

EXCERPTED FROM

“Editorial: Applied is *Not* Atheoretical”  
*Journal of Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 9, 1-3. (2000)

David A. Smith  
*University of Notre Dame*

...

*APP's Niche*

Although I am not anticipating any marked departures from what readers and authors have come to expect from *APP*, there are a few items I would like to note here for purposes of clearly staking out a niche in what has become a rather crowded journal marketplace and to provide a ready reference for authors new to the journal. *APP* has adopted the somewhat unusual position of defining its scope with respect to content rather than sub-discipline. It is not a journal for clinical psychology, counseling psychology, educational, developmental, school, personality, social, industrial/organizational, or any other kind of psychology. Nor is it a journal strictly for practitioners, scientists, educators, or administrators. It is a journal for *all* who are interested in applied and preventive psychology. This means we have one of the largest potential constituencies of any psychological journal. On the other hand, we have an equally large array of more specialized “competition”, so to speak. The competition falls into a fairly small set of categories, though, and I believe they miss a vital scholarly domain that *APP* is unusually well positioned to capture.

Most of the top psychological journals publish original empirical research reports within their various specialized sub-fields. There are also important journals featuring scholarly literature reviews. And there are practice-focused and trade journals concerned with practical aspects of service delivery. Although *APP* does not ordinarily publish empirical research reports, it already publishes scientific reviews, and its authors do not shy from tying these reviews to pragmatic intervention and prevention concerns. Apart from original research reports, then, our scope already encompasses much of the content to be found elsewhere in scientific psychological journals, namely reviews of empirical research on applied and preventive psychological topics. In my view, there are presently enough outlets for empirical research reports, and I do not intend to begin inviting papers of that sort. Rather, what is more difficult to find elsewhere, and what I would like to emphasize more in *APP*, is theory.

An added emphasis on theory in an applied journal may at first seem misplaced. After all, it is commonplace to consider theoretical and applied work as contradictory. And surely there is some validity to this perception. In order to make unambiguous theoretical contributions, empirical research tends to be very controlled. Once too many factors are controlled, however, it is easy to dismiss the findings as irrelevant to applied settings where such control cannot be duplicated. Conversely, research in uncontrolled applied settings is often so prone to alternative interpretations, it is difficult to make secure generalizations of a theoretical sort. Researchers themselves often characterize their own work as either “basic” (meaning of largely theoretical relevance) or “applied”, suggesting that contributions to one area do not bear directly on the other.

Too often, I fear, when we think of science we think quite narrowly of data. This is appropriate as far as it goes, and I do not want to reduce *APP's* traditional emphasis on empirical data in exchange for more theoretical efforts. Instead, I will be asking authors to *augment* their data-based reviews with more extensive theoretical analysis. That is, data will continue to be the foundation of *APP* articles, but theoretical sections will be encouraged and afforded additional space. Ideally, authors will take theoretical risks, exposing themselves to being proved wrong by making clear statements about why they believe the data are the way they are. Essentially, I would like *APP* to become the place where scholars go when they want to be more expansive theoretically. Of course, articles should be insightful, engaging, and provocative, but another indication of meeting my goals will be that articles are also occasionally controversial.

In exchange for taking theoretical risks, let me offer authors the observation that clear, testable, theoretical assertions tend to be unusually influential. Among their many merits, theoretical contributions that are strongly data-based attract attempts to test limits, provide helpful guides for clarifying empirical puzzles, generate novel predictions, invite interdisciplinary contributions, are of pedagogical value, and provide a structure for others studying the same problem. Although I am not aware of a quantitative study, I'll model the target behavior by making the risky prediction that were an appropriate study to be done, it would show the citation impact of the average theoretical contribution exceeds the impact of the average strictly empirical contribution by half an order of

magnitude (that's even a point prediction!). I believe this is the product of two healthy, though complementary, forces; we try to identify the earliest citation for ideas and the most recent citation for data, shortening the impact of empirical publications and lengthening the impact of theoretical ones. That is why I hope authors are eager to accept the challenge of bolstering their theoretical efforts.

Why might readers – particularly readers doing applied work – be eager to see more theoretical efforts in *APP*? Kurt Lewin is widely-cited for his dictum that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. This is not the place to unpack this pregnant phrase, though doing so with respect to the scientist-practitioner split in American psychology could be a most illuminating exercise. Let me just suggest, to take a single example, that practitioner reservations about evidence-based practice dictums can, in the main, be attributed to the perception that doing so presently entails conformance to a specified set of therapeutic behaviors. In my experience, it is only when *both* therapeutic means and therapeutic ends are dictated that practitioners get agitated. An alternative perspective holds that one can use scientifically-based theory to identify the targets of intervention (e.g., cognitions, consequences), and leave practitioners to focus their creative energies on finding the best means to influence these targets in light of each client's unique situation. Similarly, some programs of research identify the means of influencing various targets of intervention, but whether or not those targets are important is up to the practitioner to decide. Unfortunately, most treatment-outcome research confounds means with ends, testing specific intervention effects on specific targets. Null findings in such cases are ambiguous as to whether the wrong target was chosen or an ineffective means of influencing that target is to blame. Means and ends are easily distinguished in theoretical efforts, inasmuch as they can draw upon separable basic research literatures. For instance, knowing the principles of attitude change as adduced from the basic attitude change research literature would be eminently practical for those attempting to enhance cognitive therapy. Similarly, a better understanding of theories of reinforcement could be quite practical for managing complicated or unusual contingencies not well represented in the standard treatment-outcome research literature upon which most scientific practice is now reliant. In *APP* I hope that practitioners receive less ambiguous, less offensive, but equally scientific guidance than is elsewhere presently available, and I am open to feedback along the way to help assure such an outcome.

#### Two Provisos

Let me close by attaching two provisos to my encouragement of further theoretical development in *APP*. First of all, let me reiterate that theoretical efforts are to be data-based. That is what will keep *APP* distinctive. Theoretical psychology bears the same responsibility to data as theoretical physics. I think it is profoundly unfortunate that theoretical/conceptual contributions in applied and preventive domains tend largely to be poorly grounded empirically. It is little consolation that this situation curiously parallels the theoretical weakness in many data-based contributions. In *APP* they should come together. ***Theoretical efforts must be grounded in the best contemporary data available.***

The second proviso I wish to attach to my encouragement of theoretical efforts concerns what I consider the “levels of theory” problem that is particularly acute in applied and preventive domains. Apart from simple restatements of findings, it is difficult to imagine *any* generalizations from data that are not in some way theoretical. In all research domains, there are many important levels of analysis -- descriptive, epistemological, statistical, political, economic, developmental, structural, functional -- any one of which might lead to breakthroughs in understanding and none of which is necessarily less or more important in the generic sense of the term. The most appropriate level of analysis for each article will, of course, vary from area-to-area and author-to-author. But inasmuch as *APP*'s domain is “applied and preventive” psychology, it seems reasonable to press *as well* for contributions that are practical. That is, whether authors are “right” or “wrong” in their analyses of specific content domains will be gauged not against some abstract standard of truth but according to whether actions based upon their work appear likely to lead to more or less effective action according to the best presently available science.

#### Conclusion

In addition to advocating theory, Kurt Lewin is also famous for his encouragement of “action research”, which is theoretically important research conducted in applied settings where it can have real impact on people. *APP* does not ordinarily publish original research, so it would be out of place to press such an agenda here. But I hope authors are able to turn Lewin's encouragement around and produce “action articles”, articles that draw applied and preventive theoretical implications out of today's best psychological science.

But this should come as no surprise. After all, our journal's title is ***Applied and Preventive Psychology: Current Scientific Perspectives.***