

Journal Reprints as Dissemination of Psychological Research: Courtesy, Obligation, or Obsolescence?

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ABSTRACT. The proliferation of journals and the escalation of journal prices have made it difficult for psychologists, especially those in rural areas without access to comprehensive libraries, to obtain journal articles. A traditional source of otherwise unavailable papers is to request a reprint directly from the author. Although previous researchers found this method to be 60%-80% successful, there have been major changes in journal operations and alternative media since this research was conducted. In the present study, reprints were requested from 473 corresponding authors from 10 American Psychological Association journals. The compliance rate was 84% and reprints took, on average, 32 days to arrive. There was no difference in the rate or in the speed of response due to the requestor's status as an academic or applied psychologist. Although functional, the traditional reprint request method was slow, uncertain, and costly. It is suggested that a demand still exists for reprints, but that electronic reprints should replace the traditional paper format.

Key words: reprints, scientific communication

READING RESEARCH ARTICLES as a method of acquiring new knowledge is considered extremely important to research, teaching, and other scientific endeavors (Tenopir & King, 1997). Although psychological practitioners may not perceive research articles as favorably as do researchers (Beutler, Williams, Wakefield, & Entwistle, 1995; Cohen, 1979; Millman, Samet, Shaw, & Braden, 1990; Shanley, Lodge, & Mattick, 1996), they generally consider research to be important to practice, look to journal articles for new knowledge, and read sev-

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eral research articles each month (McKee, Witt, Elliott, Pardue, & Judycki, 1987; Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986).

Thus, both researchers and practitioners rely on journal articles but for different purposes and with dissimilar priorities. Scientists who read more have been found to be more productive and more widely recognized (Tenopir & King, 1997). Practitioners are encouraged to base their clinical practice on empirical evidence (APA Division of Clinical Psychology, 1995) and may face market pressures to do so. Additionally, being an informed consumer of research is a central tenet of the scientist-practitioner model (Barlow, Hayes, & Nelson, 1984).

Psychologists obtain most of the journal articles they read from individual subscriptions and libraries. There appears to have been a shift over the past two decades away from individual subscriptions and toward library-supplied materials (Tenopir & King, 1997). This trend has been fueled by the proliferation of scientific journals and by cost considerations. For example, more than 4,500 psychology, life science, and social science journals were published in the United States in 1995; at the same time, journal prices increased by more than 700% from 1975 to 1995 (70% more than inflation during that period; Tenopir & King, 1997).

This combination of journal proliferation and price inflation has placed burdens on individual subscribers as well as on libraries. The number of journals purchased at the largest research libraries declined by 7% from 1986 to 1996 as costs increased by 124% (Walker, 1998). For example, the University of Wisconsin at Madison library has canceled more than 7,000 journal subscriptions over the past decade (Branin & Case, 1998). Thus, even psychologists at universities may sometimes be unable to locate articles in specialized journals (Ellis & Curless, 1987). Applied psychologists who practice in rural areas or who do not have access to comprehensive libraries experience even greater difficulty in obtaining research articles (Holaday & Greene, 1997).

A traditional source of otherwise unavailable research articles is to request a paper reprint directly from the author. However, a conspicuous disadvantage to reprint requests lies in the potential noncompliance of the author. Early investigations of compliance focused on the form of the reprint request. For example, Seiler (1979) found that although 63% of authors responded overall, typed post-cards resulted in the best response rate (80%) followed by letterhead (70%). Ellis and Curless (1987) achieved an overall response rate of 62% but discovered that handwritten letters with an enclosed address label increased compliance to 76%. Using a larger sample, Searleman, Morris, Becker, and Makosky (1983) achieved an 81% return rate that was not biased by either gender or academic rank. Worse noncompliance problems (51%) have been encountered when requesting papers presented at professional conferences (Knight, 1987; Rienzi & Allen, 1994).

The existing database on compliance with journal reprint requests is dated. There have been major changes in journal operations and alternative media since the most recent of these papers was published (Tenopir & King, 1997). As reported by Susan Knapp, Director of the American Psychological Association (APA)

Publications, publishers no longer provide authors with free reprints on publication of their articles and most authors do not purchase reprints of their work (personal communication, May 12, 1998). Thus, the usefulness of reprint requests at this time is uncertain.

Although there are no published statements regarding the professional duties of authors in regard to journal reprints, there appears to be considerable disparity of opinion regarding reprints of convention papers. For example, responding to convention paper requests has been called a professional courtesy (Knight, 1987), a professional responsibility (Rienzi & Allen, 1994), and an unwarranted imposition (Olbrisch, 1995). Thus, there may be some confusion concerning authors' responsibility for providing reprints.

Additionally, there has been no systematic attempt to survey journals of the American Psychological Association. Previous investigations (Ellis & Curless, 1987; Searleman et al., 1983; Seiler, 1979) sampled widely across the social sciences. With such diversity of journals and topics, it is impossible to know the rate of compliance within the specialized psychological literature. Although neither gender nor academic rank has been shown to bias compliance with reprint requests, there has been no investigation of the potential biasing effect that might be created by the requester's academic versus applied position. In the present study, therefore, I surveyed a sample of APA journals to ascertain authors' overall compliance to journal reprint requests and to determine if the requester's status as an academic or applied psychologist biased the response rate.

Method

Participants

Participants were 473 corresponding authors of articles published in one full volume (mid-1996 to mid-1997) of the 10 APA journals (see Table 1) with the largest circulation (APA, 1996). Only one reprint request was sent to the corresponding author for each article, although one multi-published author received four requests for four different articles. Authors personally acquainted with the investigator were not queried. Nor were authors solicited if their address was outside the United States or Canada.

Procedure

Preprinted post cards were prepared in two formats. Both versions asked the author for a reprint of a specified article and included a return address label. The academic version featured the investigator's academic affiliation and address. The applied version featured the investigator's diplomate in professional psychology (ABPP) credential and included a business affiliation and address (i.e., nonacademic). The investigator's name, professional credentials, affiliations, and

TABLE 1
Proportion and Speed of Compliance With Journal Reprint Requests
by Academic and Applied Psychologists

Journal	Articles requested	Total return rate (%)	Academic return rate (%)	Applied return rate (%)	Mean elapsed days
<i>American Psychologist</i>	59	83	83	83	19.8
<i>Health Psychology</i>	37	89	84	94	21.7
<i>Journal of Abnormal Psychology</i>	49	84	83	84	27.5
<i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology</i>	116	83	84	82	39.7
<i>Journal of Counseling Psychology</i>	38	79	70	89	34.3
<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>	27	93	93	92	27.8
<i>Professional Psychology: Research and Practice</i>	72	82	83	81	33.9
<i>Psychological Assessment</i>	35	80	84	75	21.5
<i>Psychological Bulletin</i>	23	91	92	91	40.4
<i>Psychological Review</i>	17	88	89	88	60.6
Total	473	84	84	84	32.0

addresses were used, rather than pseudonyms, so that authors could, if they desired, locate the requester in bibliographic sources. Reprint requests were assigned to academic and applied conditions in counter-balanced order to ensure roughly equivalent numbers of requests for each journal.

All reprint request cards were mailed shortly after receipt of the pertinent journal in the Pattee Library at The Pennsylvania State University. Thus, authors received reprint requests at irregular intervals following actual publication of their articles, based on natural variations of availability to the public. The last reprint requests were mailed in May 1997 and the reprint collection was ended in December 1998. Thus, reprints not received by that date had been requested at least 18 months previously. Reprints obtained in this manner were distributed to graduate students, academic psychologists, and applied psychologists to ensure appropriate use of authors' contributions.

Results

Results were analyzed along two dimensions: proportion of reprints received and speed with which reprints were received. These two dimensions were compared across journals and by type of requester (academic versus applied psychologist).

In terms of compliance rate, 397 reprints were received for a total return

rate of 84% (see Table 1). When compliance rates were compared across journals, $\chi^2(9, N = 473) = 4.89, p < .84$, and type of requester, $\chi^2(1, N = 473) = .036, p < .85$, there were no statistically significant effects.

The number of days that elapsed between request for and receipt of reprints was calculated for each of the 397 reprints received as a measure of speed of compliance with requests (see Table 1). Elapsed days was extremely variable (a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 372) and was not normally distributed (skewness = 4.1, kurtosis = 19.4). Application of a loglinear transformation resulted in a reasonably normal distribution (skewness = 1.0, kurtosis = .7), so the transformed variable was used in the statistical analyses of elapsed time.

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted to test for differences in the speed of compliance by type of requester (academic versus applied psychologist) and journal of publication. There was no statistically significant main effect for type of requester, $F(1, 396) = 3.0, p < .08$, nor was there a statistically significant interaction effect, $F(9, 396) = .72, p < .69$. There was, however, a statistically significant difference in the loglinear elapsed days between journals, $F(9, 396) = 2.26, p < .02$. A Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc test indicated that reprints of articles from *Psychological Review* were significantly slower in arriving ($p < .05$) than were reprints of articles from *American Psychologist*. As displayed in Table 1, the mean difference between these two journals was 40.8 days.

Discussion

Although authors have little official guidance regarding their professional responsibility, 84% responded to written reprint requests. This compliance rate is consistent with previous social science research (Ellis & Curless, 1987; Searleman et al., 1983; Seiler, 1979). Nor were authors biased by the requester's status as an academic or applied psychologist. This result complements results of previous research, which showed that gender and academic rank did not bias reprint request compliance rates (Searleman et al.). The average elapsed time between request for and receipt of reprints was 32 days, but reprints from *American Psychologist* were received in 20 days while those from *Psychological Review* took, on average, 61 days to arrive.

Although the present compliance rate was good, psychologists without access to the original published source would have failed to obtain the requested journal article in 16% of the cases. Even when successful, reprint requests could reasonably be expected to take 30–40 days to be fulfilled. Practitioners facing immediate clinical problems may not find this situation to be adequate to meet their needs (Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996; Holaday & Greene, 1997; McKee et al., 1987). Researchers also may require surer and swifter access to research reports, given their reliance on recent literature (Vockell, Asher, Dinuzzo, & Bartok, 1998). Thus, the use of traditional printed reprint requests to acquire research papers is functional but may be inefficient.

It might be assumed that reprints are obsolete due to new forms of electronic publication, but this conclusion may be premature. Holaday and Greene (1997) listed computer access to electronic journals as only 1 of 22 ways to locate professional resources, and Prescott et al. (1997) found limited use of electronic databases by physicians. Electronic publishing is currently in a state of flux where "there is a lack of hard data to really know what to expect" (Tenopir & King, 1997, p. 166). Given the uncertainty concerning the financial and professional acceptance of scholarly electronic publishing (Branin & Case, 1998; Odlyzko, 1994, 1998; Phelps, 1997; Tenopir & King, 1997; Walker, 1998), it cannot be assumed that paper reprints are unnecessary.

While the paper reprint system should remain in place for those without access to computer technology, a more constant and timely system is required if researchers and practitioners are to have full access to the current scientific literature. To begin with, authors' professional responsibility concerning reprints must be clearly delineated and consistently applied. Reprints should be explicitly designated as a courtesy, rather than an obligation, of authors. Additionally, an electronic reprint system should be instituted to supplement the cumbersome and costly paper system. Because most journals require authors to submit an electronic version of their manuscript, they could supply each author with an electronic reprint in PDF format (Walker, 1998) on publication. Authors could then respond to reprint requests with an electronic reprint that would be delivered via e-mail with speed, constancy, and economy. Alternatively, they could reply with a traditional paper reprint if the requester were not electronically accessible.

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