Editorial: Science or Fishing?

Some of the most important components of a research report are its conceptual quality and consistency; how well the author(s) conceptually link the research questions, hypotheses, or topical focus to the extant literature; and how well the analyses address the research questions. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies have different conventions and language for this, but the importance of logical continuity exists regardless of the methods.

It is critical that authors demonstrate the logical continuity between previous and present work in their manuscripts. The APA Publication Manual (2010) suggests that this “usually involves stating your hypothesis or specific question and describing how these were derived from theory or are logically connected to previous data” (p. 28). It adds that authors should “explain how the research design permits the inferences needed to examine the hypothesis or provide estimates in answer to the question” (p. 28).

The primary reason manuscripts submitted to The Gerontologist are rejected before review is that the Introduction does not adequately link the methodological approach or analyses that follow to previous work. Manuscripts that first introduce independent variables or domains of inquiry in the Methods section read more like fishing expeditions designed to explain as much of the variance as possible and less like scientific endeavors. More specifically:

- Quantitative articles must make a compelling case for why some independent variables or domains of inquiry were included, whereas others were excluded. A literature review is not sufficient. Quantitative articles should be developed within a conceptual framework or model. Hypotheses or research questions should be clearly stated.
- For qualitative manuscripts, where hypothesis testing is rare, the selection of the specific research orientation, the topical focus, or research question should be justified and contextualized within a body of knowledge.
- Practice Concepts articles must include a well-articulated theory, model, or conceptual framework that clearly guides the formation of the research question or hypotheses.
- Policy Analysis articles should follow the guidelines for quantitative or qualitative research, depending on methods used.
- Articles submitted to the “Forum” section differ from those in the other sections of The Gerontologist. They typically do not involve hypotheses and often do not provide new empirical findings. Forum articles, however, must grapple with an important issue and make a novel contribution to the knowledge base. They must be more than a literature review. Strong forum articles will address an important policy or conceptual debate and set the stage for future empirical research.

Because The Gerontologist is a multidisciplinary journal and we encourage articles from such broad disciplines as the social and psychological sciences, biomedical and health sciences, political science and public policy, economics, education, law, and the arts and humanities, we expect that the conceptual underpinnings of articles will vary widely. Whether an author builds on a theory, a conceptual framework, or a model, or aims to develop one, is unimportant. What is important is that the articles submitted to The Gerontologist contribute to the scientific study of aging by grounding scholarship in extant research and theory. Just as it is important in the Introduction to develop the argument of a paper within the context of previous work, so
too is it important that the Discussion clearly state how the findings add to the knowledge base and suggest directions for future work.

In summary, we offer these thoughts simply as reminders of what we all know already: science builds on an overall body of knowledge. We urge all authors—and readers—of The Gerontologist to think and write more consciously, more overtly about theory and conceptual frameworks and to ground their research in previous literature. Whether our work is quantitative or qualitative, adding to the knowledge base should be our goal.

Reference


Rachel Pruchno, PhD, Barbara J. Bowers, PhD, RN, FAAN, Helen Kivnick, PhD, Nancy Schoenberg, PhD, Kimberly Van Haitsma, PhD, Frank J. Whittington, PhD, and John B. Williamson, PhD

All authors participated equally in writing this editorial.