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# The Experimental Psychology Bulletin

from Division 3 of the American Psychological Association

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The Editors encourage submission of any announcements, and/or letters to the editors, regarding psychological science.

Comments on the content and presentation of the newsletter are also appreciated.

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## President's Message What's in a name?

Ed Wasserman

Ten years ago, I was chosen to receive a named professorship in the Department of Psychology at The University of Iowa, the funds for which were generously donated by Dewey Stuit (a former faculty member and a former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts) and his wife Velma. At the time, I was asked if I wanted a specific designation for my

professorship. I unhesitatingly proposed the moniker: Stuit Professor of Experimental Psychology, because I consider myself first and foremost to be an experimental psychologist.

### What is an experimental psychologist?

To me, an experimental psychologist is a psychological scientist whose *modus operandi* is the experimental method. Behavior is the subject matter. When, where, and why does one observe the behavior of interest? Answering these questions demands the careful manipulation and control of relevant variables. It requires the assiduous recording and proper quantitative analysis of the behavioral data. And, it insists on the cautious and parsimonious interpretation of those empirical data in the light of both familiar and innovative theoretical interpretations.

### PsychDrollery

(Humor from members and the internet)

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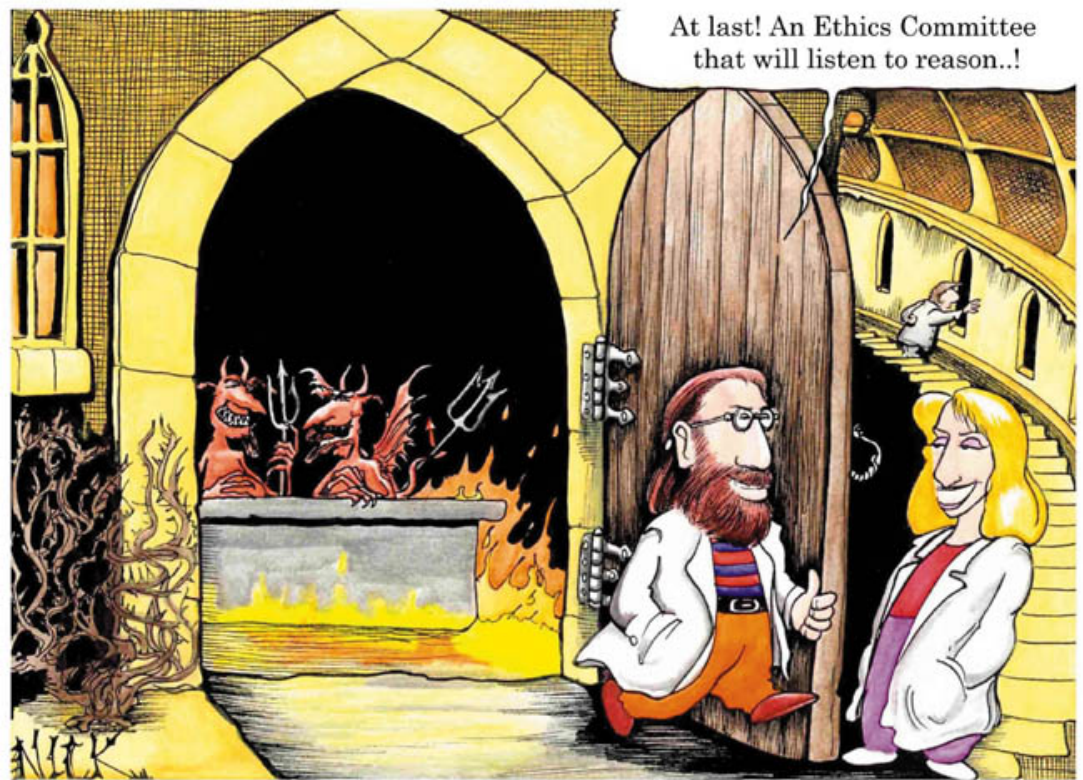
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<http://www.nearingzero.net/sbunch1.html>

Retrieved 10/27/07

In short, experimental psychology is the natural science of behavior. Its practitioners routinely ask three questions that were foundational to the work of Ivan P. Pavlov: Can I see the behavior? Can I measure the behavior? And, can I repeat the results of my experiments?

### The ties that bind

All who are members of Division 3 should agree with these simple statements. Indeed, this approach to the study of behavior binds us together as experimental psychologists. Yet, it is obvious that, within this domain, considerable diversity of scholarship is to be found.

### Forces of division

Experimental psychology has been enormously successful as an approach to understanding behavior. That very success has seen the approach applied to a dizzying array of behaviors and organisms. The Wikipedia says the following about experimental psychology: “Since it is a methodological rather than a substantive category, experimental psychology embraces a disparate collection of areas of study. It is usually taken to include the study of perception, cognitive psychology, comparative psychology, the experimental analysis of behavior, and some aspects of physiological psychology, and developmental psychology. Many psychologists would now identify with a smaller field such as cognitive or comparative psychology.”

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## Consequences of division

With so many different specialties proliferating and loyalties emerging, it is no wonder why highly specialized journals have evolved to report the latest data and theory within these individual domains. In 1975, the eclectic *Journal of Experimental Psychology* split into several specialty journals, which now include: *JEP: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *JEP: Human Perception and Performance*, *JEP: Animal Behavior Processes*, and *JEP: Applied*.

In his final commentary as the 1974 editor of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, David Grant, after observing that the *Journal* had historically published much of the best of American experimental psychology, lamentably concluded: "I believe that this has continued to be the case under my editorship, but perhaps to a lesser extent, because with the publication of many new journals, some specialized and some more general, this *Journal* no longer dominates the scene, and I have read many excellent papers appearing elsewhere that I should have loved to have seen in our volumes. The difficulties facing readers of the *Journal* have increased during the last twelve years and have been further exacerbated by the great diversity of the areas of research covered in our pages. The problem will worsen in the future, I should think, but sectioning the *Journal* may lessen the frustrations of readers with specialized interests."

That sectioning ought to have been suitable for readers with such specialized research interests. But, what about readers with more general interests? Here, *JEP: General* was created to fit that bill. Its first editor, Greg Kimble, detailed three attributes that successful *JEP: General* articles should have: "First, the work reported should be of interest to a general audience of psychologists. Second, the article should report new research but in a way that makes it the only source to which the interested reader will have to refer to understand the article. Third, the article should leave the reader with a sense of closure."

Over the ensuing three decades, the mission of *JEP: General* has changed a bit. According to the current internet description: "The *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* publishes articles describing empirical work that bridges the traditional interests of two or more communities of psychology. The work may touch on issues dealt with in *JEP: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *JEP: Human Perception and Performance*, *JEP: Animal Behavior Processes*, or *JEP: Applied*, but may also concern issues in other subdisciplines of psychology, including social processes, developmental processes, psychopathology, neuroscience, or computational modeling. Articles in *JEP: General* may be longer than the usual journal publication if necessary, but shorter articles that bridge subdisciplines will also be considered."

Having served as a Consulting Editor since 2002, I can confidently confirm that evaluating the suitability and excellence of submissions to *JEP: General* is a most challenging task, much more so than is the case for submissions to the specialty sections of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. Nevertheless, I genuinely believe that we must continue to submit general interest and interdisciplinary manuscripts to *JEP: General* in order to maintain intellectual contact with others in our diverse field.

Beyond changing the slate of journals that are published by the American

Psychological Association, fractionation in experimental psychology has dramatically affected the nature of graduate education and the character of scientific societies. I hope to discuss these and other trends in later columns.

### A final observation

I would like to make a final observation about experimental psychology. Perhaps I am alone in this opinion, but I believe that there is one more critical tie that either does or should bind together all experimental psychologists: namely, the search for general laws of behavior.

Writing in 1911 (*Animal Intelligence*, Chapter V), Edward L. Thorndike asserted that behavior is predictable. For him, the first law of behavior is that with both life and mind, as with mass and motion, the same cause will produce the same effect. It thus follows that the same situation will, in the same organism, produce the same response. If the same situation on two occasions produces two different responses, then the organism must have changed. Thorndike suggested that the changes in an organism that prompt it to respond differently on different occasions to the same situation range from temporary to permanent: hunger, fatigue, sleep, and certain diseases on the one hand, and learning, immunity, growth, and senility on the other. Of course, Thorndike is famous for formulating the prime law of instrumental or operant conditioning: the Law of Effect. But, his general interest in having the science of behavior follow in the footsteps of the other natural sciences attests to his ambitious plans for experimental psychology.

As experimental psychologists, I hope that we continue the quest to identify laws of behavior: laws that are applicable across different species and ages of organisms, that hold for both normal and abnormal behavior, and that generalize to both natural and laboratory situations.

Pursuit of this quest means that experimental psychologists share the same scientific aims, not merely the same scientific methods.

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*Note.* An interesting article on the nature of psychological laws was recently published:

Teigen, K. H. (2002). One hundred years of laws in psychology. *American Journal of Psychology*, 115, 103-118.