
EDITORIAL

CPJ4.0: ASPIRATIONS OF A RESEARCH GEEK WITH A THING FOR APPLICATIONS

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It is a cool honor and opportunity to be selected as the fourth editor of *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research (CPJ)*. This is a unique scholarly publication. Sure, it extols the familiar virtues of science and practice. But I like how *CPJ* puts the accent on practice (notice which goes first in the subtitle, *Practice and Research*). I recall with ironic delight my first rejection letter from an esteemed scientific journal that claimed to be “applied.” The editor explained that the ideas were original and that the findings were interesting but the paper was just too practitioner-oriented. Evidently in that applied journal it was a fatal mistake to speak to people who apply research in the real world.

It is customary for the incoming editor to offer readers and prospective authors a vision for the direction in which a journal will be headed and the kinds of things the new editor wishes to emphasize in putting his stamp on the new era. I always read these editorials between the lines, trying to decode what is unsaid—the unwritten rules that distinguish the fastest path to publication from a surefire path to the dreaded rejection letter. The difference is often vague and hazy and usually a function of the editor’s personal predilections and pet peeves. So rather than rattle off a series of lofty ambitions that may not reveal my biases and prejudices, I will tell you a bit about me and my attitude concerning the research enterprise before going specifically into how I think the journal can serve the profession of consulting psychology in this second decade of the 21st century.

True Confessions

The first thing is that I am intellectually promiscuous. I think around. I am tickled to find an obscure quote from philosophy, history, or literature to illustrate a psychological claim. I get a kick out of using the Pythagorean Theorem to quantify a Taoist perspective on a tired dichotomy in the leadership literature. Why be monogamously committed to the same old theory and standard methodology? In the world of ideas, there is nothing wrong with the occasional fling with a new discipline. I once had a wild weekend using biological taxometric analyses to differentiate successful from failed executive hiring decisions. It has been said that there are no new ideas, and that may be true. But there are infinite ways to arrange and combine ideas, and breakthroughs usually come from outside a discipline—where a novel twist can bust the shackles of orthodoxy and convention.

The second thing is that I love the elegance of simplicity. But we psychologists seem to prefer our stuff complex. The problem is that the world is complex, and growing more so every day. It’s hard to keep up. I am a reasonably smart guy but struggle to remember the 67 competencies or when to make an autocratic, consultative, or consensus decision depending on the interplay of decision

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quality, speed, buy-in, authority, ambiguity, support, alignment, and conflict. Now, I am not making a case for “dumbing down”; our frameworks and models have to have sophistication to be of help in navigating the complex realities of our rapidly changing world. We need what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., called “the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” This is what you find after slogging your way through ambiguity and muddy thinking, intricacy, and overanalyzing. And it requires clarity and courage to exclude the interesting, but tangential, in a bold effort to zero in on the essential. In other words, if you really understand something, you should be able to break it down and explain it to my grandmother—a thoughtful person with common sense but no specialized training.

Interdisciplinary thinking and elegant simplicity, however, are merely means to an end. What really trips my trigger is getting stuff done. It’s hard to score points and win if you spend the game staring at your bellybutton. And that’s ultimately what our clients want from us: action-oriented solutions that make them smarter and help them do things better, faster, and cheaper than the competition. There must be application value in the theoretical models, empirical evidence, and generalizations we produce in our research.

Our Competitive Advantage

Since accepting this post, I have been musing about *CPJ* and what the Society of Consulting Psychology needs from it. At the recent annual Midwinter Conference, I sought input from a diversity of society members—students, early career professionals, midcareer professionals, and tribal elders alike. We seem to be in agreement. The thing that most distinguishes consulting psychology in a crowded consulting market is the integration of science and practice. Our value proposition resides in carefully reasoned frameworks tested in empirical research and refined through application in the real world. The success of our profession rests on the belief that the combination of good theory, good data, and good experience will trump a clever idea, a ream of analysis, or an anecdote by itself. This bodes well in an era of evidence-based practice and increased accountability. But we have to do more than say “science and practice”—we have to mean it.

Remember Kurt Lewin’s great line, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory?” That is just the sound bite. It is instructive to go back to the original quote in context to see what he was saying, as this gets at both the promise and the challenge of what we can do with *CPJ*. In *Field Theory in Social Science*, Lewin (1951) wrote,

Close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology . . . can be accomplished . . . if the theorist does not look at applied problems with highbrow aversion . . . and if the applied psychologist realizes there is nothing so practical as a good theory (p. 169).

The biggest threat to the scientist-practitioner and research-based practice is exactly the polarization against which Lewin warned. This is not a hypothetical problem. I have heard plenty of academics whine about “fluffy and faddish” practice. And I have heard plenty of practitioners complain about “arcane and out of touch” academic research. There is a grain of truth to both accusations, but castigating one side while remaining high and mighty about the side with which one identifies doesn’t really push things forward.

CPJ is a perfect forum for reconciling the tension between research and practice. So I issue a challenge to researchers and practitioners alike. I challenge academics to sum up what they have learned from programs of research that is applicable in practice. What have you discovered that consulting psychologists need to know? Can you show practitioners what you have found, why it is relevant, and how to apply it? And I challenge practitioners who are in the trenches helping organizations and their members grapple with thorny problems to keep up with the scientific literature and avail themselves of the latest theory and research. In the best case, researchers might start dabbling in practice and practitioners might study their interventions and write up their lessons

of experience. Better still, both groups might team up. Consultants, how about “take an academic to lunch” day?

What the Journal Needs

I’d like to approach the question of content from two levels: first, an aspirational philosophy for the spirit of articles we will publish, and second, some specific topics I’d like to see represented in the next few years.

Practical Science

My overarching goal is for *CPJ* to cement its reputation for articles that pull together research and practice. On the research side, we need empirical studies—especially more studies using rich qualitative data to complement quantitative statistical studies. We really need more longitudinal research—quantitative and qualitative analyses of how individuals, teams, and organizations change over time. This gets at the purpose of consulting work by illustrating the dynamic process of learning, growth, and improvement. We could also benefit from more articles that summarize and integrate findings in the research literature that are relevant to a particular consulting topic. Two great recent examples are Serrano and Reichard’s (2011) paper on things leaders can do to enhance workforce engagement and Nowack and Mashihii’s (2012) paper on sound practices with 360 feedback. Primary studies and these kinds of reviews of the empirical literature that inform and support robust practice models are vital to establishing a firm evidence base for our profession.

I would also like to see an equal proportion of articles that develop from practice. For instance, case studies were central to the original vision for *CPJ* but are on the decline (Skipton Leonard, personal communication, February 8, 2014). Many members of the Society of Consulting Psychology lament this decline, noting that case studies are an excellent way to learn principles of good practice. Lowman and Kilburg (2011) have provided guidelines for developing strong case studies, and I encourage creative twists on the standard method. For instance, imagine case studies of tricky projects that solicit commentary from other consulting psychologists and researchers concerning different ways to approach the problem. Also of high value would be cases that illustrate the messy dynamics of how our work really plays out: the tradeoffs and dilemmas consultants face under the pressure of time and high stakes, reconciling the often competing interests and values of powerful stakeholders, or adapting and improvising when things don’t go according to plan.

One goal I am particularly committed to is increasing the number of articles published by consulting psychologists. There is probably more tacit knowledge about what really works in organizations in the collective wisdom of the members of the Society of Consulting Psychology than in an entire research library. But busy consultants don’t always have the time and resources to write, and the skill set it takes to be a great consultant overlaps little with the skill set it takes to publish articles in a scholarly journal. Therefore, the journal and the society are committed to supporting consultants who aspire to publish in *CPJ*. Two specific forms of support deserve emphasis.

First, *CPJ* and the Society of Consulting Psychology sponsor an annual small grants competition to support applied research directly related to consulting psychology. Each year a limited number of grants of up to \$5,000 are made based on a review of applications. Instructions for applying can be found on the Society’s website: <http://www.apadivisions.org/division-13/awards/small-grants/index.aspx>

Second, we are also providing a development editor to assist prospective authors by helping them structure their ideas, guiding them through the writing process, and helping them respond to concerns raised in the peer-review process. Instructions for applying for this support can be found on the journal’s website: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/cpb/development-editor.aspx>

Article Topics

In terms of content areas, Leonard, Freedman, and Kilburg’s (2013) analysis of changes over the last 30 years in the subject matter of articles in *CPJ* and its predecessor, *Consulting Psychology Bulletin*,

is instructive. Coaching and leadership have emerged as mainstay topics, accounting for about a third of all recent articles. This will probably remain our sweet spot for the foreseeable future because so many consulting psychologists do this kind of work and market demand is strong. However, most leadership articles present models describing what leadership is and how to assess it. We have published little on how to develop the leadership skills of individuals and the leadership capacity of organizations. This is an urgent need because there is scarcely any evidence that the \$14 billion leadership development industry is producing better leaders (Kaiser & Curphy, 2013).

I'd also like to see a shift in coaching articles from an internal view of what coaching is and how we do it to more of an external view of how different forms of coaching meet different client needs and how and under what conditions coaching produces beneficial outcomes for the individual and the organization. In his provocative workshop, *Reinventing Executive Coaching*, David Peterson (2014) pointed out how market forces toward the commoditization of coaching are creating adaptive pressures that may change fundamentally how coaching evolves. I'd like to see fresh thinking on how this is happening, or may happen, and how we wrestle with the tension between simplifying and streamlining coaching and the essential requirements for coaching to have a lasting impact.

We need to fill the gap between topics that are infrequently written about in *CPJ* yet are growing in demand in the market. The first obvious area is teams, particularly how to understand and assess teams and, especially, how to help leaders launch new teams, manage virtual teams, identify and fix dysfunctional team dynamics, integrate new team members, and turn around underperforming teams. There is a huge psychological literature on teams but little integration and distillation of this work into practice models.

Another important area concerns diversity and multiculturalism. Ours is an increasingly diverse and global world, and organizations are in need of guidance about inclusivity and fairness goals as well as navigating an increasingly interconnected world where cultural norms and expectations don't always mesh. Two special issues of *CPJ*, one on culture, race, and diversity (Cooper, 2008) and one on international organizational consulting (Cooper, 2012), were a good start in this direction and also point out many areas in need of more work. A particularly intriguing idea is Randy White's (2013) notion that to maintain relevance, we in the West need to move beyond merely exporting our leadership-development models and learn also to import the lessons from emerging markets and developing parts of the world. A truly pan-global model of leadership and development will inevitably be in demand, and what this will look like remains to be seen. Therefore, I hope to publish more articles from authors around the world and increase *CPJ*'s international representativeness.

CPJ Associate Editor, Larry Norton, has pointed out that organizational development (OD) needs a reboot. Through his applied OD work he has realized that the field seems moribund, having barely moved in the last 20 years. Larry's sense is that most OD models are out of step with today's realities of flatter, more interconnected, and diverse organizations in a fundamentally different labor market with global competitive pressures and evermore complex operating environments. His view is consistent with the steep decline in articles on OD published in *CPJ* and represents a ripe opportunity for consulting psychologists to make a contribution.

Our other Associate Editor, Ken Nowack, has a unique background combining occupational health psychology, career development, and assessment. With a growing movement toward workplace wellness and health promotion, Ken sees a need for more research exploring work-life balance as well as organizational interventions that have a demonstrable impact on employee health, engagement, and performance.

Finally, in addition to the substantive content of the work of consulting psychology, the journal needs to continue exploring issues of professional practice and development. Articles on consultant training, education, and credentials have dropped off in the last 30 years. We need to reverse this trend to ensure the practice keeps pace with changes in technology, legal issues, and market demand. In that regard, the article in this issue by Otte, Bangerter, Britsch, and Wüthrich (2014) on coaches' attitudes about the use of computers to facilitate coaching is perfectly on point. There is also significant growth in the profession of organizational consulting and related disciplines such as industrial-organizational psychology, and we need to ensure that we are preparing this new

generation of consulting psychologists with principles of good practice that are relevant for the modern world. Judy Blanton's (2014) article in this issue about supervision practices is a welcome step in that direction.

In a Nutshell

So there you have it: my hopes for the current era of *CPJ*. At its best, this journal can be an indispensable resource for the consulting psychologist—or any thoughtful person working with or in organizations—looking for a new insight or new technique or new methodology for raising his or her game. And you can help. If this vision strikes a chord, please submit an article integrating practice and science that crosses traditional boundaries and captures complex ideas in a simple framework that can be readily applied to the noble goal of improving organizations and the people who populate them.

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