases added). According to *Psychological Science's* editor, James Cutting, manuscripts are often rejected merely because they are too specialized (Tamashiro, 2003). An example of a more specialized journal is the *Journal of Family Psychology*, an APA journal "devoted to the study of the family system from multiple perspectives and to the application of psychological methods to advance knowledge related to family research, intervention, and policy" (American Psychological Association, 2006b). Its audience is largely composed of professionals, particularly APA members who *specialize* in family research and therapy.

In addition to considering the scope of a journal's audience, researchers should consider

length restrictions, publication lag, and authorship restrictions (Sternberg, 1988). Most journals will publish submission guidelines regarding these elements in each issue, as well as on their Web sites. For example, one learns from reading the submission guidelines of *American Psychologist* that manuscripts “may not exceed 35 double-spaced pages in length, including the cover page, abstract, references, tables, and figures” (American Psychological Association, 2006a). Publication lag refers to the average length of time a publisher waits to publish an accepted manuscript; this length of time might make a difference in selecting an appropriate journal. It is also important for researchers to be aware of authorship restrictions in certain journals; for example, some journals publish only articles written by members of a certain organization (Sternberg, 1988). (Refer to Appendix for more information on becoming familiar with academic journals.)

In conclusion, it is important for undergraduate students to understand that the discipline of psychology is largely centered on publishing in academic journals. Researchers best contribute to the discipline when they submit findings or theories that are meaningful to other researchers. Undergraduates are much more likely to publish by working with faculty members on previously established research projects. They will also improve their knowledge of submission guidelines and appropriate writing styles as they read and become familiar with the academic journals.

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Appendix

Publication Helps for BYU Undergraduate Psychology Students

The following list includes helps for undergraduate students interested in publishing in psychology. Some helps are unique to BYU students; others are for students or writers in general.

- As discussed above, the key to publishing as an undergraduate is to seek coauthorships with a professor in an area of his or her expertise and interest. To review faculty interests for BYU's psychology department, consult the department's Web page (<http://psychology.byu.edu/people/faculty.html>) or visit the undergraduate coordinator at Psych Central (1150V SWKT).
- It will be difficult to publish without completing the core skill courses in psychology (Psychology 301, 302, and 304). To maximize your chances of publishing while an undergraduate, be sure to complete these courses early.
- Both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Association for Psychological Science (APS) inform student affiliates of publication opportunities, some of which

are exclusive to undergraduates. Annual membership for undergraduates costs \$27 for APA and \$35 for APS. For more information, consult www.apa.org (APA) and www.psychologicalscience.org (APS).

- Learn about publication standards and the process of submitting to psychology journals by visiting their Web sites. Most mainstream psychology journals are affiliated with APA; information for each can be accessed at APAs home page (<http://www.apa.org>). Likewise, the APS home page provides information concerning its journals (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org>).
- Psi Chi, the official student honor society in psychology, provides several opportunities for undergraduate publication. BYU's chapter generally has membership drives at the beginning of each semester. Cost for lifetime membership is \$45. Membership is limited to those who meet certain academic requirements. For more information, visit the Web site of the BYU chapter (<http://clubs.byu.edu/psichiclub/index.html>) or the national organization (<http://www.psichi.org>) or keep an eye on the Psi Chi bulletin board (main level, SWKT).
- For students serious about publishing, understanding APA writing style (the dominant style used in psychology journals) is especially helpful. Regularly refer to, or perhaps purchase, a copy of the *Publication Manual*, 5th edition. For a quick overview, a handout concerning APA documentation is available at the BYU Writing Center (B106 JFSB). The handout is available online: <http://english.byu.edu/writingcenter/popups/apa.pdf>. At the center, copies of the *Publication Manual* are also available for perusal.
- A great place to begin publishing is *Intuition: BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. In addition, joining the *Intuition* staff can be a great way to become familiar with publishing standards and skills in psychology. For more information, visit the *Intuition* Web site (<http://intuition.byu.edu/index.html>) or send an e-mail to the editors

(byupsychjournal@gmail.com). Credit is available for staff members.