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International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Editorial

Fundamental principles for preparing intercultural research journal articles (with apologies to Harry F. Harlow)[☆]

“When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it, but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind: it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the stage of science.”
William Thompson, Lord Kelvin

“Keep close to experience; add as little of your own as possible; if you have to add something, be mindful to give an account of every step you take.” F.M. Urban (quoted in [Guilford, 1956](#)).

1. Introduction

Close to five decades ago, one of my intellectual mentors (and a personal friend), Harry Harlow published an editorial in the *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* upon his retirement after 12 years as the editor ([Harlow, 1963](#)). For many years I insisted that my students read that article. Unfortunately, most never got the point. Harlow’s well-known sense of humor got in the way, I suspect, of the students’ ability to see what was wrong in their own manuscripts. They spent so much time laughing leaving no room to consider the real points that Harry was making. Too bad for them. While I do not have Harry’s use of irony as well as mastery of humor to make a phrase memorable, the past 35 years as Editor-in-Chief (and founder) of this *Journal* has given a perspective that might be useful to future prospective authors. As well, the new editors might find my thoughts useful, though they are under no obligation to treat them as revealed wisdom, which they most assuredly are not. Harry’s editorial dealt with animal studies as befits his role on *JCPP*; nevertheless the principles as they might apply to human work are quite similar. Good research does not depend on the subjects of the study, but rather on the perspicacity and clear-headedness of the authors.

This essay is written for the prospective contributor to *IJIR* who sends his manuscript that was so agonized over out into an uncertain world of editors who, they fear, have “reject” burned into every synapse of their nervous systems. One can only hope that the reviewer who is lucky enough to receive their manuscript, a submission which has tears on every page, will not have just had a fight with their spouse or had to deal with a minor rebellion among his or her students. At the same time, the experienced authors may also find one or two bits of wisdom in these few pages. Even the “old hands” need a little review now and then; they too face the awful phrase: “Your ms is rejected.”

The two quotations at the beginning of this paper encapsulate my recommendations. The first suggests that measurement of phenomenon is the major goal of a science; the second asks that the reader be able to follow in the footsteps of the writer and come to the same conclusions. If the phenomenon is not subject to measurement (something that I find hard to believe), then the quote from Urban becomes even more critical. Some naïve workers tend to think that giving “an account of every step” is not necessary when doing qualitative research. Those writers tend, with good reason, to have their work rejected.

[☆] I wish to express my appreciation to Robert Miranda, Jerry Frank, and Geraldine Billingham. These individuals were instrumental in the launching and survival of this journal during their tenure at Pergamon Publications. Without their faith in the journal and this writer, *IJIR* would have been stillborn and the International Academy for Intercultural Research would have been but a glimmer in my eye. I also want to express appreciation to those researchers who submitted their work to the young *IJIR*, people such as Dan Katz, Dan Kealey, Bill Gudykunst and others. They gave needed credibility to the new kid on the block. Many, but thankfully not all, of these people are no longer with us, but they deserve the warmest of aloha and mahalo nui loa. It has been a great ride and I have enjoyed every minute of it.

Harlow's paper was organized as a regular, though brief, article. It had an introduction (including the literature review), method, results, and discussion. Comments on the cover letter (which I never paid much attention to, though apparently some editors do), the use of footnotes, and an overall editorial policy were also discussed. I think this is a reasonable way to proceed and, so, I will.

But, first, there are some general comments about formatting. Reviewers are human beings, evidence occasionally being to the contrary. Many reviewers are people who have time on their hands either because they are retired or they have decided that leisure is the best predictor of a long life. In any case, they have the time to be very conversant with good grammar and how to catch the stray comma, prepositional phrase, incorrect use of homonyms, the failure to use a spell-checker and all the other little gremlins that make editors smile and writers cringe. The prescription here is: make life easy for the reviewer so that at least you will get a fair shake.

The Section 1 should contain at least three parts: a clear and concise statement of the theory that will be tested, or at least some proposition from that theory. Second, a review (not just citations) of the relevant literature focused on the lacunae in the previous studies. Third, a justified statement of the hypotheses. The object of this section is to whet the appetite of the reader and make them care about your effort. In writing your literature review, do not make the mistake of neophytes to the world of academic publishing and think that the more citations you use (particularly if they are in obscure journals that have long ago ceased to publish) the better. You are not writing a doctoral dissertation here where the object is to impress on your committee your ability to sniff out the most arcane writings. So, by the time the reviewer gets to the Method section, they should be doing a Pavlov to see how you have solved some critical issue in the theory that informs your research. An important point: avoid discussing variables that you will not be testing in the research. Throwing a plethora of variables at the reader is only confusing and will give the impression that you are trying to cover the paucity of clear thinking with a pile of irrelevancies.

If the rationale for your paper is that a previous article used a faulty methodology and you are going to utilize an improved process, be sure to mention this point. Show why, briefly, the previous author missed an important and critical point when developing their method.

Since *IJIR* is a journal that is interested in cultural issues, your statement of theory should indicate its importance in understanding the role of culture to the phenomenon to be investigated. What particular aspects of culture are of interest and why should we care. In making your argument do not assume that there are no relevant articles in *IJIR*. Reviewers will want to know if you have taken the time to assess if *IJIR* is a good fit for your paper and one way to demonstrate that fit is to cite relevant papers that have already appeared in the journal. Failure to make this assessment might give the reviewer the idea that you are shopping around that has already been rejected by one or more other journals.

This is probably as good a place as any to opine on the relative likely acceptability of quantitative versus qualitative research. Perceptive and long-term readers of *IJIR* will have noticed that we have accepted both types of methodologies. At the same time qualitative studies are more likely to be rejected for methodological flaws than quantitative mss. The reason for this disparity is quite clear: the standards for quantitative studies are generally understood; for qualitative there is less clarity. Often, the latter appears to be exploratory and begs for quantification. Exploratory studies are best utilized to guide more systematic efforts and thus should remain in the researcher's file cabinet or on their hard drive or even perhaps in the cloud.

2. Method

This is the section where you will show your cleverness. It is also the section that results in greatest number of rejections. Accordingly, it should be written with the greatest of care and clarity. Again, there are four major subsections: Participants, Instruments, Procedures, and Data Analyses and all should be included. The participants need to be fully described on all relevant dimensions. How they were selected is critically important as well as what they were told about the purpose of the research. How many were solicited and how many actually participated in your study. If the number solicited and the number of actual participants differ explain how and why. What might be the impact of self-selection? If the impact is likely to be significant, be sure you describe how this is to be controlled in the later subsections of this section. If your object is to assess the impact of some cultural dimension on the dependent variables of interest, be sure to demonstrate that the groups actually differ on those dimensions. Do not assume that because some archival data (e.g. Hofstede) gives different values for the countries of origin that your Ss exhibit those differences. For example, foreign students are likely to be different than students who stayed in their home country so that characteristics of the latter might not apply to the former. How you are going to assess these differences will be in the instrumentation section. If subjects are selected from different locales, then the rationale for the selection has to be made clear and defensible. It should be closely related to the hypotheses being examined. In general, if the research reported is multi-sited, then at least three such locales should have been selected, again according to a rational criteria that is not based on the writer's sabbatical leave location.

The instrumentation section should carefully follow the variables that you have clearly stated in the introduction. Do not introduce new variables here; doing so will only irritate the reviewers. If you use measures that have been developed elsewhere and not only similar populations to your participants take the time to assess their applicability in your study. This might mean conducting a preliminary study with a different group of subjects and determining reliability and validity. If you use a reduced version of a measure, be sure to assess that the latent structure remains the same. Reliability and validity are

not just terms we learned in our graduate courses in test development but, if not addressed will cause the heads of reviewers to explode. If demographics were gathered how were they presented and was confidentiality cleared imparted.

Writers who use qualitative approaches often assume that the instrumentation section is best covered in as few words as possible and, even more, kept secret until the discussion section or placed in an appendix which will rarely, if ever, be read. This is not a good policy and, if followed, is likely to have a less than satisfactory result. Indeed, as the quote from Urban at the beginning of this editorial suggests, exactitude and clarity in the steps followed and the questions being asked (as well as the likely probes) is even more important for qualitative research.

Once the measures have been selected or created and sufficient psychometric properties have been assessed, the ms now moves to the procedures. Like all of the other sections, woe be to the author who slights this part for it is here that the reviewer will be seeking any flaw that would prevent realizing the goals of the research. For example, if the procedures are very time consuming, have the parts been presented in random or counterbalanced order to control for fatigue effects? How was the project introduced to the participants? What were the demand effects, if any and did the procedures introduce the necessary controls?

Sometimes authors combine several studies into the same article in the belief that the effort and time involved in carrying out such research will impress the reviewers and readers. This may or may not be the case. But, if such is the case, then the sequence of studies and their relation to one another becomes paramount. Ideally, each succeeding study should utilize the information from the prior study and expand in a rational and understandable direction. If this is not the case, then it would be better to break up the report into several different mss and submit them over a period of time to the same or different journals. Besides, as old hands in the academic dance know, tenure and promotion committees know only how to count, not evaluate.

If the researcher is smart and knows how to hedge their bets, then they will have designed the study to provide checks on positive self-presentation and the efficacy of the manipulation. Failure to address these points in the design often leaves the author with an inability to explain away negative (and sometimes even positive) results. This results in overly long Discussion sections because the writer is trying to explain the unexplainable. The image of a fish flopping around out of water is one that I have often had on reading such attempts.

Research design is different from data analysis though young researchers, and even some not-so young ones, often fail to appreciate the difference. In other words the design should drive the statistics, not the reverse. Multi-level designs such as those advocated by van de Vijver (e.g., *Cheung, van de Vijver, & Leong, 2011*), in my opinion, though difficult to do well, should, nevertheless, be a goal for all intercultural researchers.

If the study utilizes a qualitative design, then issues of inter-rater reliability and methods of content analysis must be clearly outlined in the procedure section. This is because the analysis of the non-quantitative data IS the procedure.

The data analytic section gives the reader a roadmap to the results and links the methodology clearly to the hypotheses. The ideal ms is one that organizes this section by hypothesis and clearly indicates what results will indicate support. The rationale for the selection of a given analytic technique over some other approach should be compelling such that the reader will agree that the given statistic will, indeed, provide a clear test of the hypothesis. Tests for such disturbances as multicollinearity and non-normality of distributions need to be discussed here since failure to account for such problems has sunk many an otherwise well designed study.

3. Results

If the two previous sections have been well done, the results section should be short and present just the results, again organized by hypothesis. The reader has already been prepared with an easily understood roadmap. Often less experienced writers try to slip in a new hypothesis or a new statistic to explain some counter-hypothesis result. Such stealth actions belong in the discussion if they belong anywhere and you are likely to tick off the reviewer by using this technique.

4. Discussion

Harlow commented that it is this section that separates the adults from the children. While there are firm rules for the preceding parts, there are none for the Discussion. The sky is the limit so often writers take this fact as an opportunity to spend many pages explaining what they should have done had they the time, money, and staff. The experienced writer will simply summarize how the results add to the underlying theory and perhaps indicate his or her next study. Some writers also take it upon themselves to protect against a later study done by someone else that disputes the present research. Harlow called this the "alibi in advance technique." I do not recommend it if for no other reason that the new study may never be done or may appear in an even more obscure journal, so why tempt fate. In any case, most tenure and promotion committees are unlikely to keep track of research in a field not their own, one of the benefits of academic compartmentalization.

Of course, your study will have limitations. But, if you have followed the prescriptions in this article, the limitations will be few and probably inconsequential. Mentioning them, briefly, will give you a patina of modesty and reduce the desire for others to attack such a sincere scholar.

5. Concluding remarks

Harlow ended his editorial with the following paragraph. In the spirit of imitation being the sincerest form of flattery (as long as credit is given), I quote the paragraph here:

“Faced with a mounting flood of uninspired researches, and watching publication lag continuously mount despite multiple allotments of additional Journal pages, I came to realize that my editorial policies, even though rigid and unreasonable, were incomplete or else in error. For a long time I thought there was no solution, and then I realized I was wrong. I established a new JCPP policy and formalized it with a rubber stamp, only to realize that my term as Editor has already expired. But, at least I have the rubber stamp which I planned to use on a large number of manuscripts: “Not read but rejected.” (Harlow, 1963, p. 896)

I have not gone so far as to prepare a comparable rubber stamp though at various times over the past three and half decades it seemed like a good idea. If the number of mss continues to increase without a comparable increase in quality such a policy may be necessary. It will up to the next and succeeding editors to decide if such a stamp is useful and, if so, procure it.

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