

Further Reflections on Publishing Multiple Journal Articles From the Same Data Set : Reply to Bray (1994) and Parke (1994)

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Abstract:

Areas of Agreement

There are three primary areas in which we agree with James H. Bray (1994) and Ross D. Parke (1994). The first, and perhaps the most important, area of agreement is the desirability of researchers publishing a single, integrative, and comprehensive journal article from one data set. This approach is most likely to advance knowledge in family psychology because in this way readers will gain the broadest possible perspective on findings from an entire study. In contrast, authors who publish multiple journal articles from the same data set take the risk that those who read only one of the multiple journal articles will gain a limited, narrow, and possibly even a misleading view of their work. Thus, publishing multiple journal articles from the same data set should be done with great caution and only when our two proposed criteria are met.

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Article:

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A second area of agreement is the need for flexibility in how specific issues related to multiple publication are handled. Because these issues are likely to be complex, we believe that it would be counterproductive for editors and professional organizations to attempt to develop rigid rules to apply in all cases. One advantage of the two criteria that we proposed is that they can be flexibly used by authors, reviewers, and editors.

A third area of agreement is the need for empirical work in family psychology to be grounded in theory. We fully concur with Bray's (1994) and Parke's (1994) position that a clear theoretical basis is one of the best ways to help resolve dilemmas concerning multiple publications. Research projects that are grounded in theoretical frameworks will help authors, as well as editors and reviewers, determine whether a study addresses more than one distinct purpose. For example, Parke noted that the theoretically derived notions of normative and nonnormative life transitions may be used to determine how to package results from longitudinal studies.

Response to Additional Issues Raised by Bray and Parke

We respond to six additional issues raised by Bray (1994) and Parke (1994). First, both Bray and Parke expressed some concerns with our criterion that multiple journal articles from the same data set address distinct research questions and use different relevant literatures. Bray noted that it is difficult to determine what is a distinct literature. He pointed out that different subdisciplines within family science have emerged and that scholars within these subdisciplines believe that they are contributing to different "literatures," when, in fact, they are addressing issues that are conceptually quite similar. Parke noted that the emphasis on distinct literatures may discourage interdisciplinary research and, perhaps most important, "cutting edge" research that integrates and extends different literatures.

We agree that it is difficult to delimit the defining features of a literature. Furthermore, we concur that a too strong emphasis on the criterion of distinct literatures may unduly discourage creative and integrative research efforts. However, we would like to emphasize that we define a literature in the broadest possible sense and do not consider disciplinary boundaries to be relevant determinants of the borders between literatures. Also, although the criterion of distinct purposes is difficult to operationalize (resulting in reasonable disagreements among scholars about whether multiple publications are appropriate; see Bray's (1994) disagreement with our recommendations concerning Researcher C in our article), we believe that such a criterion is necessary. Surely, it is not sufficient to defend the publication of multiple articles solely on the criterion that a single, integrative article cannot be written from a comprehensive data set.

Second, Bray (1994) pointed out that presenting too many data in a single journal article may obscure important findings because a particularly critical finding may be embedded in a particularly complicated pattern of results. Although this is a point well-taken, we believe that this potential problem, by itself, does not justify multiple publications. Rather, we believe that authors faced with this problem need to continue to try, perhaps with collaboration from

colleagues or conscientious reviewers, to give the important findings the prominence in the article that they deserve. Thus, we view this potential problem as one that could be solved by a careful reworking of the single article, rather than by its division into more than one journal article.

Third, Bray (1994) and Parke (1994) pointed to the pressures that are placed on faculty to publish a large number of peer-reviewed journal articles and, consequently, the emphasis placed on quantity at the expense of quality. Although Bray does not indicate that publishing pressures justify multiple publications, he does indicate that we should not ignore this reality in deliberations on the multiple publication issue. We disagree. In our opinion, pressures related to tenure, promotion, and the awarding of external funding for research projects are not relevant to the decision-making process concerning multiple publications. Rather, the most effective way to address the realities of publication pressures is to educate tenure, promotion, and grant review committees about the distinction between a large number of articles that make minor scholarly contributions and a small number of articles that make major contributions. In short, we endorse Parke's comment that the pressure to publish often should be replaced by the pressure to publish wisely.

Fourth, Bray (1994) raised the important practical issue of whether it is appropriate to publish multiple journal articles from a single data set when the articles represent students' theses and dissertations. We believe that the same criteria that apply in these instances pertain to the general case: If it is not possible to write a single, integrative article from the data set (our first criterion) and if the purposes of the multiple articles are distinct (our second criterion), then it is appropriate to publish multiple journal articles (including one from the thesis or dissertation) generated from the data set. Our position implies that if our two criteria are not met, then it would be inappropriate for a student to publish a journal article from his or her thesis or dissertation that presents only the results pertaining to the student's project. Rather, in such instances we suggest that the student should be included as an author (perhaps even a senior author) on a journal article written from the data set, given that the student's thesis or dissertation work represents professional contributions that contributed to the overall significance of the entire study (see Fine & Kurdek, 1993).

A fifth issue pertains to Bray's (1994) mention of publication outlets other than journal articles (e.g., book chapters and books). We deliberately chose not to consider these other publication outlets because, to our knowledge, there is no consensus in the field that these other outlets should necessarily present new information or that the results presented should be distinct from findings already published. Thus, multiple publications may be appropriate for these other outlets even though they may be inappropriate in the domain of journal articles.

A sixth and final set of issues is related to secondary data sets. We did not address these issues because the purpose of secondary data sets is very different from that of author-generated databases. Secondary data sets are usually atheoretical and are designed to generate information

that scholars can use for their own distinct purposes. Thus, the scope of these secondary data sets is typically so broad that it would be impossible to generate a single article from them. However, as suggested by Bray (1994), we believe that authors contemplating whether to publish multiple journal articles from a secondary data set can use our first criterion and a modified version of our second criterion. The modified second criterion is that it is not possible to write a single article from the selected findings of interest from the secondary data set rather than from the entire data set, as our original criterion proposed.

We disagree somewhat with Bray's (1994) suggestion that authors of articles from secondary data sets have an obligation to make sure that other scholars have not already published an article that presents the same finding from the same secondary data set. In our opinion, all authors who submit manuscripts to journals have an obligation to place their work in the context of what other scholars have already done and to indicate how their work represents a unique contribution to the field. Thus, we do not wish to place a higher standard on authors of articles from secondary data sets than on authors who publish articles from data that they themselves have collected. Furthermore, because it should be clear to prospective authors that their work must represent a unique contribution to the literature and that a unique contribution implies that previous literature has been reviewed, we do not support requiring authors—whether using a secondary data set or an author-generated database—to sign a statement that indicates that they have investigated whether there has been a published journal article that has already presented that finding.

Conclusion

Bray's (1994) and Parke's (1994) comments underscore both the importance of issues regarding the publication of multiple journal articles from the same data set, as well as the complexity of how to address them. Their comments exemplify the kind of dialogue we had hoped that our own reflections on this topic would generate.

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