

Announcement

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST: The Case for Juried Analyses

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Abstract—The inaugural issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest (PSPI)*, a new publishing initiative by the American Psychological Society, accompanies this issue of *Psychological Science*. The report it contains, “Psychological Science Can Improve Diagnostic Decisions,” by John Swets, Robyn Dawes, and John Monahan, represents a careful effort by those authors to summarize the potential of modern psychological science to enhance real-world diagnostic decisions. Such decisions (Is a cancer present? Will this individual commit violence? Will an impending storm strike? Will this applicant succeed?) are prevalent and crucial to the lives of individuals and to the well-being of our society. Subsequent issues of *PSPI* will address other important topics of public interest in areas where psychological science may have the potential to inform and improve public policy. Each of those reports will also represent the efforts of a distinguished team of scientists to report the available evidence, and the implications of that evidence, fairly and comprehensively. In this article, we describe the goals, procedures, and potential of *PSPI*.

George A. Miller’s (1969) oft-quoted enjoinder to “give psychology away” has become a common goal among psychologists. With lawmakers insisting with increasing fervor that publicly funded research and training be relevant to enhancing national welfare, there is a greater sense of accountability today than ever before. Indeed, some people might say psychology’s reaction to Miller’s enjoinder has been somewhat too enthusiastic—that we have sometimes rushed to “give away” findings that have been premature, unreliable, or incomplete. Some researchers and scholars have even joked privately that it may be time to “take psychology back” from those members of the profession who have on occasion hurried into press conclusions that do not then stand the test of time.

Scientific psychology has, in fact, produced a steady stream of findings that are highly relevant to the nation’s welfare—in such diverse domains as child rearing, schooling, training, counseling, treatment, policing, human factors design, organizational-interpersonal aspects of the workplace, and countless other areas. But obviously psychologists have not spoken with a unified voice, and often we have spoken prematurely. Consider some of the conflicting findings and pronouncements that pervade the media: Do drug-refusal training programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) change teenagers’ attitudes toward drug use and reduce future use? The answer to this important question varies, depending on which report or opinion you read. The same is true of claims regarding the efficacy of sex education training, the viability of controlled drinking (as opposed to total abstinence) for alcoholics, and a range of other issues.

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In short, if we take Miller’s advice seriously, it is incumbent on us to ensure that what we give away reflects the best and most reliable of scientific psychology. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest (PSPI)* was developed by the American Psychological Society (APS) as one means of bolstering our confidence that what we give away is based on the most scientifically prudent reading of the total corpus of relevant data, rather than based on a reading of only a partial or misleading piece of the relevant corpus.

THE BIRTH OF *PSPI*

At its midwinter meeting in Miami in 1997, the board of directors of APS discussed the possibility of starting a new journal that would publish “white papers”—impartial reviews of the literature—on topics of pressing national importance. These reports would be written by teams of highly qualified scientists, ideally without vested interests in the issues under review. Members of a planning committee and the APS board spent 2 years planning this journal, consulting also with media representatives and members of the broader scientific establishment. *PSPI* is the result of their deliberations. The planning committee considered a wide range of possible projects, as well as the procedures that would be necessary to assemble teams of authors who would be both highly qualified and fair-minded. Once an initial set of topics was selected and procedures were determined, the APS board approved the *PSPI* initiative. The report that accompanies this issue of *Psychological Science* was then given the green light to go forward as the first project.

THE PRESENT REPORT AS A MODEL FOR FUTURE *PSPI* PROJECTS

In “Psychological Science Can Improve Diagnostic Decisions,” John Swets, Robyn Dawes, and John Monahan have provided what we hope will prove a model for future *PSPI* reports. Over the many months they worked together, they endeavored to achieve consensus and to provide a fair, thorough, and clear report on the potential to improve diagnostic decisions. They show that psychological science has tools for analyzing and enhancing decisions that can augment, or sometimes replace, human judgments based on intuition or personal experience. However, not every *PSPI* project team will necessarily arrive at similarly positive or cohesive conclusions. In some cases, a careful survey of the relevant findings may lead a team of authors to conclude that there is simply no basis for some intervention or technique that is heavily promoted by entrepreneurs, including, perhaps, some psychologists. What will drive the selection of *PSPI* projects is the public-interest importance of a potential topic and the extent to which relevant findings exist, not a prejudgment as to what conclusions the investigators are likely to reach.

The present plan is to publish two issues of *PSPI* per year, to arrive in the same wrapping as the May and November issues of *Psycho-*

logical Science, APS's flagship journal. It is our immodest hope that these reports will come to be seen as definitive summaries of research on nationally important questions, much like the reports commissioned by the National Research Council, but focused on issues for which psychological research plays a central role. The following are topics we have already commissioned:

- Do herbal products such as ginkgo enhance cognitive functioning?
- Do smaller classes result in superior achievement, and if so for which types of students?
- Are projective tests valid diagnostic and predictive instruments?
- Is self-esteem causally related to academic performance and social adjustment?
- Do coaching courses for the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) boost scores when appropriate controls are present?
- What is the most effective way to teach reading for various types of learners?

We have also assembled a long list of other potential topics, each of which deals with some matter of current—and often intense—public interest. An *APS Observer* article on the *PSPI* initiative, which appeared in November 1999, contained a call to APS members to nominate topics for future *PSPI* reports. Many excellent ideas were triggered by that invitation, and we hope that the APS membership will continue to be involved in the *PSPI* initiative.

Those of us associated with the launching of *PSPI* believe that scientific psychology is uniquely situated to provide a form of juried analysis wherein conflicts among researchers can be refereed and a scientifically responsible resolution can be reached. We hope that *PSPI* will be useful to consumers, policymakers, and professionals in their effort to understand which claims are based on scientifically adequate data and which are not. And we hope that researchers and teachers will find *PSPI* reports valuable as state-of-the-art assessments of important topics and issues.

PSPI PROCEDURES AND POLICIES

The first step in producing a *PSPI* report is the editorial board's assessment of the social relevance of the topic and available research on it. Does the topic deal with a compelling public-interest issue? What is the state of the research database upon which a project team would base their conclusions? Who are the major contributors to research on this topic? Next, the *PSPI* editorial board vets the names of scholars who are considered possible authors of the report. So far, this process has proved the most challenging. We want the very best scholars to serve, but we also do not want to include individuals whose positions are so entrenched as to blind them to alternate interpretations. Intensive vetting by the APS Board of Directors and the *PSPI* editorial board has occurred for the early commissioned reports, and we expect this process to continue throughout the coming years.

We are well aware that not everyone will be pleased with *PSPI* reports; some cherished assumptions may be shattered, and some popular interventions may be judged as useless or even harmful. Adherents of an approach that gets criticized will understandably question the makeup of the team of scholars that was commissioned, the way the question was framed, and so on. Such claims of bias cannot be fully avoided, and we are aware of the risk that *PSPI* reports might be dismissed as "advocacy in the guise of science." We can only say that readers have our promise that *PSPI* teams will be chosen with great care, and that *PSPI* reports will be subject to an exceptionally rigorous and painstaking review process.

"GIVING AWAY" SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY: COLLABORATING WITH SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

One of the most important aspects of the *PSPI* initiative is our link with *Scientific American*. John Rennie, editor-in-chief of *Scientific American*, has agreed to work with APS by publishing versions of the *PSPI* reports in the magazine. Each *PSPI* report will serve as the complete, archival findings of a given project team; the *Scientific American* version will be rewritten, in collaboration with the report's authors, for the magazine's broader audience. We are enthusiastic about this collaboration, which we hope will increase the influence of *PSPI* reports among scientists, laypersons, and policymakers. In addition to our relationship with *Scientific American*, we have explored linkages with other major media, such as National Public Radio, to maximize our efforts to "give away" responsible scientific psychology.

If done well, *PSPI* reports—in their academic and popular versions—could be used to inform decision making by consumers, courts, opinion makers, legislators, and leaders in business, the military, and education. They could serve to disabuse reckless or ungrounded claims in the media. They could provide the public with a better understanding of the usefulness of scientific psychology. By sharing with the public what scientific psychology has to offer for individuals and society, we will be enhancing the image of our profession in the eyes of a public that frequently equates psychology with what they hear on talk radio or see in the pop-psychology shelves of bookstores. In short, in a different sense, we *definitely* want to "take psychology back"—and give the public a more scientifically grounded and useful psychology in return.

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REFERENCE

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