

# Principles and Plans

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*Editor's Note:* Eric Eich is the incoming Editor of *Psychological Science*. He and his team will review new submissions to the journal starting January 1, 2012. A version of this Editorial previously appeared in the October 2011 issue of the APS *Observer* (Vol. 24, No. 8, pp. 13–14, 24).

“Unique” is an overworked adjective, but it certainly applies to the American Psychological Society’s (APS’s) flagship journal, *Psychological Science*. No primary-research journal can match its scope, as reflected, for example, in the August 2010 issue—the copy closest at hand as I was writing. Here one article asks whether Russians, in comparison with Americans, are more apt to self-distance, or adopt an outsider’s perspective, when analyzing their feelings (they are), and another article asks whether neural representations in working memory are distinct from representations in long-term memory (they are not). Elsewhere in the same issue, we learn about the effects of physical enclosure on psychological closure, genetic differences in people’s sensitivity to social drinking cues, and hand-mouth coordination in British sign language. And so on.

In addition to having an astonishing range, *Psychological Science* is distinguished by its emphasis on innovative research—a point also made plain in these same pages. Among other notable discoveries, the August 2010 issue reports the first demonstrations that preschoolers can use the statistical properties of human actions to intuit and learn about psychological causes, that oxytocin—the so-called love hormone—makes people more trusting but not more gullible, and that restricted emigration policies have the ironic effect of increasing public support for the status quo, and thus promote acceptance of limitations on one’s rights to be free.

This potent combination of diversity and originality is a hallmark of every issue of *Psychological Science*, as Founding Editor William K. Estes intended. In the journal’s inaugural issue, Estes (1990) noted that the purpose of *Psychological Science* is to “provide psychologists with a convenient means to view the range of work in their science,” to promote “interdisciplinary knowledgeability on the part of psychologists and [present] scientific psychology to people outside our field,” and to “serve much the same functions for psychology that *Science* does well for the physical and biological sciences” (pp. 2–3).

This vision has been embraced by each of Estes’s successors—John Kihlstrom, Sam Glucksberg, James Cutting, and Robert Kail—and this consistency has been crucial to the advancement of *Psychological Science*. Many people would


welcome the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Estes et al. I am one such person and deeply appreciate being given the job. Allow me to share with you my guiding principles and operational plans for stewarding the journal:

1. *Psychological Science* is a striking success by any measure: size of audience, number of submissions, journal impact factor, and others. Consequently, readers have high expectations about what they will read (page-turning accounts of groundbreaking research), and authors have high expectations about how they and their work will be treated (fair assessments, fast turnaround, meaningful if brief feedback, etc.). The success of the journal and the expectations of its constituents reflect well on the policies and processes that have been developed over the past 20-plus years by many smart, dedicated people (including Associate, Advisory, and Managing Editors, APS Directors, and members of the production staff). Accordingly, my first principle in managing the journal is: *Do no harm*. I grasp the core vision that guides *Psychological Science* and respect the principles and practices that have helped it prosper.
2. That said, with submissions approaching 3,000 in 2011 and increasing at an annual rate of 10% to 15%, editing *Psychological Science* presents complex logistical challenges. Under the current system (see Robert Kail’s interview with Henry L. Roediger, III, in the April 2010 *Observer*), every submission is read in its entirety by two members of the editorial team, which includes the Editor and his Deputy, Associate, or Advisory Editor colleagues. One reader has expertise in the relevant research area and offers a specialist’s opinion, whereas the other reader, who is less knowledgeable about the subject matter,

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provides a generalist's perspective. If either reader thinks the manuscript has even a reasonable chance of ultimately being published, it is then sent to two or three experts for extended review. About two thirds of all submissions are declined or triaged on initial review, and about one third of the submissions sent out for extended review are published, yielding an acceptance rate of 11%. As Kail remarked (Roediger, 2010):

The most common reason—by far—for triaging a paper is that the work isn't sufficiently groundbreaking for *Psychological Science*. The work is well done and valuable, but makes an incremental contribution to a well-established line of work. These sorts of papers belong in specialty journals, not *Psychological Science*. Another reason for triage is when a paper is written solely for the "in-group" or expert reader in mind, and, as a consequence, has virtually no appeal to the nonspecialist reader. (p. 43)

No system is perfect, and the current structure has its limitations. To cope with the deluge of submissions, a high triage rate is essential (more on this later); action editors rarely request or allow major revisions (publication decisions are usually straight up or down), and authors of triaged manuscripts receive only brief explanations for negative decisions, not the detailed accounts most would prefer. More submissions also means more editors, reviewers, and staff, all of which makes for a more expensive and elaborate enterprise. And any decision system of this magnitude is certain to suffer errors, either at the stage of initial review (a triaged manuscript has been considered by only two people, after all) or downstream, during extended review or editorial evaluation. Some rejected manuscripts will go on to be published elsewhere and make major contributions to the field.

Nonetheless, the current system has significant strengths that more than make up for its shortcomings. As Kail noted in his *Observer* interview (Roediger, 2010), all submissions—including those that are triaged—are peer reviewed. Also, triaged manuscripts are declined quickly, often within a week of submission, so as not to tax the authors' patience or waste their time. For submissions recommended for extended review, it is easier to recruit well-qualified ad hoc reviewers if they know the work has already been vetted by an editor. And one of the advantages of having both a specialist and a generalist read every submission is that every area has its hotly contested in-crowd debates that, when viewed from a vantage

point two steps removed (i.e., by someone outside the area), seem trite and tedious. The generalist reader is there to represent the vast majority of our audience, and it is partly this person's role that sets *Psychological Science* apart from specialty journals.

The editorial system that my colleagues and I are gratefully inheriting is the product of 20-plus years of adaptation to changing circumstances, including the doubling of submissions every 5 years and advances in electronic publication. Moving forward, the system will continue to evolve as we meet new demands (including the daunting prospect of 6,000 submissions by 2016) and try new things (such as the Q & A exercise, described later).

But one thing we must not do is restrict the journal's extraordinary range—its most attractive and defining feature—in the interests of editorial efficiency. That would greatly increase the chances of missing something important—an idea, a discovery, a connection—that does not fit neatly into any pre-defined category (Rozin, 2009), and would thereby contribute to the balkanization of our field, the antithesis of what *Psychological Science* is all about. To help guard against this, I will work with the editorial team to ensure that nothing important falls between the cracks and to assure our audience that *Psychological Science* remains committed to publishing the best science in psychology, broadly interpreted to include emerging as well as established areas of research (e.g., neuroeconomics vs. psychophysics).

3. In the January 2008 APS *Observer*, Roediger offered 12 tips and 1 suggestion for editors. I especially liked his advice on choosing and caring for the editorial team—for instance, not stacking the review board with senior researchers who are already overcommitted, appointing people initially for short terms to see how they measure up, and assigning a manageable number of manuscripts to each reviewer, to prevent burnout.

Like Roediger, I was fortunate to study under Endel Tulving, another source of sage advice. Tulving urged his students to ask themselves three questions when reading any scientific work: What do I know now that I did not know before? Is it worth knowing? Will it have an impact on the field? As Roediger (2008) remarked in his *Observer* essay, journal editors would do well to raise these same questions with authors:

If you are ever appointed editor of a journal, ask authors to answer Tulving's questions in their letter of submission. . . . 1) What is it that the reader will learn from this article that she did not (or could not) have known before? 2) Why is that knowledge important? and 3) If

published, what will this paper be cited for in the future? Keeping these questions in mind will help the authors in crafting their papers, and the answers will help reviewers and editors in their deliberations. (p. 43)

Given the uncommon diversity of *Psychological Science* and the premium it places on discovery and innovation, I believe it would be particularly useful to obtain answers from our contributors to a common set of questions, similar to those suggested by Tulving. Accordingly, I will ask authors to respond briefly to each core question when submitting their work and will encourage them to address these same issues in the manuscripts themselves. My hope is that this Q & A exercise will improve communication among authors, reviewers, and editors, which in turn should promote fair and informed assessments.

4. How high a triage rate is too high for *Psychological Science*? In the annual report for 2008, Kail addressed this question by having two editors independently rate a large sample of new submissions on a scale ranging from *very likely to be published* to *very unlikely to be published*. Manuscripts with scores of at least *some-what likely to be published* from both editors made up 33% of the sample and were considered to be promising candidates for acceptance. On the basis these findings, Kail concluded that the then-current triage rate of 57% did not mean that high-quality submissions were being denied on initial reading.

By 2011, however, the triage rate had risen to 67%, and it is certain to go higher unless the number of submissions declines sharply—which is improbable—or the number of acceptances increases significantly—which may be doable. More to the latter point, the number of pages can be increased by 10%

to 15% without individual issues of *Psychological Science* becoming too big to be picked up and read cover to cover—an enjoyable experience for many readers (Hébert, 2007). On the flip side, more space could be freed up by posting more supplementary or supporting material online, provided that the material is fully reviewed and remains within acceptable word-count limits.

Still, it seems inevitable that *Psychological Science* will one day move to an all-electronic format for ecological, financial, and other reasons. The success of *This Week in Psychological Science (TWiPS)*, the weekly online summary of articles published in the journal, bodes well for this eventuality. Within APS, ongoing conversations are focused on this and related issues—for instance, the pros and cons of using social media to give away our brand of psychology to the public at large and the development of an online forum where readers can discuss the journal's articles and policies. I welcome the opportunity to take part in such conversations, as their outcomes are apt to shape the nature of our field in general, and *Psychological Science* in particular, for years to come.

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