Self-Composed: Rhetoric in Psychology Personal Statements

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Self-Composed

Rhetoric in Psychology Personal Statements

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The personal statement written for graduate school admission has been a genre virtually ignored by rhetoricians but one that deserves attention. Not only a document of pragmatic importance for applicants, the personal statement is an indicator of disciplinary socialization. The discipline studied here is clinical psychology. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the author analyzed a corpus of statements to identify features distinguishing statements of admitted applicants from those of rejected applicants. The findings showed that successful applicants attended more to projecting their future research endeavors and demonstrating their commitments to scientific epistemology. Thus, the author argues that the modifier personal *needs qualification, because successful applicants tend to emphasize their public identities as apprentice scientists.*

Keywords: *personal statement writing; genre; graduate school admission statements; personal writing; public writing*

When application deadlines draw near, graduate school hopefuls scramble to assemble all the documents required to complete applications. Despite the bustle of activity at this time, most of the work that will decide their fates is already done: Graduate Record Examinations (GREs) have been taken, courses completed, research papers written, grade point averages calculated. There is, however, one component still under applicants' control: the personal statement (PS). The PS is a crucial component because it gives applicants the opportunity to mobilize their past achievements and present interests into a proposal argument for their future education.

Even as writing PSs grants applicants rhetorical agency, however, it also renders them vulnerable because of an inherent imbalance of genre knowledge between writers and readers. Faculty members who review applications develop keen senses of the formal attributes of the genre and its range of permutations. By contrast, applicants

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have read few, and written even fewer, documents of this kind. Thus, they may feel themselves to be composing in a rhetorical void in which they must write in an unfamiliar genre for an audience that they do not know nor will likely ever meet.

When looking for information to bridge this rhetorical void, applicants have a limited number of places to turn. Nowhere in college curricula are students taught how to write PSs, even though they will have to produce them if they wish to continue their education beyond the undergraduate years. In many instances, the only institutionalized resource for would-be graduate students is a university writing center. At a large, southwestern public university, the setting of this study, PS writers constitute a sizable portion of visitors to the writing center. On average, according to the writing center coordinator, 15% of visits annually are from graduate and professional school aspirants. For a writing center whose staff conducts upward of 10,000 consultations annually, about 1,500 are for PSs. Because most writing center consultants are students in English (common among writing centers), one may wonder how well equipped the consultants are to help students aspiring to graduate training in other disciplines or professional schools.

Students who do not seek help from writing centers may turn to popular advice books, but these books present problems of their own. Most guidebooks available are written for as large an audience as possible. Typically, they try to address those who aspire to business school, law school, medical school, and graduate school inclusively (Asher, 1991; *Graduate School Admissions*, 1999; Greene & Minton, 1989; Stelzer, 1997; Stewart, 1996). Moreover, as is often the case with these all-encompassing books, graduate programs receive comparatively less treatment than professional programs. Given the large audiences they must address, these writers dispense mostly "generic" advice: Use vivid language; stand out from the crowd; avoid sob stories.

In addition to books aimed at a general audience, there are a few specifically for psychology applicants (American Psychological Association, 1997; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Norcross, Mayne, & Sayette, 2002). However, these more specialized texts occasionally offer divergent advice. Norcross et al. (2002) claim that "many personal statements are ineffective because . . . the student fails to be 'personal.'" The authors continue, "This is the part of the application where a committee gets to see you in a more personal light, an area where 'you can be you'" (pp. 61-62). This invitation to

applicants to speak freely of their personal lives is qualified by Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000), who caution applicants not to mention instances of trauma or treatment in psychotherapy because they "do not have control over the images such information might conjure in the minds of evaluators" (p. 209). Elsewhere, the authors acknowledge the "concealed agenda" of graduate admissions: To a large measure, an applicant's success depends on whether the applicant "appear[s] capable of fulfilling the needs of others!" (p. 38). Reading the advice books against one another exposes what Paley (1996) termed the "rhetorical paradox" inherent to application essays: Applicants are invited to write candidly about their personal lives, yet the invitation comes from gate-keeping readers who will judge those self-representations for their institutional suitability. Caveat scriptor.

Unfortunately for both applicants and those who attempt to help them, there is little discussion of PSs in the scholarly literature of rhetoric and composition. Despite all the potential rhetorical interest in the PS—for those who analyze genres, for those who study academic socialization, for those who theorize personal writing—the literature is scant. Only one study of PSs at the postbaccalaureate level exists, an unpublished manuscript by Barton, Ariail, and Smith (2002). In a multimodal design involving descriptive genre analysis, think-aloud protocols by admissions officers, and writing center consultations, the authors analyzed personal essays written by medical students applying for residencies. They found that readers judged residency essays moralistically according to the efficacy of their opening narratives in conveying writers' dedication to the values of the medical profession: compassion, integrity, and service. These values imbue the image that the authors believe the medical profession wants to project in a time of health maintenance organizations, skyrocketing medical costs, and malpractice litigation. Barton et al.'s observation that residency applicants affirmed the ideology of their chosen profession carries over to my own findings, albeit with results peculiar to the disciplinary investments of academic psychology.

Continuing the inroad begun by Barton et al. (2002), I wish to open up the genre of the clinical psychology PS to rhetorical analysis in a method designed to isolate and describe the characteristics that distinguish PSs written by admitted applicants from those written by denied applicants. My analysis advances the claim that successful PSs tend to exhibit rhetorical features common to academic papers written by research psychologists. These rhetorical features index an

epistemological stance consistent with the traditional objective orientation of scientific inquiry. Thus, the modifier *personal* in "personal statement" is something of a misnomer because successful candidates tend, in the main, to devote less attention to their personal lives than to the lives they have led and will continue to lead in the laboratory setting. Applicants increase their chances for acceptance by the degree to which they manage to construct convincing professional identities committed to a clear research agenda: one directed outward to the disciplinary community in the form of problems needing empirical testing.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The institutional setting for this study was a large psychology department that enjoys a national reputation for the quality of its graduate training. Clinical psychology is the largest of seven subdivisions in the department, and it is the area in which competition for admission is fiercest. For academic year 2002, approximately 200 students applied, and only 5 matriculated.

A few years ago, the department adopted the mentor system, under which faculty members assume direct responsibility for the graduate students they admit. When the new students arrive, they immediately join the professors' laboratories and begin to contribute to ongoing research projects. The mentor system has changed the way the department conducts its admission process. Applicants apply to one of the seven departmental divisions and must specify the faculty members under whom they want to study. Once received, applications are passed directly to the specified faculty members, who have complete autonomy in choosing which applicants to admit. Before making offers of admission, however, faculty members typically conduct telephone and in-person interviews with top-choice candidates. The files of any who are passed over by the first faculty member named are then forwarded to other professors named, if any.

The graduate advisor informed me that before the department instituted the mentor system, the GRE score was the single greatest determiner of an application's success. Under the mentor system, the PS has taken on increased importance because it is the only place where an applicant can elaborate a research interest to the extent that faculty members can judge how well that interest dovetails with their own. An informational leaflet mailed to those requesting an

application from the department informs them that "considerable attention is given to upper-division coursework, letters of recommendation, and the applicant's personal statement." Another internal leaflet for the department's own undergraduates states that "your personal statement is very important."

Thus, there is ample reason to believe that the PS is a crucial component of an application to this program, but how comparable is this program to others? The *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical & Counseling Psychology* (Norcross et al., 2002) reported the self-assigned ratings of programs on a continuum from practice oriented (1) to research oriented (7). This program ranked itself as a 6, relatively high at the research end. Of the 184 schools listed, 74 rated themselves at 4 or above, and of those that rated themselves at exactly 6, there were 34 in number. This program shares its rating with many of the most prestigious psychology programs in the country, including state schools such as the University of Colorado, the University of Arizona, Arizona State University, the University of Georgia, the University of Minnesota, Virginia Tech, the University of Maryland, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of California, Berkeley; and private schools such as Duke University, Vanderbilt University, Yale University, and Pennsylvania University. Admission instructions available online show a high degree of similarity across different programs, suggesting that the results of this study can be generalized with some confidence to other clinical programs inclined toward research.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The corpus of texts for this study came from the pool of applications submitted to the department's clinical psychology doctoral program for academic year 2002. The original number of texts totaled 45: 9 statements written by admitted applicants and 36 statements by denied applicants. The 36 unsuccessful PSs were sampled randomly from the 180 denied applications. The relatively small number of PSs in the successful subset was due to the psychology department's admissions protocol. The department does not extend an offer to any applicant before a faculty member has confirmed the applicant's intention to accept through a telephone interview. This prior confirmation ensures that few offers extended are subsequently declined. To establish numerical parity between the two subsets, I randomly

selected 9 PSs from the 36 unsuccessful ones. In final form, the corpus contained 18 texts: 9 successful and 9 unsuccessful.

As stipulated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), all information identifying applicants was removed from the PSs before they passed into my hands. Furthermore, on account of the sensitivity of the material, the IRB declined my request for any other information from the applicants' files.

Given these constraints on my data, I supplemented my knowledge of the context in which these PSs were evaluated by interviewing five members of the clinical psychology faculty. I asked each interviewee the same four questions:

- What do you look for when you read statements?
- How important is the statement compared to other materials?
- Is there a preferred order in which you read an application file? and
- How does having a mentorship program in place affect your evaluation?

Even though interview data added significantly to my knowledge of the evaluative context, I acknowledge the myriad other variables at play in the evaluation of applications; therefore, my claims linking PS text features to an applicant's admissions success must be read as claims of correlation rather than causation.

Following Barton (2002), I set out to conduct "inductive discourse analysis," which approaches texts "with the goal of identifying rich text features" (p. 24). Because my goal was to identify features that distinguished the PSs of admitted applicants from those of denied applicants, *rich* assumed the meaning of "correlates with success." A precedent for my comparative study is the work of Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Faber (1996), who published separate articles on the same set of data. Both compared high-rated and low-rated Conference on College Composition and Communication abstracts to identify salient differences in the high-rated texts. As with these studies, I developed a method with both quantitative and qualitative components.

Quantitative Analysis

Three content areas or topics constitute the core of a typical clinical psychology PS: topic RE (research experience: participation in research projects), topic RI (research interests: professed research

interests for graduate study), and topic PE (practical experience: volunteer or paid work as a counselor). The first two topics, RE and RI, are specifically solicited by the program's prompt to applicants: "Your personal statement should emphasize your research interests and research experience." Given this explicit mention, I hypothesized that successful PSs would show greater proportional attention to these topics than unsuccessful statements. Topic PE, by contrast, is not mentioned in the instructions to applicants. In fact, I was told by one of my interviewees that an applicant who expresses interest in pursuing a career in practice is immediately eliminated from consideration. Even though the clinical doctoral program requires a yearlong practical internship, the program's mission is to produce research scientists rather than practicing therapists. Therefore, I hypothesized that successful PSs would devote less proportional attention to topic PE than unsuccessful PSs.

To measure the relative proportions given to each of the three topics, I had to divide the PSs into units to be coded. Given inevitable variation in syntactic complexity, I chose to count T units, defined as an independent clause (subject plus finite verb) along with any dependent or embedded clauses and modifying phrases attached (Hunt, 1965). After marking off each of the 18 texts into T units, I then coded the T units according to the catalog of three topics: RE, RI, and PE. To arrive at a proportional figure for each topic, I divided the total number of T units per PS by the number of T units per topic.

Table 1 indicates that successful PSs did elaborate topics RE and RI at greater length than their unsuccessful counterparts. The statistical results for topic RI showed significance at the $\alpha > .01$ level, but the results for topic RE did not achieve significance. The results for topic PE indicated in the reverse direction—successful PSs devoted less attention to elaborating practical experience than unsuccessful PSs—but this test also failed to achieve significance.

These proportional findings prompted me to pose a corollary hypothesis. Because Barton et al. (2002) found that readers of residency applications tended to form their evaluative judgments on the basis of opening narratives (and, the researchers noted, seldom modified these first impressions), I reasoned that successful applicants would not only devote more attention to the discussion of research but would also mention research earlier in their PSs than unsuccessful applicants. To test this hypothesis, I counted the number of T units from the beginning of each PS to the first T unit coded as either topic RE or topic RI. The results appear in Table 2.

Table 1
Proportional Emphasis of T Units in Three Core Topics

Topic	Successful Personal Statements *M* (*SD*)	Unsuccessful Personal Statements *M* (*SD*)	*t* Value	*p* Value
Topic RE (%)	34 (0.165)	23 (0.140)	1.746	.068
Topic RI (%)	23 (0.101)	12 (0.077)	2.718	.008
Topic PE (%)	4 (0.070)	9 (0.068)	–1.428	.08

NOTE: RE = research experience; RI = research interests; PE = practical experience.

Table 2
Number of T Units Until First Mention of Research

Successful personal statements, *M* (*SD*)	5.67 (3.606)
Unsuccessful personal statements, *M* (*SD*)	15.67 (13.702)
t value	–2.117
p value	.031

NOTE: The *t* test was run using the assumption of unequal variances because the variance test showed a much larger range of deviation in the unsuccessful subset than the other.

As predicted, successful PSs introduced the topic of research earlier than unsuccessful PSs, a finding significant at the $\alpha > .05$ level. From this, I inferred that foregrounding one's identity as a researcher helps establish one's orientation toward a scientific career.

An example of a foregrounded research orientation, this opening paragraph comes from a successful PS:

> My interest in psychology stemmed from the need to explain my mother's depression. In beginning my undergraduate studies, I soon realized that psychology encompasses so much more than clinical therapy. While I remain interested in therapy and clinical outreach programs, I am fascinated by the more empirical power of psychology. In college my particular research experience focused on eating disorders. Currently, at the [hospital], I assist in research about obesity as well the behavioral and cognitive effects of sleep apnea in children. This background has fueled a desire to continue research with eating disorders and is why I am applying to the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program. I hope to work with [Professor X] on body image and eating disorders.

The paragraph illustrates a remarkable chronological compacting of the writer's past. The first sentence could have introduced an early-life narrative, but the second sentence leaps forward in time to the writer's undergraduate years, and the third sentence breaks with the chronological sequencing of narrative. As result, the paragraph begins to read more like an expository essay than a story. The remaining sentences further specify the writer's particular interests in research, with the final sentence naming a future research direction. The organizational pattern of the paragraph above is a hybrid of chronological (past to present) and deductive (general to specific) patterning. This paragraph illustrates one way in which successful applicants draw on the conventions of report writing in their PSs.

More than chronological compacting and funneling specificity, this paragraph communicates the writer's commitment to the values of science. As soon as the second sentence, the writer distances herself from the practical application of psychology and aligns herself with the "more empirical power" of research. Her professed allegiance to and privileging of the epistemology of science situates her ideologically within the disciplinary community of academic psychology. What this paragraph suggests is that successful applicants did more than simply foreground and emphasize research to a greater extent than unsuccessful applicants; they signaled their socialization into the belief system of science.

The rhetorical features that correlate with such epistemology, however, do not submit easily to coding and quantification. As the above paragraph shows, scientific epistemology is evidenced by certain lexical choices (e.g., *empirical*), but to interpret these words as indexical of a value system requires close attention to context. For this reason, pursuant to deeper analysis, I departed with the method of coding and counting in favor of close comparative reading, the type of context-sensitive hermeneutics more often associated with literary study. Like Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), I felt that methods of corpus linguistics would not provide suitable evidence for substantiating claims about a writer's epistemological orientation. Furthermore, the relatively small size of my corpus would militate against my finding any statistically significant patterns at the lexicogrammatical level.

The results of the quantitative proportional analysis do suggest, however, where a close reading for rhetorical features of epistemology would be best repaid: topic RI. Statistical tests showed that the greatest disparity between the two subgroups of successful and unsuccessful PSs occurred in their emphasis on research interests, so

it follows that there were likely more differences here than in length alone. It is the place in a PS where applicants most reveal their conversance with scientific thinking.

Qualitative Analysis

Responses I heard from faculty members during my interviews confirmed that applicants must demonstrate their scientific socialization to gain admission. One interviewee explained that strong applicants are those who "think like a scientist." For this interviewee, thinking like a scientist meant appreciating the importance of novelty. This interviewee looks for applicants who can recognize anomaly and are prepared to pursue an unexpected explanation for a phenomenon. Another interviewee explained that strong applicants are those who recount their research experience as the testing of a theory rather than merely collecting or coding data. It is crucial that applicants have the capacity to conceptualize a research project, so this interviewee looks for those who express their research interests as the formulation of a problem.

Faculty members screen candidates for evidence of their scientific socialization, but given time constraints in reviewing applications, they must arrive at their judgments quickly. As mentioned earlier, more than one interviewee informed me that any applicant who indicates an interest in practice is immediately eliminated from the pool. Similarly, Barton et al. (2002) found that readers of residency applications arrived at their evaluations after reading only the opening paragraphs. So, if readers must assess scientific socialization quickly, what then are the cues they rely on?

What I learned from interviewing faculty members and from reading the corpus repeatedly is that an applicant's scientific socialization may be summarily assessed according to his or her self-positioning among a constellation of related binary oppositions—such as art versus science, practice versus research—in which there is a privileged term in each pair. These binaries offer something like a rough gestalt for quickly plotting one's epistemological orientation to scientific research. In my schematic of three binaries, there is a directional preference in each case toward one term, and successful applicants are more likely than unsuccessful applicants to indicate orientations in the preferred direction. The three binaries and their preferred directionalities are

- intuition → empiricism,
- application → basic research, and
- egocentrism → communitarianism.

In the presentation of results that follows, I provide explanations of the pairs and analyze passages from the PSs that exemplify success or failure at effecting proper directionality.

Intuition → empiricism. Psychology privileges empiricism over intuition, like any science, but to a greater degree than any other, psychology must face down folk wisdom—in this case, the ragbag of theories about human nature collected through life experience. Frequently, folk wisdom circulates as maxims, but almost any given "truism" about human nature has its antipode. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but out of sight, out of mind.

E. O. Wilson (1998) reminds us that consciousness did not evolve to introspect but to survive. The philosopher's creed to know thyself comes late in the development of an intelligence shaped by adaptation to the external environment. People learn what they need to know of their immediate environments to go about their lives; "that is why even today people know more about their automobiles than they do about their own minds," wrote Wilson (p. 97).

The two excerpts below come from the PSs of unsuccessful applicants who reversed the preferred directionality by placing intuition before empiricism:

> After being introduced to psychology, I felt that I had finally found a discipline that called out to me, that seemed to naturally accommodate the way that my mind already worked.

> [I] entered college as a natural sciences pre-medicine major. All freshmen at [school] were required to take psychology so I signed up for Introduction to Psychology along with basic science courses. . . . To my surprise, I was completely enthralled with this new information. I felt much more of an aptitude for psychology than for biology or chemistry. Psychology made sense to me; its concepts were intuitive to me. I had found my passion in psychology.

For the writer of the first excerpt, psychology conformed to common sense, whereas psychology as a science would submit common sense to the disconfirming potential of empiricism. The writer of the second excerpt also committed the misdirection of fitting psychology to

intuition, but she committed an additional misstep when she implied a dichotomy between "basic sciences" and psychology.

In a popular textbook for psychology undergraduates, *How to Think Straight About Psychology*, Stanovich (2001) expresses irritability at popular misconceptions about psychology's membership among the sciences:

> Many who deny psychology the status of a science are themselves quite confused about the nature of sciences. Every undergraduate psychology instructor has encountered the freshman or sophomore student who has chosen to major in psychology because "I don't like science." . . . When the instructor asks, "Have you taken much biology or chemistry since coming to the university?" the reply is predictable: "Oh, no, I've *always* avoided science." Note the irony here: The student knows nothing about the sciences but is absolutely certain that psychology is not one of them! (p. 8)

Given that the writer of the second excerpt claimed to have already taken biology and chemistry and thus would know something of the sciences, the fact that she positioned psychology outside the category of true science could alienate readers even more than a student without scientific background who presumed the same division.

Application → basic research. Stanovich (2001) argued that in the popular imagination, psychology is expected to produce "recipe knowledge": steps that one can follow to solve personal problems. However, this demand for application does not govern the research agendas of most psychologists, for whom "psychological research is largely basic research aimed at uncovering general facts and theories about behavior" (p. 201). Basic research carries prestige because it frees the pursuit of knowledge from the mercenary demands of the marketplace.

Much of the research that clinical psychologists conduct would qualify as basic, such as establishing the causes of psychopathologies, but clinical psychology also answers to the need for application as treatment. Yet the interests of scientists and practitioners clash: Like guild members of an earlier era, professional psychologists have a vested interest in guarding their practices out of self-interest, whereas researchers must submit their knowledge to their peers for certification (Albee, 1970). Those who promote psychology as a science decry how clinical cabalism has threatened psychotherapy's future as an insurable treatment. As Krauthammer (1985) wryly put it,

> As long as psychotherapies resist pressure to produce scientific evidence that they work, the economic squeeze will tighten. After all, if psychotherapy is really an art, it should be supported by the National Endowment [for the Arts], not by Blue Cross. (p. A17)

Although improved practice is one goal of clinical psychology, successful applicants seldom mentioned practice as one of their goals. When successful applicants did mention practical experience in their PSs, they evaluated it as seed stock. For instance, one successful applicant wrote of practical experience as a "treasure house" of experience to draw on for research.

The following passage from a successful PS devotes much more space to topic PE than average for successful PSs, but notice how the writer used topic PE as a segue into topic RI:

> As I began my Master's program, I was well-prepared for a practicum in addictions . . . or so I thought. The first two months of my practicum at [program] were overwhelming; I was thrown into a tumult of counseling and education. I co-counseled three intensive outpatient groups a week and brought books, videotapes, and psychoeducational materials on various addictions and treatments home each night. . . .
>
> As I grew more familiar with and confident in the field, I began noticing a number of gaps in knowledge about the addictive process. Working as a student counselor, I grew more and more frustrated as every answer led to five more questions. By the time I began working full-time as an addictions counselor, I realized that while I enjoyed clinical work, it was not academically fulfilling and, more importantly, did not answer my questions.

Later in her statement, the applicant formulated her research questions, which were not concerned with the treatment of addiction but with its causes (e.g., "How do social expectancies influence alcohol and drug use?").

The writer's use of topic PE as the motivator for topic RI may have proved a decisive turn in her statement because it dispelled any notion that she had a practical orientation. One faculty member told me that she reads between the lines to flush out practice-inclined applicants. Because a majority of prestigious clinical programs have research orientations, students occasionally apply even when their career aspirations are practical. Many, however, are savvy enough to leave their true aspirations unstated and instead proclaim dedication

to research. Therefore, an applicant who writes at length about clinical experience, even claiming to have an interest in research, raises suspicions for this professor.

Egocentrism → communitarianism. The study of psychology often attracts students who seek insight into their own personalities and those of friends and family members. Sometimes, students have their first experiences with psychology as patients. Although many students may be initially attracted to psychology for personal reasons, students with interest in research must direct their interest away from their personal lives. One faculty member informed me that "red flags fly" whenever she senses that an applicant wants to come to graduate school for self-actualization. Consider the following passage from an unsuccessful PS:

> I know that as a PhD I will have a job that I will be excited to go to every day and will inspire me. I feel that [this program] is the best place for me to begin my journey and take these first steps toward reaching my goals. . . . In evaluating my career goals, I have come to a greater understanding of who I am as a whole person and the various roles and responsibilities I have in my life. I have searched my heart to find a path that will allow me to feel like I am being true to myself, and I am confident that my decision to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology will contribute to my becoming a more enriched and fulfilled person.

Travel metaphors evident in lines such as "begin my journey and take these first steps" and "searched my heart to find a path" link the modernist promise of progress with pop psychology self-absorption. For a writer to adopt clichés from self-help literature could cause a reader to question not only the writer's motives for graduate training but also the writer's "communicate competence" (Hymes, 1974) in the discourse of social science.

By contrast, successful applicants directed their interest outward into the public domain of disciplinary knowledge. To be heard in the intellectual community, scientists must make the case that their research interests include the interests of others: The wider the interest, the more valuable the research. The scientific method succeeds insofar as scientists make their findings publicly available for verification. In this sense, science is communitarian.

But *communitarianism* should not in this instance be read as synonymous with *collectivism*, for a scientist, or more often a scientific team,

must compete in the community to belong. Membership requires an original contribution to a shared body of knowledge; originality is the sine qua non for the approval of a dissertation as well as all subsequent publications of an academic's career. The double demands of novelty and contiguity govern the knowledge making practices of scientific communities (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989).

The contrast between an egocentric and a communitarian presentation of topic RI is well illustrated by the following two extracts, the first from an unsuccessful PS and the second from a successful PS. I have emphasized all occurrences of the personal pronoun and its variants (I, me, my, myself) as a lexical indicator of orientation:

> *I* have invested a great deal of time, energy, and thought into deciding where *my* interests lie and how *I* wanted to go about pursuing them. In *my* experience working with children with autism and others with ADHD and conduct problems, *I* have developed a personal interest in developmental aspects of psychopathology and how combinations of nature and the environment work to shape children's attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. In developing relationships with the children *I* worked with, *I* found *myself* wondering why these kids were different from their peers and how these differences would influence other parts of their development and their lives as adults. . . . *I* have also had many friends struggle with drug problems and other risk-taking activities and these experiences drew *me* to the research of [Professor X] and her work concerning addictive risk-taking behaviors. . . . After reading some of her work . . . *I* became quite certain that [this program] had the best program to match *my* interests.

> *My* specific research interest is in the physiological aspect of sexuality in women survivors of child and adult sexual trauma. Even though both trauma and sexuality are fields amply researched, there is a penury of data in the area where the two intersect. Initial studies on the physiological changes of sexuality due to sexual trauma used self-reported measures on anorgasmia and dyspareunia. No information is currently available on other aspects of sexuality, such as arousal, the role of anxiety and arousal, the differences between women with sexual dysfunction and those with normal sexual functioning in the women survivors population. *I* want to perform research on these unexplored areas of the relationship between female sexuality and sexual trauma.
>
> The goal of *my* research is to move away from a "victimization movement" . . . and promote a better understanding of women's needs and strengths to overcome the biopsycholosocial trauma. *I* intend not

> to corroborate on [*sic*] the variables of unwanted pregnancy and promiscuity of sexually traumatized women, but rather to explore their needs and understand their struggles in rebuilding a functional life. *I* strongly believe that the definition of health for women survivors of sexual assault should include satisfying sexual functioning.

The disparity in the number of personal pronouns—12 in the first extract and 5 in the second—provides a lexical measure of an underlying difference in directionality. The writer of the first extract continually directed her interests toward herself, whereas the writer of the second extract directed her interests efferently to the psychological community.

The writer of the first extract located her research interest in her personal experience working with children and observing her friends. She did not, however, transform this interest into an intellectual problem for empirical investigation; instead, it remained a matter of amateur curiosity: "I found myself wondering why these kids were different . . . ." Moreover, she ended with an inversion of the Kennedy exhortation, claiming what the institution could do for her rather than what she can do for the institution: "I became quite certain that [this program] had the best program to match my interests."

In contrast, the writer of the second excerpt positioned her interests in the wider intellectual community. Consistent with Swales's (1990) create-a-research-space analysis, the writer created an exigency for her research interests. She began with a review of existing knowledge but took the additional step of evaluating it as lacking: "penury of data," "no information available," "unexplored areas." Into this rhetorically hollowed cavity, the writer posited her own research interest. If the reader accepts her evaluation of the literature and concedes the value of her proposed contribution, then the writer has met the dual demands of contiguity and novelty and thereby demonstrated familiarity with the knowledge ways of academe.

From the point of view of stasis theory, the writer of the second extract presented topic RI at the proposal stasis, the forward-looking stasis of action. In doing so, she cast herself in the future role of a scientist working to solve a problem of common interest to the clinical psychology community. By contrast, the writer of the first extract never moved appreciably beyond the stasis of evaluation. She discussed her research interests in the past tense: "I found myself wondering," "these experiences drew me to the research of [Professor X]."

DISCUSSION

That the values of science would be highly regarded by a clinical psychology program, a conclusion easily drawn from this study, makes sense in light of psychology's protracted campaign for uncontested inclusion in the ranks of science. The legacy of Freud, as virtuoso exegete and speculative theorist, continues to haunt those psychologists who wish to practice a pure science because his theories do not admit to falsification (Stanovich, 2001). Psychoanalytic approaches survive in psychology, but this department has cast its lot with empirically demonstrable theories. According to the *Insider's Guide to Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology*, which furnishes statistics about the theoretical orientations of faculty members at each program listed, this department reported 23% of its clinical faculty members having psychoanalytic orientations and 46% having cognitive-behavioral orientations in the 1994 to 1995 edition (Mayne, Norcross, & Sayette, 1994). In the 2002 to 2003 edition (Norcross et al., 2002), the department reported no faculty members with psychoanalytic orientations and 75% with cognitive-behavioral orientations.

Given this department's partisan position in regard to questions of art versus science and research versus practice, it is not surprising that applicants who communicate awareness of this partisanship are the ones who tend to gain admission. The quantitative analysis showed that successful applicants on average devoted more space to proposing what they would do in the future (topic RI), while the qualitative analysis showed that applicants made their future proposals in a manner conversant with the epistemology of science through self-positioning vis-à-vis important binary oppositions. In the case of each pair, there is a preferred directionality: empiricism over intuition, basic science over application, communitarianism over egocentrism.

Consistent with the findings of Barton et al. (2002), clinical psychology PSs are sites for the affirmation of values and beliefs central to the self-image of a discipline, but in contrast with medical residency essays, it is not dedication to human service that is valorized in clinical psychology PSs but dedication to the creation of new knowledge. The values that Barton et al. correlated with positive reader evaluations—such as sensitive bedside manner, a belief in human dignity, a sense of social obligation—sound quite similar to what some applicants extol when describing practical experience, but as the findings of this study strongly indicate, the elaboration of

practical experience is likely only to diminish an applicant's probability for acceptance to this program.

The PS is a peculiar form of autobiographical writing. To call it "personal" misleads, for successful applicants tended to focus on their identities as apprentice scientists, not on their lives outside the lab. And neither is the PS an autobiography in the traditional sense in which a writer fashions memory in congruence with a present understanding of self. The telos of a PS reaches into the future as a writer projects a professional identity, complete with a proposed research agenda, as the inexorable outcome of a reconstructed academic past. Thus, at least for aspiring scientists, the PS might be more shrewdly construed as a "prospective" statement.

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