

## **Publishing in psychology: a description of the current situation in Germany**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the current publication situation in the German field of psychology from an author's viewpoint and examines the authors' acceptance regarding open access journals. The review is based on the answers of 28 authors to a questionnaire on official statistics about psychological journals and on information obtained from journal editors. The results show that accessibility to journals does not pose problems to authors in Germany. The authors are clearly oriented towards the Anglo-American branch of scientific psychology, writing mostly in the English language and submitting their manuscripts to international journals. The whole publication process takes rather long but could be substantially quicker if the publication lag was abbreviated. Most of the authors appreciate the general idea of open access journals but see serious challenges that need to be overcome when a new journal is to be established. The circumstances under which a new psychological open access journal could be successful are briefly discussed.

Key words: psychology; scientific communication; information dissemination; journals; open access; publishing; trends; language; Germany

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The publication situation in psychology has undergone substantial changes in the last years. Further changes have to be expected in the years to come. Those changes include

- increased necessity of psychologists working in the field of scientific research to publish their research,
- increased efforts of publishing houses to raise their monetary profit,
- new possibilities due to the availability of new media, especially the Internet and e-mail, and
- the development of web-based journals, readers can access papers without any charge from (*open access journals*) as alternatives to conventional journals.

It is likely that these changes will noticeably alter the working environment of psychologists working in the field of scientific research. Regarding the effects of these changes, actors should be differentiated. In order to foresee how different actors will be affected by the changes, a review of the current state of the German publication situation in psychology would help to see where we stand at the moment. In any case, perhaps due to the manifold recent developments and changes, such a review is not yet available. To overcome this lack, an overview is presented in the present paper of the current publication situation in Germany regarding psychology as a prerequisite for a fruitful discussion that optimally will lead to developments that are satisfactory to all actors in the psychology publication process.

The publication situation in psychology can be viewed from different perspectives. From our point of view, the most important perspectives are those of the authors; libraries and other institutions; students and other readers; and publishing houses. The present paper focuses on the perspective of the authors which sometimes seems to have been neglected in recent discussions.

Publishing is of high personal relevance to the authors. It is not only a way to communicate scientific results to other researchers. In fact, it is an essential - if not the most important - prerequisite for individual scientific success. Indeed, Lang and Neyer (2004) showed by use of logistic regression analysis that the productivity of a psychologist in Germany (operationalized by the number of publications as single author and the number of publication as co-author and number of citations) significantly predicted the length of staying at universities at the post-doc level and the probability of becoming a professor ( $N=579$ ).

This paper follows two main objectives. The first lies in reviewing the current publication situation in Germany from the perspective of authors active in the area. Secondly, reporting the authors' degrees of acceptance regarding open access journals. The paper is based on information drawn from different sources. In the next section, the methods from which the information was derived will be described. Subsequently, the gathered information is discussed regarding accessibility of journals and papers, publishing habits, reviewing processes and the acceptance of open access journals. The paper ends with a brief summary and a discussion.

## Method

To reach the two objectives mentioned above, different sources of information were used. Most of the information stems from a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire used consisted of 38 questions that were formulated for the present study. It contains questions in different answering formats, regarding the topics *accessibility*, *publishing habits*, *reviewing* and *acceptance of open access journals*. The questionnaire was sent out to 38 psychologists working at universities and scientific institutes. All 38 are personally known to the first author. Thus, the sample drawn cannot be seen as random or representative for German psychologists. Nevertheless, the answers given by the sample provide an insight into the circumstances of German psychologists actively publishing their work. 28 of the authors asked (76 %) completed the questionnaire and sent it back. 10 % of them are female. 7 % are PhD students, 59 % post-docs, 7 % assistant professors and 27 % full professors.

Besides the empirical data, information on journal characteristics and the impact factors of journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA) were taken from American Psychological Association (2007, 2008). Since, to our knowledge, no comparable summary exists for German psychological journals, we asked the editors of eight leading German psychological journals by e-mail for information concerning rejection rates, impact factors and the length of the reviewing process. Unfortunately, we only received the information asked for from three German journals.

## Results

In this section, the results regarding the accessibility of articles, the publishing habits, the reviewing process and the acceptance of open access journals are described. All topics are dealt with from the perspective of the authors.

### *Accessibility*

In Germany, university libraries and other institutes have subscriptions to many psychological journals. Naturally, the number and focus of the journals varies between institutions to some extent. In the last years, the libraries increasingly complained about the rising fees that have to be paid for the subscription to the journals. Today, the fees for international journals (about € 200 - € 2000) are remarkably higher than for national journals in the German language (€ 100 - € 200).

Anyway, from the perspectives of both readers and authors, at the moment, no shortcomings regarding accessibility have to be stated. In contrary, the accessibility has even improved over the last decade due to online access to many subscribed journals and literature services like subito ([www.subito-doc.de](http://www.subito-doc.de)), where articles can be ordered from for about € 5 to € 6.50.

The positive view on accessibility is mirrored by the results of the conducted survey. Since there are no serious problems to access journal publications, most of the authors asked do not engage in activities that might violate copyright restrictions. 69 % of them never or

seldom make articles that have already been previously published openly accessible - for instance in the Internet.

### *Publishing Habits*

Within these paragraphs, the author's habits regarding written language, submission format used, preference of submission format, importance of publications for scientific success and relevance of the impact factor regarding the choice of a journal are reported.

The authors asked indicated that they write nearly three quarters (73 %) of their submitted articles in English while only 27 % are written in German. No other languages are used. This indicates that the authors asked are clearly oriented towards the Anglo-American branch of scientific psychology. The result is well in line with the viewpoint relatively common amongst German psychologists that the most effective way to communicate scientific results and to foster their own scientific success is to publish in the English language. A recent example of this opinion can be found in Dormann, Sonnentag and van Dick (2008). But see also Kanning et al. (2007) for arguments for publishing in the German language, at least for papers in applied psychology.

The subjective importance of publishing in international journals is empirically underlined by the authors who answered on average that international publications are very important ( $Md = 3$ ) for their scientific success while national publications in the German language are, on average, only rather important ( $Md = 2$ ; 0 = very unimportant, 1 = rather unimportant, 2 = rather important, 3 = very important).

When selecting an appropriate journal for a manuscript besides the obviously necessary fit between the content of the manuscript and the scope of the journal, a journal's impact factor seems to play an important role regarding the choice. Nearly all authors (90 %) indicated that they know the impact factor of the international journal they submit manuscripts to and base their choice on this information. Some of the national journals do not have an impact factor. But, if they do report an impact factor, it is in general considerably lower than the impact factors of leading international journals.

Most of the submissions are handled electronically. The authors submit their manuscripts online over the Internet (52 %) or by e-mail (33 %). Only 15 % of the manuscripts are submitted traditionally as paper print-outs. Additionally, the authors were asked for their preference regarding the submission format. With a median of 2.5 (0 = very unsatisfied, 1 = rather unsatisfied, 2 = rather satisfied, 3 = very satisfied), they prefer to submit papers online more than by e-mail ( $Md = 2$ ) or as paper print-outs ( $Md = 1$ ).

### *Reviewing*

Besides the accessibility of scientific papers and the publishing habits of the authors, the circumstances of the reviewing process is another important point to look at when describing the publication situation in Germany. While the first two parts of this section mainly describe the characteristics of libraries and authors, the reviewing process focuses on features of the publishing houses and the journals. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of some key features regarding the reviewing process. Most of the authors have to

go through two rounds of reviewing before their manuscripts are accepted and receive on average 2.9 reviews in each reviewing-round. The quality and tone of the reviews is rated as mediocre to good. A lot of time passes in the reviewing process ( $M = 7.6$  months) and between acceptance and the final publication of the paper (publication lag;  $M = 8.6$  months). After the papers are published, the authors typically get relatively quick responses to their work from the scientific community ( $M = 2.6$  months). It is obvious that the publishing process could be substantially shortened if the publication lag and the reviewing process were shortened.

**Table 1:**  
*Authors' view on publication process*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Number of reviewing rounds until acceptance	1.96	0.51
Number of reviews each round	2.90	1.35
Quality of reviews <sup>a</sup>	2.64	0.56
Tone of reviews <sup>b</sup>	2.21	0.73
Duration of reviewing process (months) <sup>c</sup>	7.56	6.47
Publication lag (months) <sup>c</sup>	8.56	4.89
First reactions (months) <sup>c</sup>	2.57	2.20

Note. <sup>a</sup>0 = very bad, 1 = bad, 2 = mediocre, 3 = good, 4 = very good 4 = very good. <sup>b</sup>0 = very unfriendly, 1 = unfriendly, 2 = neutral, 3 = friendly, 4 = very friendly. <sup>c</sup>In months.

Comparing international and national journals regarding rejection rates and the publication lag, it becomes obvious that they differ slightly in rejection rates (international: 74 %; national: 64 %) and largely in the publication lag with the national journals having a much larger average publication lag of 17 months than the international journals (six months; see table 2).

**Table 2:**  
*Rejection rate and publication lag of national and international journals*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rejection Rate (international journals) <sup>a</sup>	74	12
Rejection Rate (national journals) <sup>a</sup>	64	23
Publication lag (international journals) <sup>b</sup>	6	1
Publication lag (national journals) <sup>b</sup>	17	1

Note. <sup>a</sup>In percent. <sup>b</sup>In months.

However, it has to be noted that the results for the national journals are only based on the information of three journals, since the other journals did not respond. The results for the international journals are based on the data of eight journals from American Psychological Association (2008).

### *Acceptance of Open Access Journals*

It seems that open access journals have become more important for scientific publishing recently. Articles in open access journals are accessible in a digital format via the Internet, are free of charge for the reader, and are free from most copyright and licensing restrictions. What makes open access journals possible are the availability of the Internet and the consent of the author or copyright holder. Like traditional journals, many open access journals use a peer review procedure to ensure the quality of the papers. Besides the peer reviewing, manuscript preparation and server space generate costs. Therefore, many open access journals charge a processing fee for accepted articles, to be paid by the author or the author's sponsor such as a university or a funding organization. Some journals are run by institutions that cover the costs, so that the authors do not have to pay a fee to have their articles published.

The majority of the authors asked (74 %) has a generally positive view on open access journals. However, 26 % judge open access journals as a negative trend. Furthermore, the positive statements were mostly restricted by severe concerns. In the following, four concerns are given which the authors mentioned frequently.

- Open access journals are only seen as interesting for the publication of own manuscripts if the reputation and scientific quality is high and if the journals are indexed.
- Developing high quality open access journals is seen as a non-trivial task that might fail.
- Costs for authors are seen as highly problematic, mostly as unacceptable.
- Open access journals may evolve as a place for second-class papers that cannot be published elsewhere.

Summarizing, the development of open access journals generally has great potential and is desirable especially for readers. Most of the authors asked within the survey appreciate the idea of open access but see serious challenges that need to be overcome when establishing a high quality journal. Clearly, only an open access journal in English has the potential to become successful.

### **Summary and Discussion**

The present paper followed two main objectives. On the one hand, the current publication situation in Germany for psychology should be reviewed from the perspective of the authors, and on the other hand, the degree of authors' acceptance regarding open access journals should be examined. Regarding the first objective, no serious problems regarding accessibility exist. The responses given to the brief questionnaire survey showed that the authors are clearly oriented towards the Anglo-American branch of psychology. This goes hand in hand with the authors indicating that they predominantly write in the English

language and try to publish their work in international high impact journals even if the rejection rate in these journals is much higher than in national journals. Comparing international with national journals further, it becomes obvious that the first offer, on average, the possibility to publish the work faster than national journals. The delay for national journals is mostly due to relatively long publication lags. A substantial reduction in the publication lag may be a possibility to increase the attractiveness not only for national papers. Regarding the second objective, the development of open access journals generally seems to have great potential and is obviously desirable especially for readers of scientific articles. Most of the authors asked within the survey appreciate the idea of open access journals but see serious challenges that need to be overcome when establishing a high quality journal. If these challenges can be solved, open access journals will be a progressive new way of publishing in psychology.

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