The Worm Runner's Digest

Larry Stern on an 'extraordinary and subversive' journal

Science, we all know, is serious stuff. If it is to retain its cultural and cognitive authority, it must be seen as an objective, dispassionate and value-free enterprise. But science, at its core, is a human enterprise populated by all types of people. Some, to be sure, are rather austere – practically agelastic. Newton, it's been said, only laughed once: when asked if there would be any use in reading Euclid. But science and scientists can also be awfully funny – without jeopardising the objectivity of what comes to count (however provisionally) as certified knowledge.

Mindful of American author E.B. White's admonition that 'Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind,' I shall not attempt to provide a definition, much less an analysis of the nature of humour, its role in one's psychic well-being, relationships with others, and various institutional settings that comprise society. I note, only in passing, that some of the giants have tried their hand, and perusing their work literally left me limp. Unable to appreciate the merits of Hobbes' superiority theory made me feel inadequate. Kant's reliance on reason to account for humour seemed totally incongruous to me. After slogging through Kierkegaard's treatise I felt so disoriented and confused that I began to question the meaning of it all. Though hopeful, I found that delving into the recesses of Freud's theory provided no relief at all. And reading Schopenhauer's discussion sapped whatever will I previously possessed to continue. Fortunately – just in the nick of time as the deadline for this article approached – I stumbled upon Mel Brook's learned distinction, 'Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.' Feeling rejuvenated, I was able to press on.

Cartoonists have been poking fun at science – and especially at psychologists – for decades. From 1925 to 2004, for example, 2486 cartoons about psychology appeared in the *New Yorker*. Gary Larson's depictions of psychology in his Far Side are insightful – and hilarious. Just consider his cartoon titled, 'The Four Personality Types,' featuring four individuals confronting a half-filled glass of water. After the typical optimist, pessimist, and indecisive personality types say their piece, the fourth, hands on hips bellows, 'Hey, I ordered a cheeseburger!' You don't need to be a native New Yorker to relate – and smile.

But one need not look outside the halls of academia to find such humour. Indeed, for my money, nothing beats the humour contained in the *Worm Runner's Digest*, published between 1959 and 1979. If your library subscribed, you might find it and its twin, the *Journal of Biological Psychology*, nestled between the serious *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*.

The brainchild of James V. McConnell, then an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, the *Worm Runner's Digest* burst on the scene as a new 1960s counterculture was beginning to take form. Devoted in part to puncturing the pretentiousness and pomposity of that sacred cow known as 'science,' it was, as McConnell noted, one of the first scientific journals that knowingly published satire.

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What, then, prompted the creation of this peculiar journal?

It began with a paper McConnell presented on the morning of 8 September 1959 at the 67th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. In this paper, 'Apparent retention of a conditioned response following total regeneration in the planarian,' McConnell reported data collected by one of his honours students, Reeva Jacobson, which indicated that separate pieces of trained worms, after being allowed to regenerate their missing parts, retained the initial training of the original uncut worm. Moreover, after several regenerations, worms that contained none of the structure of the originally trained animal also retained some memory of the initial conditioning.

On 21 September *Newsweek* published a summary of this work, triggering a series of events that no one – certainly not McConnell – ever expected.

Two years earlier, the Soviet Union's successful launch of Sputnik sparked fears that the United States lagged behind the Soviets in science and technology. One result, designed to ignite the youth of America's interest in science, was a renewed emphasis on local science fairs.

Shortly after the *Newsweek* coverage, McConnell was inundated with letters from high school students from around the country asking where they could obtain worms for their projects and how they should go about caring for and training them. Some students, according to McConnell, demanded that he send a few hundred trained worms at once since their projects were due within days.

After answering the first few letters McConnell realised that something more efficient was needed. So he and his students wrote what amounted to a training manual describing their work and how to repeat their experiments.

McConnell firmly believed that 'anyone who takes himself, or his work, too seriously is in a perilous state of mental health'. So as a joke, he affixed the name *Worm Runner's Digest* to the top of the manual. Adorning the front page was a crest that one of his students designed, complete with a two-headed worm with pharynx fully exposed, a pair of diagonal stripes in the maize and blue colours of Michigan across the escutcheon of said planarian, a coronet made up of a Hebbian cell assembly, a Ψ for psychology, a homage to the stimulus-response of behaviourism, and a motto, *ignotum per ignotius* which, loosely translated, means 'When I get through explaining this to you, you will know even less than before I started.' To top things off, McConnell labeled it Volume I, No. 1.

To McConnell's astonishment, word of this new 'journal' got out and he started receiving submissions. So he decided to 'pep things up a bit' by scattering poems, jokes, satires, cartoons, spoofs and short stories more or less randomly among the more serious articles.

McConnell wrote some of these

spoofs himself, including one on learning theory that should be mandatory reading. In it, a psychology professor is walking in the woods thinking about how to teach his intro students the finer points of learning theory when he suddenly finds himself in a giant Skinner box on an alien spaceship, complete with a nipple on the wall that delivers 'a slightly cool and somewhat sweetish flow of liquid' and, later, a lever that when pulled delivers protein balls of food. The 'experiments' the subject endures are classic, and if the denouement does not bring a smile, well, perhaps you are in a perilous state of mental health.

Dozens of reputable psychologists contributed humour to the digest as well. Harry Harlow had two pieces: 'Fundamental principles for preparing psychology journal articles' and a poem, 'Yearning and Learning,' a somewhat bawdy look at how monkeys learn to copulate.

B.F. Skinner contributed two parodies of behaviourism: 'A Christmas caramel, or a plum from the hasty pudding,' in which he plays the role of Professor Skinnybox, and 'On the relation between mathematical and statistical competence and significant scientific productivity,' which he published under the pseudonym of F. Galton Pennywhistle.

Spoofs of Freudian theory also appeared. 'Some comments on an addition to the theory of psychosexual development' by Sigmund Fraud introduced the 'nasal stage,' occurring between the anal and phallic stages, in which the libido is localised primarily in the mucous linings of the nose. Though the consequences of poor nasal training might not be as drastic as those accompanying poor toilet training, two pathologies might ensue: feelings of superiority that lead you to turn your nose up at others, and/or being a busybody and constantly sticking your nose in others' business.

Other notable contributions that graced the *Digest's* pages include faux reports on 'The effects of physical torture on the learning and retention of nonsense syllables,' 'The Gesundheits Test,' 'Taste aversion in dead rats: Learning or motivational defect?' and its follow-up 'Taste aversion in dead rats: A note on proper control procedures.' The *Digest* is also credited with announcing the 'law of scientific output,' where productivity equals the number of secretaries in a laboratory times their average typing speed divided by the number of scientists. Thus, not only is one good secretary worth two good scientists but when the number of scientists is zero, productivity becomes infinite.

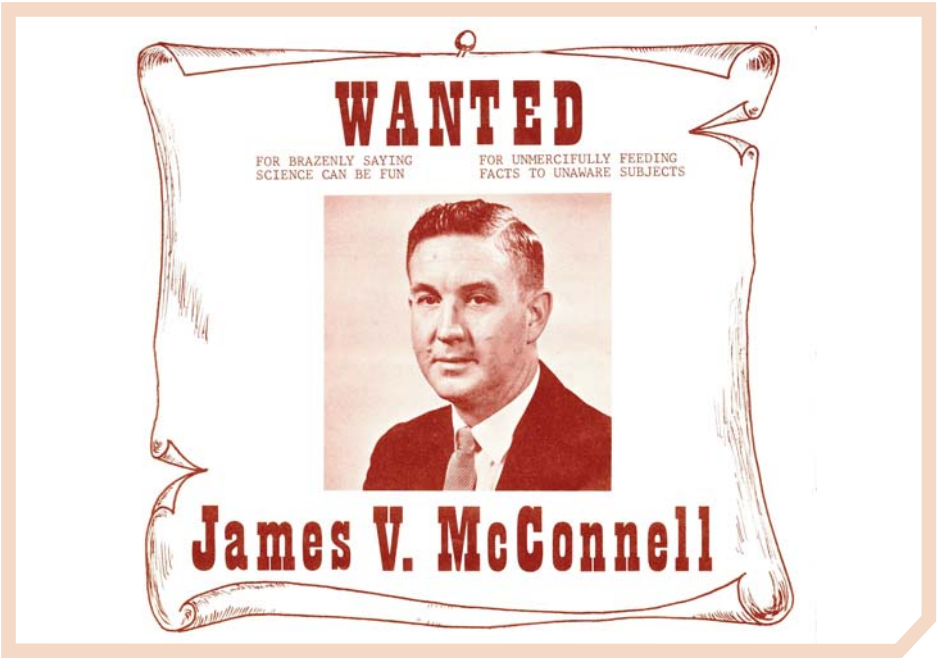
But bona fide experimental reports were included in the *Digest* as well. Some of these, most notably McConnell's report in 1961 that naive planarians, upon cannibalising their conditioned brethren, showed evidence of 'remembering' the conditioned task, strained the credulity of psychologists. Indeed, the publication of serious articles side-by-side with spoofs apparently posed a problem for some scientists who complained that they weren't able to distinguish between the serious reports and the parodies.

To deal with this problem, McConnell banished all of the so-called funny stuff to the back of the journal, printing it upside down to make sure that no one would confuse it with the serious work. This began in October 1964. Three years later, the split became formal when McConnell renamed the front part of the journal containing the serious scientific work the *Journal of Biological Psychology*, retaining the name *Worm Runner's Digest* for the back half of the journal.

At its peak, the *Digest* had roughly 2500 subscribers scattered throughout the world. Since humorous cartoons appear regularly in best-selling psychology textbooks today, it is easy to forget how extraordinary and subversive the *Digest* was when it first appeared.

As might be expected, responses to the *Digest* were mixed, reflecting some of the schisms found in the larger society at the time. While admirers hailed the *Digest* as a 'scientific *Playboy*,' revelling in its wit, McConnell's more austere critics referred to it pejoratively as a 'scientific comic book', arguing that science is not the place for such sophomoric humour. McConnell, in fact, believed that the *Digest* cost him research grants.

McConnell's bottom line – that science could and should be fun – is perhaps as important today as it was when he began to champion the cause in 1959. If your library does not hold copies of the Digest, you can find the 'greatest hits' in two anthologies – *The Worm Re-turns* and *Science, Sex, and Sacred Cows* – in used bookstores, or online. As Arthur Koestler opined, 'One of the last Palinuran joys of civilized middle age is to sit in front of the log-fire, sip a glass of brandy, and read the *Worm Runner's Digest*.'



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