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Maximizing journal impact: Moving from inspections of topics to scans for techniques, populations and actions

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The comments offered in this article are intended to maximize the benefits and impact of JOOP content for both practitioners and academicians. Specifically, I argue that because practitioners and academicians alike are 'time-poor' when it comes to reading journal articles, we inevitably end up conducting 'topical scans' in which we scan the titles of an issue for relevant topics. In order to maximize the impact of JOOP content, in addition to these topical scans, we also need to include scans for: (a) relevant techniques, (b) relevant populations, and (c) relevant actions that may be applicable even if the specific topic is not. I also discuss the importance of practitioners becoming more involved in the publication process and describe a matchmaking mechanism for research-practitioner publication collaborations. Finally, I argue that scientist-practitioners are the true heroes of our profession and should therefore be held in high regard.

In March 2007, John Arnold invited me to analyse the practical applications (or lack thereof) of papers published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* (JOOP) from September 2006 to June 2007. I was asked to offer comments that both practitioners and academicians could 'latch on to' about how to get 'practical mileage' out of recent JOOP content. John was particularly interested in me offering 'pointers and ideas' to practitioners about how to benefit from JOOP's academic output given my 10 years of experience as a practitioner combined with 6 years of academic experience.

Arnold (2004) stated '. . . By *practical relevance*, we mean that a paper should address issues that at least some practitioners perceive as affecting how they might do their work and/or what work they might do'(italics in original). Arnold (2004) states further that the positioning and impact of JOOP should be broad-ranging enough in terms of the issues and topics addressed that both practitioners and academicians will hopefully identify at least one (and usually more than one) good quality article in each issue that will interest each potential reader.

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My review of the 40 articles published in JOOP from September 2006 to June 2007 revealed that the criteria, as defined above, have been met. I believe that anyone would be hard-pressed to identify a single article during this time frame that does not 'address issues that at least some practitioners perceive as affecting how they might do their work and/or what work they might do.' Furthermore, one would be hard-pressed to identify an issue during this year that did not contain at least one article that would be of interest and use to either a practitioner or an academician. My evaluation is that JOOP has done a very good job (at least during this 1-year period) of avoiding publishing the pedantic type of article described by Gelade (2006) and Anderson, Heriot, and Hodgkinson (2001) in which the theoretical content and methodological rigour is high, while the practical relevance as defined above is low.

Sometimes, the practical relevance of an article is immediately straightforward. As such, some articles need no comment as they are literally dripping with practical relevance. Such is the case of the paper by Pendry, Driscoll, and Field (2007), *Diversity Training*: *Putting Theory into Practice*. Indeed, the objective of this paper was to persuade the practitioners charged with diversity training (DT) that they can improve DT through a deeper appreciation of social psychological theory and research. Pendry *et al.* (2007) present several classical approaches to DT (Walking Through White Privilege Exercise, Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed Exercise) and, for each one, offer a social psychological analysis of the exercise and offer advice, and especially cautions in using the exercises in DT programmes. They also present a strong argument why a social cognition approach may be especially beneficial and offer three specific exercises that practitioners could consider utilizing in the design of DT programmes (the implicit associations test, the father–son exercise, and the intergroup attribution exercise). This paper stands out as an exemplar of what Anderson (2007) saw as a 'bridging mechanism' between practitioners and academicians. That is, that JOOP should serve (and is serving) as one of the most valuable bridges, we have for information exchange between researchers and practitioners in IWO psychology. Pendry *et al.* appear to agree with this ideology and state:

> . . . DT offers a splendid forum in which to act out and evaluate many of the premises that underpin mainstream social psychological approaches to the study of prejudice reduction. If more trainers began to think more systematically about how they might borrow and adapt ideas from mainstream social psychology, it would be a promising start. Moreover, it would be mutually beneficial if social psychologists would pay more attention to how their theories and research in the experimental laboratories actually play out in real-world training sessions (Pendry *et al.*, 2007, p. 45).

This reminds one of the now-cliché statement made by Morris Vitales in 1992 at the age of 93, 'If it isn't scientific, its not good practice, and if it isn't practical, its not good science' (as quoted by Katzell & Austin, 1992, p. 826). Pendry *et al.* deserve much acclamation for their excellent work in consolidating science and research in this article.

Other times, of course, the practical implications of a paper are not nearly so straightforward. At the crux of the debate here is who should shoulder the responsibility for digging out the practical relevance of an article? Practioners? The academicians who conduct the research and write the article? For some, the answer is clearly that researchers are *not* solely responsible since it may be seen as unwise to 'require researchers to attempt to spell out in detail the myriad of possible implications for practice in a huge and unknown variety of settings' (Anderson, 2007, p. 177). Instead, a more balanced approach appears to be justified as nicely summed up by Anderson (2007, p. 176), '. . . while it is beholden upon researchers to highlight ramifications for organizational practice, it is also the responsibility of practitioners to interpret and extrapolate from published findings.' I believe that most of us agree that drawing practical relevance for articles published in JOOP is the *joint* responsibility of both researchers and practitioners. However, before getting on with the task at hand, two important preliminary points need to be addressed.

First, as Hodgkinson (2006) has aptly pointed out, one of the primary functions of applied scientific journals such as *JOOP* is to stimulate critical reflection among practising professionals. In other words, Hodgkinson argues that while some articles can be clearly and directly mapped onto specific projects one is currently engaged in with immediate and obvious benefit, there are other times when practitioners may need to engage in critical reflection in order to obtain significant benefit from an article. Such would be the case when a practitioner comes across an article that has no immediate relevance to specific current situations and needs. As such, the following suggestions are offered in an attempt to more clearly delineate how such a critical reflection might occur.

Second, several authors have recently argued quite persuasively that in our efforts to make journal content such as that of *JOOP* more relevant to practitioners, we need not and should not sacrifice scientific rigour. For example, Wall (2006) argues that such a compromise would severely undermine the integrity of our profession. Hodgkinson (2006) agrees and argues that:

> the rigorous evidence base underpinning our practice is what fundamentally sets us apart as a unified group of applied psychologists from other professionals seeking to enhance productivity and well-being in the workplace, many of whom have begun to encroach on our territory, but have done so without the attendant background knowledge or training to critically evaluate the impact of their interventions and adjust their actions accordingly. In other words, the scientist-practitioner model is the unique selling point of the IWO psychology profession. (Hodgkinson, 2006, p. 174).

I agree with the assertions made by Hodgkinson (2006) and Wall (2006) that all of the methodological and theoretical rigour should be retained in our journal articles. In fact, I trust that it will soon be clear to the reader that the suggestions I make below depend on the maintenance of that methodological and theoretical rigour. Now that these two important preliminary points are in hand, we are ready to proceed.

Scanning for relevant topics

It can be assumed that generally practitioners who browse through the titles of articles in a given issue of JOOP are likely to be scanning for papers relevant to projects they are currently involved with. If they identify a title of a paper that even indirectly or broadly addresses current or near-future projects, they are likely to then proceed on to read the abstract. If the paper is still perceived as being relevant, they might then read the first few paragraphs of the introduction and discussion and then move on to the section on practical implications. If the paper is a 'direct hit' on a project they are working on, they might even go so far as to read the whole paper. Such might be the case of a practitioner charged with developing and implementing a diversity training programme who comes across the Pendry *et al.* (2007) paper discussed above. Please note here, however, two important points: (1) we are unsure of how many practitioners actually have access to JOOP and/or are actually scanning the contents of each issue and (2) the scenario described above is probably not all that different for researchers. It is just that researchers are scanning for articles relevant to their research stream as opposed to an applied project as is the case with practitioners. As pointed out by Symon (2006) both practitioners *and* academicians are likely to be 'time poor.' As such, both are likely to scan and read only highly relevant articles. Of course, this is not a desirable state of affairs and in the following sections of this paper I would like to specifically address what we *all* might do to increase the benefits obtained from articles in JOOP.

Scanning for relevant techniques

First, I believe we must scan with a modified frame of reference. Currently, most of us scan with specific topics in mind – current projects in the case of practitioners and topics that fall within our stream of research for academicians. While this is a seemingly logical approach given the amount of time we can realistically devote to journal reading, we must also look into how others' work can have practical implications for our own work. I therefore propose that we must not only scan topically but also 'technically'. For example, as a practitioner I may be asked by senior leaders to identify reasons why employees are leaving the organization. A cursory topical scanning of the 40 articles in JOOP from September 2006 to June 2007 will not identify a single article that *directly* bears upon employee turnover. However, if one modifies the scanning to include searching for *techniques* that might be relevant to understanding employee turnover or otherwise relevant to the project, a totally different outcome is reached. For example, a practitioner might gain valuable insight from the Brodsky (2006) article 'In the wings of British orchestras: A multi-episode interview study among symphony players.' The practical relevance of this particular paper to this particular project lies not in the topic or the sample. Further, the results of this paper are unlikely to be of specific value to this particular project, and the researchers could go on and on about the practical implications of this paper without having much of a chance of directly commenting on how the research could be of use to those practitioners charged with studying and understanding employee turnover.

However, a practitioner who scans for applicable techniques is likely to find great value in Brodsky (2006) for understanding how one might go about conducting qualitative interviews to understand employee turnover. To be more specific, a practitioner (especially those who may have not received much training in qualitative techniques in graduate school) might learn much about fashioning a series of employee interviews aimed at better understanding employee turnover by using the three-stage plan as described in the design and procedure section of the Brodsky (2006) paper. Likewise, academicians may also find relevant value in the qualitative techniques described in this paper. For example, I used the paper as an example of the qualitative research technique of ethnography and the principles of the emic and etic perspectives and approaches in my undergraduate IWO psychology class.

The Brodsky (2006) paper represents just one example of many others in these four volumes of how specific techniques could be utilized in a project involving better understanding of the reasons for employee turnover. As stated by Symon and Cassell (2006) the special section in volume 79 (3), concerning neglected research techniques in work and organizational psychology, 'aims to illustrate the insights to be gained from adopting such "alternative" perspectives on topics of contemporary interest to work and organizational psychologists, such as retention of women in the workforce, collaborative (cross-agency) work, advanced technology change and stress at work.' (p. 307). Understanding employee turnover could easily be added to this list and the techniques described in these five papers could all directly bear on this project. Another example is the paper by Kloep and Hendry (2006) 'Pathways into retirement:

entry or exit?'. Kloep and Hendry's paper presents a qualitative interview technique that could be of use, including the development of an interview guide and a description of their analyses of data.

Scanning for relevant populations

Recall that in his operationalization of the construct of 'practical relevance', Arnold (2004) includes the notion that papers in JOOP should not only have an impact upon how a practitioner goes about his or her work but also upon 'what work they *might* do' (italics not in original). As a result, I suggest that another modification we might want to consider in reference to our cognitive framework when conducting our scanning pertains to the specific populations of employees that are included in a study. For example, suppose a practitioner is working for an organization that utilizes a large percentage of part-time employees (e.g. banking or retail). Further suppose that the practitioner is neither involved with any projects concerning his/her part-time workforce nor also is even considering such a project, and nor has such a project even entered into his/her stream of conscientiousness. I would argue that such a practitioner's scanning should include a mechanism to identify and further examine articles that involve important populations of employees for their given organization *in spite of the fact that the specific topic addressed is not seemingly relevant*. For example, take the Martin and Sinclair (2007) article 'A typology of the part-time workforce: Differences on job attitudes and turnover'. The practitioner who is not currently engaged in any projects dealing with his/her part-time workforce (although the organization employs a large percentage of such employees) yet scans and then reads this article might just be enlightened to the possibility that perhaps he/she *should be* involved in such a project. Martin and Sinclair offer compelling evidence that organizations in their efforts to effectively manage their part-time workforce need to develop 'a more sophisticated awareness of the characteristics of their workers' (p. 317). These researchers present a practitioner-friendly conceptual framework and procedure for understanding these characteristics, especially those that are critical to employee retention programmes or efforts.

Another example of potential benefits of 'scanning for populations' can be found in the Fay, Borrill, Amir, Haward, and West (2006) article 'Getting the most out of multidisciplinary teams: A multi-sample study of team innovation in health care'. Again, even though a practitioner may not be currently involved in a project dealing with teams or even considering such a project, even a cursory review of this article may convince him/her of the need to be involved – especially if his/her organization makes wide use of multidisciplinary teams. Fay *et al.* (2006) provide evidence that not only is it important to ensure multidisciplinarity in teams in terms of the quality of team innovations but effective team processes are also needed. Such processes include shared vision, high interaction frequency, and shared mental models. A savvy practitioner might therefore undertake a project in which training modules are developed to ensure effective team processes.

Scanning for relevant actions

Yet a third modification to our scanning processes, in addition to scanning by relevant topic, is 'action scanning'. This type of scanning involves identifying what Anderson (2007) referred to as 'action research' articles or 'organization-based case studies, attitude survey and intervention projects' (p. 178). Again, even though a practitioner may not be currently involved with an 'action' or intervention described in a specific article, a quick scan of an article may convince him/her of the need to be so. For example, the previously mentioned article on diversity training by Pendry *et al.* (2007) might (a) convince practitioners that they should develop and implement such a programme, or (b) that they should re-evaluate the specific exercises utilized by their current programme, especially given the potential negative consequences of some common exercises, or (c) that they should consider implementing one of the three specific exercises recommended which are based on a social cognition approach to stereotyping.

Another example of 'action scanning' can be found in the paper by Clegg and Spencer (2007) 'A circular and dynamic model of the process of job design'. Even if a practitioner is not currently considering undertaking a job design or redesign project, this paper may serve as a reminder of a previous conversation with a manager who was complaining about employee productivity or morale and sought advice or assistance in addressing this issue. Although the practitioner may not have had a ready answer to the manager's inquiry at the time, and even though he/she might have later forgotten about this conversation, the 'action scanning' and the review of this article could serve as a retrieval cue. Then, almost automatically, he/she realizes that perhaps – just perhaps – an intervention utilizing concepts from the model of the process of job design presented in this paper is just the right tool for helping this manager. Indeed Clegg and Spencer clearly state that one of the practical implications of their model is to identify the important interconnected variables that provide 'action levers' (p. 336) for attempts at improving performance.

On a final note, the scanning process described above will operate much more effectively if authors attempt to explicitly state the specific techniques, populations, and actions utilized in their paper in the abstract. Further, to help ensure that we are enticed to read the abstract, given we often do not get past the title of an article in our scanning process, it might also behove authors to attempt to specifically identify the techniques, populations, and actions in the title of their paper as well. In short, authors should be asking themselves if their paper utilizes a specific technique, population, or action that may be relevant to others – even if the topic *per se* is not. They should then state as explicitly as possible in the abstract, as well as the title, unique or specific techniques, populations, or actions involved in their study.

Practitioner involvement in the publication enterprise

In addition to modifying our scanning of JOOP articles, I would also like to offer another suggestion on how practitioners can derive maximum advantage from JOOP articles that does not involve the utilization of current or previous articles, but rather those yet to be published. Specifically, I refer to more involvement of practitioners in authorship of articles published in JOOP. For the four volumes between September 2006 and June 2007, 40 articles were published in JOOP. Ninety-five authors were involved in writing these 40 articles. Of these 95 authors, 87 (92%) were either academicians or employed by a research centre or institute associated with a university or other government agency. Of the 40 articles only five (13%) included a practitioner as one of the authors and only one article (3%) had a practitioner as a first author.

Other authors have noted the same lack of practitioner involvement in the publication process. For example, Anderson *et al.* (2001) provide evidence over a 50-year period of the existence of two clear trends in regard to authorship in some of our leading journals. The first trend is a sizable increase in the proportion of papers where all authors are academics. For example, Anderson *et al.* (2001) noted that from 1949 to 1964 63% of articles in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* were all written by academic authors. From 1967 to 1982 this percentage rose to 77% and from 1990 to 2000 this percentage rose to 96% and 92% for the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*, respectively. The second trend noted by Anderson *et al.* is a decline in papers where all authors are practitioners, 'to the point of virtual extinction' (p. 397). That is, while 31% of articles written for the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* were by authors who were all practitioners from 1949 to 1964, this percentage plummeted to 1% and 3% for these two journals, respectively, from 1990 to 2000. A further interesting finding from Anderson *et al.* is that collaborations among academics and practitioners have been the exception rather than the rule, even dating back to the period 1949–1964. For example, only 5% of articles for the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* were authored by collaborating academics and practitioners from 1949 to 1964 and this percentage remained virtually unchanged for the period 1990–2000. Anderson *et al.* assert that the trend of fewer and fewer practitioners being involved with the publication process will slowly result in more of our published research falling into the pedantic category as opposed to the pragmatic category. Surely, this is not a very good standpoint for either the health of our field in general or regarding the practical value practitioners are likely to obtain from our leading journals.

I would suggest that if practitioners want to maximize their benefit from JOOP output, then they should become much more involved in the research and publication enterprise. Having been a practitioner for over 10 years, I realize that practitioners are more time-poor when it comes to conducting empirical research with an aim towards publication than are academicians. I also realize that most practitioners are offered little to absolutely no incentive for publishing papers. And I realize that many practitioners (as well as academicians) feel intimidated by the peer review process and the time-consuming revisions and frustrations that inevitably come from such reviews. The good news is that practitioners neither have to nor should attempt the publication process alone. The answer, in short, then, is collaboration, or what Anderson (2007) refers to as the 'mutual research group' bridging mechanism. Practitioners have access to data and knowledge of how those data were collected and the context in which they were collected. Therefore practitioners' role in the collaborative effort may be to write the method and procedure sections. Academicians on the other hand may possess more knowledge concerning research design, statistical analyses, and the literature and theory in a given research area. Their part of the collaborative effort therefore is likely to be in the writing of the introduction, results, and discussion sections.

I also believe that many practitioners who are currently not engaged in the research and publication process could afford themselves some amount of time for this endeavour by proactively approaching their managers. That is, many (although by no means all) practitioners are in a solid position to approach their managers and offer a compelling argument for the benefits to be obtained for employees, themselves (including their manager), and the organization as a whole for active research participation. I further believe that many practitioners are in a position where they could negotiate a small part of their annual reviews to be contingent on applicable research projects that could ultimately culminate in published research – especially, when they collaborate with IWO psychologists in academic environments. In short, I encourage practitioners to become more involved in the publication process by working with their supervisors in negotiating time for research and in actively seeking out academicians to collaborate with.

Better research through match.com

Of course, before all of this can occur, there must be a mechanism that matches practitioners and academicians who are interested in collaborating with each other on similar interests and research areas and in ways that complement and leverage the talents of each party. I believe the best place for this to occur is within professional associations like The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) in the United States or the British Psychological Society (BPS) in Great Britain. Imagine an area devoted to such matchmaking endeavours on either of these websites. Researchers could post a 'profile' of themselves in which they identify their research interests, the kinds of data that they are looking for, or organizations or specific populations or categories of employees that they are seeking. They could also include their curriculum vitas that others could browse to see the kinds of work that they have done in the past. One could even indicate the best way and times to be contacted, mention special skills or experiences (e.g. hierarchical linear modelling, structural equations modelling, item response theory, experience developing and implementing assessments centres, etc.) or indicate whether funds from a grant have been secured, etc. On the practitioner side of the equation, one could indicate the types of data that could be made available (e.g. multisource feedback data, selection data, employee opinion data, performance appraisal data, etc.). Practitioners could also indicate the roles that they are most interested in playing in the publication process and the competencies they can bring to the table. For example, practitioners might indicate that they have many years worth of multisource feedback data available and have been asked by senior leaders to demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme. However, they lack the time and/or statistical competencies to undertake such a project. Academics interested in this area of research would likely approach such as practitioner in earnest. Practitioners could also clearly delineate the tasks that they would be willing to carry out in the publication process (e.g. writing the method and procedure sections and the practical implications in the discussion section). So, not only would researchers find and obtain coveted data but also practitioners would have a chance to be involved in and thus have an impact upon the publication process and would further be in a position to save their organizations the monies that would have otherwise be spent on consulting fees. This would benefit the practitioner, researcher, and the organization.

Another tangible benefit for the practitioner becoming involved in the publication process concerns the issue of continuing professional development. Indeed, such continuing professional education and development requirements are now mandatory for all UK-registered chartered psychologists. Similarly, the EuroPsy or European Certificate in Psychology has a requirement for 40 hours of continuing professional development per year. The guidelines for obtainment of the EuroPsy indicate that it is a responsibility of the Registered EuroPsyc Psychologist to keep informed about recent professional and scientific developments in psychology. The guidelines go on to say that there exist a wide range of different types of professional development activities – including '(Co-)authorship and/or editing of publications on research and/or professional issues.' Clearly, becoming involved with the publication process, whether required by professional associations or not, is a viable option in the lifelong process of continual learning.

Finally, the scanning process described above can help practitioners identify academics whose research deals with relevant topics, techniques, populations, or actions. Practitioners will likely find it worthwhile to contact these academics and initiate a conversation about potential research collaborations. Most academics would welcome such dialogue. In this context, it is helpful to remember that academics need access to practitioner data and insights just as much as practitioners need access to the skills of academics.

The sad plight of real heroes

One final thought – liaisons who serve as ambassadors in bridging the science–practice gulf are the potential heroes of our profession. They are the true scientist-practitioners. These are academicians actively involved in consulting and practitioners actively seeking to be involved in the research and publication process. They have competencies as scientists in their research design and statistical skills. They also have the ability to speak the language of business and to obtain and manage credibility with senior-level executives. They help ensure that the findings in all of our research efforts will make any difference whatsoever in the world of work. The stated mission of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) is to 'enhance human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings by promoting the science, practice, and teaching of industrial–organizational psychology.' In my opinion, as IWO psychologists, we are mostly communicating, influencing, and impressing *each other* with our research and journal content. Much work remains to be done in spreading the Gospel message of IWO psychology research findings to the ends of the earth and in maximizing our enhancement of human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings.

Unfortunately, these heroes of the profession are the very ones who often get castigated by all-out academicians for their very bridging efforts that are so desperately needed. They are accused of having little or no psychology or theory in what they do. At the same time, all-out practitioners too severely criticize these heroes for being 'ivory tower' or esoteric. These heroes are probably the worst casualties/martyrers in the seemingly never-ending saga of the scientist-practitioner debate. Yet, they are the very ones who can convey the intricate and seemingly ever increasingly complex findings of our research in a language that can be understood and appreciated by general audiences.

In summary I have discussed about how both practitioners and researchers can 'latch on to' and get 'practical mileage' from JOOP content as well as how practitioners can benefit from JOOP's academic output. I believe these goals can be accomplished by modifying our scanning of JOOP content to include not only relevant topics but also relevant techniques, populations, and actions. Also we can narrow the science–practice chasm by involving more practitioners in the publication process, and facilitate this desirable outcome by including researcher-practitioner matchmaking mechanisms on our professional websites. Finally, we should hold true research-practitioners with the highest of regard.

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