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Should We Talk to the General Public about Our Work?

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This essay regards the need of communication with the general public about our work. Our discussion focuses on a list of concerns, including who among us should be responsible for bringing our work to the public, what might be interesting to the public, what could be the best way to reach them and, finally, why this endeavor is so important. This discussion will also allow us to present our personal opinions and ideas about these concerns.

As psychologists and scientists we face questions every day in our work, and some of these questions, those that remind us of the responsibilities of our profession, can often be uncomfortable: The more we think about the possible answers, the more aware we become of the difficulty of putting them into practice. Among the many important questions one could ask, perhaps the most critical one is whether we should make efforts to talk to the general public about our work. It is hard to imagine any of us categorically answering this question with a *no*. In fact, most of us will readily agree that we should devote time and effort to this endeavor. However, few of us would answer with just a *yes*, but perhaps with a more uncertain *of course, we should, but...* And it is precisely after this *but* when this question becomes interesting, when it wakes up specific concerns.

One of the first questions we need to ask ourselves is *who should be in charge of bringing our work to the public?* Should all of us be equally responsible or just those individuals with a special gift for communication? In our opinion, we can all collaborate in this endeavor at many levels. In other areas, people like Carl Sagan or Isaac Asimov devoted a significant part of their work to spread their science. We also had our pioneers in psychology (e.g., Skinner's "Walden Two"), but our spokespersons are scarce: Very few of us have the talent, time, and patience that are required to write a book for nonprofessionals. However, we can try to engage students in our classes, inviting them to explore the topics by themselves while teaching them to think critically about theories and evidence. We can choose to write, from time to time, a review of the topics in our research area in less-specialized journals. We can offer conferences aiming to reach our neighbors, not just our colleagues. We can, if invited, make the effort to talk on the radio or TV. There is no better way to reach the public than TV.

Once we accept that, to some extent, we all have the responsibility of communicating with the public, we must consider *what aspects of our research will be interesting for the general public*. Although only they know, we can offer a wide selection of topics so that they can pick those that are found interesting or even enthralling. Ideally, we should listen to the public before selecting the topics we decide to talk about. We should think of this job in terms of marketing: We can

only sell a product that the buyer will find useful. One good way to get an idea of the market is to examine the NY Times bestseller list of non-fiction books to find out what the current “hot topics” are. Although this is often a place where pseudo-science appears, it could provide a great opportunity for serious science to make headway. New technology also provides us with tools to give us a glimpse of the public’s interests. For example, one can use Google Trends (www.google.com/trends) to obtain instant graphs based on the number of searches for specific words (e.g., comparative, conditioning) for the last two years. This tool also gives us information on the top ten cities, regions, and languages from where the search originated.

Once we determine what might be interesting to the public, we must take on the challenge of speaking of complex ideas and theories, results and procedures, and doing so *without using a jargon only we understand*. Although this is not an easy task, it is not impossible either. We should try to think the same way we did during our first days of college, when most of the professors and textbooks seemed too cryptic to be understood. We can talk to our friends (outside of academia) about our science as a way to get the training necessary to express our ideas in a way they can understand. We can also be aware of our role in training the next generation of scientists by encouraging graduate students to begin considering this possibility early, thereby helping them to become “citizen scientists”. Writing about our research in a more public forum (at least from time to time) would also make us more committed to the effort of expressing ideas in a less technical fashion.

This last idea brings us to our next question: *What are the best means to reach the public?* A book might be still the best option. But this book must be appealing and cover the topics without getting bogged down in the details. In other words, this book should be understood and enjoyed not just by our colleagues, but also by those outside of science or even of academia. A book on psychological science does not have to exclusively cover scientific topics. In fact, a balance between the science and the people behind the science is desirable. If personal stories and anecdotes of those who contributed to the scientific advances are interspersed with the theories and discoveries, the reading becomes more dynamic and easier to digest. In mathematics (hardly more appealing *a priori* than psychology to the general public), a good example might be found in James Gleick’s “Chaos. Making a new science.” Even in our field, one can easily observe the students’ positive reaction to the pictures of many of our scientists on the pages of Michael Domjan’s “The principles of learning and behavior”: The pictures give each name a face; suddenly they realize they are actual people! But, books apart, perhaps the best and easiest way to get to the general public, especially young people, is the Internet, and more specifically using the already popular *blogs*. Building a *blog* is easy, it only takes a few minutes. Once built, one can use it as a diary, in which any idea can be posted... and discussed. Once a comment gets the attention of those lonely navigators of the Internet, their opinions and questions will appear. And this is precisely another way of collaborating, posting opinions and discussing ideas in someone else’s *blog*. One of the author’s (OP) former advisors, Helena Matute, realized the great potential of this tool to spread science and created Psicoteca, first in a website format and later as a *blog*. Interestingly, this *blog* has been most visited (at least based on the posted comments) by

Spanish-speaking students, who get involved in discussions and sometimes write asking for advice. Some of them can find in this *blog* what might be hard to get at school: People with similar interests who will not consider him/her a *nerd* for wanting to devote time to think skeptically about psychology.

After addressing several concerns about the importance of sharing our work with the general public, it is time to face the crucial question: *Why should I worry about communicating my work with anyone besides my colleagues?* The most honest answer is surprisingly simple: Because we owe it to society. Because not everyone has the great chance to work in the search of scientific knowledge, but still deserves access to it. Because our work is only possible thanks to grants that, after all, are public money, part of the effort of every citizen. And finally, because there are few things as satisfactory as sparking the general public's interest and curiosity in what we do and why we do it.