

Kail Assumes Editorship of *Psychological Science*

By Richard Hébert

Meet APS Fellow Robert “Rob” Kail, Purdue University, the new editor of *Psychological Science*, APS’s flagship journal. Kail is inheriting the editorship from James Cutting, who has held the position since 2003.

The new guy’s no slouch. Between 1977 and the end of 2006, he has logged nearly 41,000 miles bicycling, 14,970 miles running, and 2,315 miles swimming, albeit most of it in a gym. And yes, he’s been keeping track, meticulously, with an Excel spreadsheet to prove it. His proudest achievement on that score: “I’ve almost swum from New York to Los Angeles.” He brings that same intensity to set and achieve goals to his editorship. More on that to come. First, get to know the man.

Given his affinity for spreadsheets, it should come as no surprise that what enticed Kail into psychology wasn’t the introductory course he took his freshman year at Ohio Wesleyan University, but a statistics course the following year. Taught by Harry Bahrick, “a remarkable man” who at 82 is still heavily engaged in research, the statistics class gave Kail “[his] first glimpse of what psychological research was like.” That glimpse led to graduate school.

But as the 1970s began, he wasn’t sure he wanted to spend his life in a laboratory. The nation was bogged down in Vietnam. Four Kent State students protesting the war and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia were killed by Ohio National Guardsmen “less than an hour away” in May 1970. The now familiar Pulitzer-prize winning photo taken on campus that day was on front pages all across the country.

In the face of all that, experimental psychology seemed “somewhat divorced from reality” Kail says. He wanted “something more relevant.” The University of Michigan promised that relevance in a graduate program that applied research and theory from psychology to educational issues and problems. “Off I went to Ann Arbor,” recalls Kail.

His first semester, he began studying under John Hagen, retiring this year as executive director of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), and got “the same feel-

ing [he] had from the statistics course: ‘This is my niche.’ It was experimental enough, but when you’re doing research with children, the implications and applications of the work for improving the lives of children always lurks in the back of your mind, sometimes in the front.”

Cognitive development, in particular children’s development, became his lifelong “niche.” He worked with Hagen throughout graduate school, then Hagen and the late APS Fellow Harold Stevenson teamed up to co-chair his dissertation. If it was Hagen “who fostered my interest in cognitive development research, it was [Stevenson] who taught me how to write and encouraged me in editorial work,” he says. (Stevenson became famous in the 1980s for demonstrating that Asian children did better in school than Americans because, among other things, they worked harder.)

With his newly minted doctorate, Kail went to the University of Pittsburgh for four years, then to Purdue, where he has remained since 1979, with the exception of a year at the University of Maryland, on the outskirts of Washington, D.C.

That interlude was most noteworthy for the way in which he literally rose above Washington’s notorious rush-hour suburban traffic. At Purdue, his “commute” was a 12-minute walk. In Maryland, he lived in the suburban town of Olney, due north of the nation’s capital. The problem: College Park is northeast of the city, some distance along I-495, the infamous Beltway that girds the capital city and is perhaps the metropolitan area’s most notoriously clogged thoroughfare.

A licensed pilot, he took to the air. His daily commute now involved 15 or so minutes by car to Montgomery County Airpark in Gaithersburg, where his 1973 Skyhawk Cessna 172, “Blue Belle,” was parked; readying the plane for flight; piloting himself to College Park (12 minutes in the air); then



Robert Kail

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a shuttle bus to campus. In all, it consumed about an hour and a half. Each way.

"It wasn't time effective," he concedes, "but it was a hell of a lot of fun. It's kind of inspiring, flying to work and seeing familiar D.C. landmarks. It was also a lot of fun to look down at the people creeping along on the Beltway, and here I was going 150 miles an hour."

The following year he returned to Purdue. Shortly after, he became editor of the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (JECp), a position he relinquished at the end of 2006, and of *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, published by Elsevier, a position he still holds. When he decided to step down as editor of JECp two years ago, "I was approached about editing other, more traditional journals," he says, but declined.

"When *Psychological Science* opened up, it was the only one I would consider. I had always admired the journal's approach. It published discovery-oriented articles that are short and exciting to read. I thought, 'Now, *that* is a journal I would like to edit.'"

As editor, Kail will be reading a lot. In 2006, the journal received almost 1,300 submissions. On the basis of mail received the first few months of 2007, he expects 1,500 this year. "That's six submissions a day, and I read every single one of them." If submissions continue to increase by 15 to 20 percent a year, that will be more than 10,000 articles over the course of his five-year term.

His initial reading is for triage, eliminating about a third of the articles as clearly inappropriate for the journal. Of the remaining 1,000 this year, he expects to distribute 700 among his nine associate editors (his predecessor, APS Fellow and Charter Member James Cutting, Cornell University, had three) and ride herd on the remaining 300 himself.

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He also wants to streamline the review process. "One of my goals is to accelerate the whole publication process. We're encouraging associate editors to reach judgment as quickly as they can."

There are no multiple reviews, a common practice at other journals, he says. "If we invite a revision and resubmission, we typically don't send it back to the reviewers. We only

invite a revised manuscript if we think it will be publishable. [When the revision comes back], it should be close enough to publishable that we can decide. We will never go through two substantive revisions."

And no more "snail mail." He's only accepting submissions electronically, posted on a designated web site (<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/psci>). "One of the main reasons," he says, "is that it allows us to cut staff-related costs." It also cuts down turnaround time.

Cutting oversaw tremendous growth of the journal since he took it over four years ago, ushering it from bimonthly to monthly publication in 2004. Cutting says he and Kail have "talked a lot" during the transition and that they "agree on an amazing variety of things."

"I have no doubt whatsoever that Rob will do a wonderful job," Cutting says. "He is an experienced editor and knows a wide range of topics very thoroughly. I am also sure that he will discover what I did, that being editor of *Psychological Science* was the most fun — as well as demanding — thing that one might imagine doing professionally. The scope of the journal is breathtaking, and the best of papers are simply fabulous."

Kail said Cutting has been "wonderfully helpful" with the editorial transition. "I'm very grateful that he's been so willing to field my questions." Don't look for Kail's name on the journal's masthead until late this year, when it begins publishing articles he and his team have accepted and processed. Until then, it will be publishing the remaining articles inherited from Cutting.

APS President Morton Ann Gernsbacher, University of Wisconsin, pays Kail high praise. "We are delighted to have Rob assuming the editorship," says the APS Fellow and Charter Member. "Rob comes with a bounty of editorial experience, an illustrious career of productive and important research, and a veritable passion for psychological science. This journal is one of the jewels of APS's crown, and we are all enthusiastic about Rob's forward stewardship."

As for himself, Kail knows where his strengths lie. "I think investing my effort in editorial work has been good for me and for the field, in the sense that I think I'm a good editor. I think I'm really fair. I just want good science, and good science comes in lots of forms. I'm very broad in my definition of good science."

"It's a tremendous honor," Kail adds, "to be invited to edit what many people would say is the definitive empirical journal of psychological science. *Psychological Science* was modeled after *Science*, and in many ways it has emulated *Science* very nicely."

He believes "very strongly" that he is responsible to two constituencies — authors, who "deserve the fastest, best feedback I possibly can give them," and readers, whom he wants to provide "a collection of articles that are page turners."

"We say this in our instructions to peer reviewers, and it's more true than at most journals: Think about the breadth of the article. We want articles that appeal to a broad spectrum of science readers. The goal is to publish the most exciting, cutting-edge research that is likely to interest a broad cross-section of readers."

"We want authors to send us their best stuff, the kind of findings that they rush down a hallway to share with a colleague. Is this the type of paper you would want to go down the hallway to psychologists who are not in your specialty area and say, 'Look at this! This is really cool stuff'? ... I want readers to feel that about every article they read."

He also wants the articles short. Traditionally, most submissions have been research articles, with a 4,000-word limit, but Cutting also encouraged shorter articles. He moved research reports — with a 2,500-word limit — to the front of the journal to induce authors to submit articles in that format and instituted even shorter reports of 1,000 words or less for straightforward but nevertheless exciting findings.

"I will continue these policies," Kail says, "because with rising submissions and a constant number of pages, we can publish more manuscripts if they're shorter, and (longer) research articles often have somewhat rambling introductions and discussions that can profit from some serious editing."

By any objective measure, the journal has been successful. Its Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) impact factor has risen "steadily and dramatically," Kail says, and now stands at 4.50 — "way up there in the world of psychology journals."

"We don't want *Psychological Science* to be a victim of its own success," however, explains Kail. Success attracts "more and more submissions," but adding more pages, one conceivable solution, would make the journal uncomfortably hefty. "It's really important that people feel comfortable with it, that they can pick this up and read it cover to cover," Kail says. "Everybody agrees we could increase the number of pages by 15 or 20 percent and it would still have that comfortable feel," but no more.

Conversely, "We don't want to have a rejection rate that gets people thinking, 'What's the point of submitting?'" The real challenge is how to keep the acceptance rate at a level that is encouraging to authors without having a journal that is so thick or has so many articles that readers will no longer browse through it but will become selective in their reading."

What to do? One option, dividing the journal into specialty sections or even separate journals, is unlikely, he says, because "at APS we are all bound together by common interests, and the journal is the ultimate expression of that common set of interests."

Another idea, one that he and his editorial board are looking into, is electronic publishing. Under this plan, each week subscribers would be emailed abstracts of six or seven articles, with the complete articles attached as files or as Internet links. That could approximately double the number of manuscripts accepted, he says, without overburdening readers, "but it's not going to happen in 2007 or 2008. Maybe in 2009."

For now, APS members get the journal free, in the mail, and can access it on the APS website, <http://www.psychologicalscience.org>. ♦

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Organized by Dana Dunn



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William Buskist and Jessica G. Irons, Auburn University

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