

## Publishing in the Journal of Counseling Psychology: An Interview with Brent Mallinckrodt

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[Three first-year doctoral students interviewed Brent Mallinckrodt in September, 2006. The following is an excerpt from their department newsletter. For the full version see: <http://escp.coe.missouri.edu/Newsletter/Newsletter.htm> ]

A manuscript starts its “electronic life” when the author(s) upload their finished manuscript online through the journal’s website. The manuscript coordinator then checks to see that the manuscript is in the proper format, and removes all identifying information from the manuscript itself. Although the Action Editor knows the identity of the author(s), it is important that this information remain masked from reviewers. Brent then decides whether to review the manuscript himself, or to assign it to an Associate or Guest Editor. This process is usually complete within two days of the manuscript upload.

The Action Editor then selects three reviewers within five days. Two reviewers are typically members of the Editorial Board and the third is an ad hoc reviewer. This practice ensures a mixture of continuity and fresh opinions from outside the Board. The manuscript coordinator sends a digital copy of the manuscript as an email attachment, and a prospective reviewer has approximately five days to decide whether to accept or decline the invitation to review the manuscript. This response is also accomplished with an email system. Thus, within ten days a manuscript has been assigned to an Action Editor and three anonymous reviewers. Reviewers are given 21 days to complete their narrative review, which is usually 1 to 2 single spaced pages, and to fill out a recommendation form communicating their decision to the Action Editor.

A software program known as “Journal Back Office,” maintained by APA, notifies reviewers if their evaluation is late, and notifies the Action Editor when the final review has been received. Each reviewer signals one of five basic recommendations: (a) Accept the manuscript “as is”, (b) Tentatively accept pending minor revisions, (c) Reject, invite a revised resubmission – with strong encouragement, (d) Reject, invite a revised resubmission – with warning that extensive changes will be needed, and (e) Reject with no offer to resubmit. Brent explained that it is fairly rare that all three reviewers’ recommendations fall on the same “rung” of this five-step ladder, although generally all three reviews are no more than two steps apart.

The three reviewers’ recommendations frame a range of possibilities and the Action Editor’s decision almost always falls within this range. However, Brent explained that the Action Editor is not absolutely bound by the reviewers’ recommendations, and may reject a manuscript that all three reviewers think should be revised, or may invite a revision when all three reviewers think a manuscript should be rejected. Through December, 2006, Brent has personally made decisions on about 220 manuscripts since becoming Editor in 2005. There have been 5-6 occasions when his decision fell outside the reviewers’ recommendations. These have been evenly split with

half “overruling” the reviewers in a more positive direction and half in a more negative direction.

Once Action Editors make a decision, they draft a letter to the authors providing a rationale for their choice. Brent emphasized that a hallmark of *JCP* is the care that the Action Editor takes to be sure that these letters, even when the manuscript is rejected, are tactful and provide useful feedback that will encourage the authors to improve their work in the future. When a revision is invited, the letter describes in detail the most important revisions that must be accomplished, as well as resolves any discrepant suggestions from the three reviews. This “decision letter” is then sent to the authors, along with the narrative reviews. Brent has set the goal of having feedback to authors within 60 days of submitting a manuscript. Timely, thorough and helpful feedback to authors gives *JCP* a competitive edge when it comes to soliciting the best manuscripts from researchers.

Seldom is a manuscript accepted after the first submission. In fact, of the nearly 500 manuscripts submitted so far in Brent’s term as Editor, not one has received an “accept as is” decision for its first version! Realistically, the best outcome one can hope for with a first submitted version is “accept with minor changes.” When authors are invited to resubmit a revision, the Editor also gives a deadline for the resubmission depending on the extent of the changes needed. This deadline can range from 45 days to periods of up to six months if authors need to collect new data. Authors (just like students in MU classes) may request an extension of a revision deadline. Typically, a manuscript goes through 4 to 5 versions before publication, with each version climbing up the “reviewer recommendation ladder” until it finally reaches “accept as is.” Roughly speaking, 10% of all manuscripts are rejected because they are not a good match for *JCP* content, and an additional 40% are rejected after review because they are not of publishable quality. About half of all manuscripts receive an invitation to revise and resubmit. Of these, about half are eventually rejected and half are eventually accepted – resulting in *JCP*’s overall rejection rate of about 75%. Brent emphasized that students should not be discouraged by these numbers, because many of the manuscripts rejected by *JCP* are eventually published in other journals. Action Editors at *JCP* write rejection letters with the goal of being as helpful as possible in assisting authors to revise and/or resubmit their work to other publications.

Once a manuscript is accepted, it will be sent to the professional staff of the journal for layout and final copy editing. The APA staff is responsible for making sure that manuscripts from different author(s) all have the same general tone and format. The APA Journals Office sets a cap on the number of pages for all of its journals. Recently, Brent was successful in persuading the APA central administration to increase *JCP*’s allocation from 600 to 700 pages each year. Typically, manuscripts are 12-14 published pages, which means that in the past, only about 44 articles a year could be published. This explains why Action

Editors frequently push authors to cut material to shorten their final article. As one of his visions for the journal, Brent would like to publish some studies as “Brief Reports” of only 7-8 pages to allow for more total annual published articles.

### Suggestions for Prospective Authors

Brent’s first advice about publishing your work in a journal, such as *JCP*, is to read that journal. Getting into a regular habit of reading the journal or going through back issues will allow you to know what kind of studies the journal has published in the past. Editors often receive manuscripts that do not match the content area of the journal and these manuscripts are immediately rejected. The official “scope statement” for *JCP* can be found at: <http://www.apa.org/journals/cou/> and a more extended explanation of the types of articles *JCP* seeks can be found in Brent’s initial editorial (see *JCP* volume 52, No.1, 2005, p. 126-131.)

Reading the journal also helps you to identify the current “hot” research topics, although this does not in any way mean that you should study an issue based on its popularity. You should always write about what you love; passion sometimes creates the best studies. Brent advises students to think of every manuscript as a building block to the greater pool of knowledge which can be looked as a huge wall. As Brent stated, “Some areas of the wall are more developed than others. Think about how your study can fit within the greater scheme of what we already know. Try to find an area where you can add one new brick by connecting to what has already been done. There is an abundance of room for you and for your ideas; you merely have to find your best fit.”

A second point of advice is that you should pay special attention to your passions and your clinical curiosity. The greatest research idea can begin as a curious twinge that takes you in a particular direction. Don’t be afraid of having the courage to explore such directions, they can lead you to places unknown and result in research that is greater and more far reaching than anything you might have imagined. Brent’s first publication in *JCP* was his Masters thesis, which was based on a challenge posed by his practicum supervisor. Due to his vision disability, Brent was not able to see when a client was crying in a session, although he could hear a change in voice quality. He was reluctant to ask, “can you tell me if you are crying?” without first explaining that he is legally blind. He wondered if it might be best to talk about his disability in his very first session with a client, before the need arose later in the work. When he asked his prac supervisor for guidance, his supervisor replied, “Sounds to me like a good idea for Masters thesis.” The rest is – if not “history” – then at least the following publication: Mallinckrodt, B., & Helms, J. E. (1986). Effect of disabled counselors' self-disclosures on client perceptions of the counselor. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 33, 343-348. As a result of this study, Brent formulated a way of involving his clients in a discussion of his disability in their first session. The point is that you too should consider pursuing your questions about clinical work through research to find answers that could help you – and all other readers of the article – to become a better counselor.

Eventually you will need to think about the practical details of your research, but be careful not to let too much “practical self-

ensorship” lead to early abandonment of your research passions. Otherwise, your curiosity may never translate into research. For instance, back to the example of Brent’s thesis, he was initially discouraged to learn that he would need 120 clients for his study, and wondered “how will I ever get anywhere near that many clients to volunteer?” However, his advisor, Dr. Helms, helped him to see that many practical barriers can be surmounted. Brent solved the problem by constructing videotapes of therapists who did and did not self-disclose about their disabilities in a simulated counseling session. Undergraduate research subjects viewed and rated the tapes. The lesson here is that with creativity and sharing of ideas with your advisor and peers, you can transform your curiosity into an empirical study that adds to the pool of knowledge. A final point to keep in mind is simply that there is NO PERFECT STUDY; we as humankind are subject to error. In research design it is often the case that as we fix a problem, the very “fix” introduces a new problem (Do you remember the game, “Wack-a-Mole?”). The goal of research is to design a study with the fewest problems, knowing that perfection is not attainable.

Brent also described the differences between what Action Editors call “Fixable Flaws” and “Fatal Flaws” in a manuscript. An example of a fixable flaw might be poor execution of statistical analysis. But because data can almost always be reanalyzed with a more appropriate technique, a manuscript is never rejected only because the researchers made a poor choice of statistical method. These errors can be fixed in a revision. However, if researchers chose a measure that is not reliable or valid with the given research population, a “fatal flaw” may result. It is not possible to go back and “undo” inappropriate selection of research measures. A very useful guide for planning your research and preparing your manuscript may be found in the “Guidelines for Reviewing Manuscripts for *JCP*” available at: [http://www.jbo.com/jbo3/JCP\\_Reviewer\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.jbo.com/jbo3/JCP_Reviewer_Guidelines.pdf). Here you will find the criteria that are used by the individuals who will review your manuscripts submitted to *JCP*.

Finally, there are no reasons why student work cannot be published. Almost every issue of *JCP* has at least one student’s publication. You can tell by the footnote on the first page of an article whether the study was a student’s dissertation or thesis. Be persistent in seeking faculty to consult with you on how to develop your idea into a research study. The most important thing to remember is that if your study has some academic value, then there will be a publication home for it. Remember to be patient with the process and be persistent. Even if *JCP* does not accept your manuscript, you can submit it to other journals. Furthermore, you can learn a lot from the process and the reviewers’ feedback that can help you refine your study and/or future projects.

In the end we are brought back to this question, “What is *JCP*?” One answer is that *JCP* shapes the definition of Counseling Psychology through the selection of articles to be published. It is a record of the institutional knowledge of our profession. Given that you can contribute to the journal now as a student author, and eventually as an ad hoc reviewer and possibly a Board Member or future Editor, you too can play a part in shaping the future direction of your profession. You are the future of Counseling Psychology. Grow from here, and then go forth and make it great. The academic world is waiting!