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The APA Dragon.

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I would like to tell you about the APA dragon. It is a mythical creature to be sure, but it does not mean it is not real: not long ago, I experienced quite a bit of (very real) distress as I encountered this creature in the process of writing my dissertation and teaching undergraduate students how to write research proposals.

Meet the Dragon

Unlike the species of dragons domesticated by the Valyrians, this dragon does not scorch the earth, and neither does it incinerate people who oppose its masters, but it knows how to burn them when necessary. These burns are not visible but experienced—by students, for example, as lower-than-expected grades on class papers or by researchers as rejection letters in response to journal submissions.

The creature's mighty leathery wings are not aerodynamic: this dragon does not fly, and therefore, it cannot carry riders to distant lands for conquest. These wings exist to cloak and to obscure reality. Mandigan et al. (1995) observe of articles written in the APA style,

the reality of the research (...) appears to be less organized and more ad hoc than a reading of the empirical report would suggest. (...) What appears in print is a sanitized, rationalized account of the research that conforms it to the standard story schema. (p. 430).

Its sharp claws do not tear into flesh; instead, they hedge words—make writing sound tentative and therefore, “convey an impression that theories are more tenuous and less permanent than the data that generate them, an idea that has characterized empirical disciplines since the time of Bacon” (Mandigan et al., 1995, p. 432)

Akin to Hesiod's Ladon, the multi-headed serpent placed in the Hesperides Garden to guard the golden apples, the APA dragon also guards. It watches over the “grand edifice—a towering international accumulation of reliable and practically useful results” (Phillips, 2006, p. 15), also known as the Ivory Tower of Babel (Demers, 2011), or even more simply, as Social

Sciences, in which educational research—my field of study—occupies many niches. It is a mysterious tower: some believe that social sciences hold “keys to the universe” and answers to humanity’s problems; others say that social sciences are “congenitally indecisive,” or too banal, no matter how hard the scientific jargon tries to hide it (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 391). True or false, the Dragon guards it, all the same.

The Dragon’s body is a body made of rhetoric that powers the production of knowledge in psychology and other fields that draw on psychology and/or use APA style in its publications. Bazerman (1988) went as far as to identify it as the Behaviorist Rhetoric.

The Dragon’s origin story

The APA dragon’s origin story contains interesting insights into its nature, and I will share some bits of it here.

The egg was procured in the early 1900s by the editors of academic journals—the gatekeepers who watched over secrets psychologists wished to share with the public. At that time, psychology was booming and professionalizing (Sigal & Pettit, 2012). Psychologists were becoming numerous, and fruits of their labors were plenty, but the gatekeepers were too few and too weary from bearing “information overload” (Blair, 2003) burdens, and frankly, from too many tasks. They clamored for a solution—some kind of standards for writing manuscripts.

I suspect the idea to summon the dragon came from the University of Chicago Press, which kept a tiny—no bigger than a style sheet—drake since its launch in 1891. The creature’s purpose was to facilitate communications between professors, typesetters, and “‘brainery’—the proofreaders who corrected typographical errors and edited for stylistic inconsistencies” (The

Chicago Manual of Style Online, N.d., para. 1). Even as a hatchling, it was a valued and important member of the production process; it grew very quickly to the size of a pamphlet, and then a 200-page book in 1906. Critically, the Chicago Manual was not confined to the cornerstone of its newly constructed Press building (built in 1903) but was free to roam, having been made available for purchase and postal delivery by its owners. Maybe this is when the editors of psychological journals saw it and decided to get one for the APA?

I cannot tell, but it took over two decades of heated debates between psychologists and editors to finally hatch a drake in 1929. Some prominent psychologists like Edward Titchener, for example, warned in 1904 that standardization will stifle ideas and heterogeneity in scientific thought, leading to the eventual stagnation of the field; Hollingworth predicted that push for “uniform pages” will “kill the life of science” and he went on the record calling standardization a “chain-store method,” good for creating an “elaborate and endowed scientific machinery” but no one of “scientific caliber” capable of running it (Sigal & Pettit, 2012, p. 360). On the other hand, James Cattell—a big name in experimental psychology, a professor, and the long-tenured editor of the *Science* journal—advocated for norms and rules. The results of the survey administered by the National Research Council’s committee to the nation’s psychologists and editors provided the empirical evidence of the turmoil and tension within the growing community (Sigal & Pettit, 2012). Yet, the Conference of Editors and Business Managers of Anthropological and Psychological Periodicals somehow resolved in a consensus late in 1928 because in February 1929, Madison Bentley and five of his collaborators published “Instructions in regard to preparation of manuscript” in *The Psychological Bulletin*.

Although the original seven pages of the *Instructions* were not envisioned by the Committee to “assume any authority in dictating to authors, to publishers or to editors” but

rather, to serve as a “general guidance in the preparation of scientific articles” (Bentley et al., 1929, p. 57), in fifteen years’ time (1944), the drake grew to fill thirty-two pages of The Psychological Bulletin’s June issue, looking less and less like a guide, and more of an authority figure. In eight more years (in 1952), it grew into a sixty-page APA Publication Manual, which had to be printed separately as the Bulletin’s supplement; and after two more revisions (one in 1957, and the other in 1967), it emerged as the Second Edition designed as a 136-page booklet dressed in a bright red cover.

The Dragon molted five more times since then. The latest, seventh edition (published in 2019, which marks the ninetieth anniversary since the hatching), is more magnificent than ever. Although (as measured in inches), it looks thinner than the fourth edition published in 1994, and it has twelve fewer pages than the impressive 439-page Fifth published in 2001, the Seventh is set in a smaller type, which translates into more words per line. Its pages now feature color—that is, color coded sections and headings—to make sure its engagement with users is streamlined and it does not take up more time than necessary. Moreover, the Dragon’s cover is no longer a measly two-color, but a full color rainbow-esque (plus spot-gloss) print job—more complex and expensive in terms of production, but also more aesthetically appealing than its earlier iterations.

I wonder... why the extra expense? Surely, color coding pages for an easier navigation makes sense, but what function do color and texture serve on the cover? Perhaps, the laziest answer to “why the expense” is another question: “why not?”

As APA gleefully reported in its 2019 press release announcing the newest (seventh) edition, the Manual “has been in constant production and circulation since it debuted in 1952” (para. 7), and since then, the Association sold over 15 million copies” (para. 2). As of 2021, total

sales, which include other products besides the Manual, brought over \$100 million in revenue (APA, 2021), which probably makes the organization a successful enterprise, at least in terms of its two officially articulated primary functions: “as a content provider of important research, and as APA’s primary source of income” (para. 1). But I can only guess the meaning of success as expressed in these numbers, of course, as I am a student of educational research, not economics; and really, what I think is not as important as the way APA perceives itself—how it talks about its own accomplishments.

On the back cover of the 7th edition, success as measured in “more than 15 million copies sold” is clearly noted, being that it is printed in the largest, boldest font at the top of the page and set in red ink over tangerine-yellow space visually separated from the rest of the copy. Just below in the largest, darker orange rectangle positioned in the center of the page, there is a more nuanced message. It speaks of the Manual’s worldwide prominence evident in translations into multiple languages and suggests that “numbers of copies sold” equates with acclaim as the Manual is not a mere set of prescriptions, but “the style manual of choice” for vast audiences, such as “writers, researchers, editors, students and educators in the social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, nursing, communications, education, business, engineering, and other fields.” Curiously, psychology did not even make the list, maybe assumed to be too obvious, or too integral with “social and behavioral sciences.” The narrative speaks of its “authoritative and easy-to-use reference and citation system,” and briefly reminds of its purpose as a guide, only it does not simply guide the writer’s choices of “headings, tables, figures, language, and tone” but alludes to holding secrets to “powerful, concise, and elegant scholarly communication.” The Manual is designed to be relevant to the entire “scholarly writing process—from the ethics of authorship to reporting research,” and as such, it is an “*indispensable* resource for students and

professionals” (emphasis added) who not only wish to become excellent writers but aspire to “make an impact with their work.”

How can one possibly say no to buying and using this (a bit pricey), but beautiful Manual—the “tool of choice” (APA, 2019, para. 7) used by so many good, intelligent people around the world doing impactful work?! If I sound distastefully sarcastic, it is not so on purpose. Frankly, I am not sure how to interpret what I am being told in this message and how I should react to it. But something seems off.

Reflection

I, for one, never had the option of not using APA as a student majoring in psychology, and I do not have it now, on the cusp of graduating with a Ph.D.—the university was very clear in its instructions to write my dissertation in the APA format. Worse yet, as an instructor, I do not feel this choice is mine to pass onto my students; and even if it was, it would be an *impossible* choice. I already perpetually wrestle with myself when I grade their research proposals: on the one hand, I care that my students practice creative and critical thinking, so I spend an enormous amount of time providing feedback and suggestions; among many things, I urge them to ditch turgid wordworks, to use active voice and to take ownership of their ideas by writing in the first person. But when I see them take so much “ownership” of their work that their arguments begin to sound too diluted or too casual, I panic. Who am I to tell them how to express their academic voices? ...and yet, if I say nothing, will I not be somehow responsible when they struggle in graduate school? Following the APA Manual of style, therefore, seems like a solid strategy, and so, I tell myself that I choose to do it.

This is the way of the Dragon who does not have to roar or burn its constituents to a crip to maintain its grip on reality. Its ways are more subtle and sophisticated, as it weaves the narrative of choice, success, and power—in the Garden-of-Eden-serpent-like ways. Present-day editors who decide on the fate of manuscripts only appear to command the Dragon¹. It may look like they keep the beast on the leash and summon it as needed, but once again, not everything is as it looks. Under the gatekeeper mantles, these people bear scars; many of these scars were inflicted during ritual studenthood performances—sundry literature reviews and research proposals written in the APA format and no doubt, envisioned by the professoriate to help the emergent writers master academic work. Thus, to a unsuspecting eye, a successful dissertation defense marks the occasion when a student becomes a master (just prior to climbing toward some other mastery point to advance her career, but this is a story for another time); yet I wonder if the order of who masters what in this tale is correct... what if a dissertation defense marks the moment when the APA dragon lays claim on the graduate as s/he finally joins the academic community? As Mandigan et al. observe (1995), “students who enter the field of psychology acquire psychology's language conventions, and in doing so they also come to implicitly endorse important values of their discipline” (p. 428); that is, they come to work for the Dragon, and not the other way around.

Perhaps, the closest anyone can ever come to actually steering its movement must participate in its grooming just before the next molt. This is when a group of special people—of groomers who get together every so many years to comb and to clean the beast’s scales—decide

¹ I want to acknowledge that not every journal follows the APA format, and not every editor was trained to use the APA style as a student; however, in this particular story, all characters write and work with APA—it is *their* story. And mine.

what to keep and what to omit from the next edition. However, considering that these people also grew up under the watchful eye of the Dragon like everyone else (the Dragon is older than any of us) maybe they cannot control it, either?

The dragon positively has become too large to worry about any challenges to its authority. For years, psychologists have been referring to the APA Manuals as their “Bible,” a sacred text, which—critically— “serves to enculturate its adherents in fundamentalist approach to codes of scientific conduct” (Walsh-Bowers, 1999, p. 376). So, when writers make rhetorical choices (and they always make them, even if they “usually go unrecognized” (Marshall and Barritt, 1990, p. 590)), they create “the tacit landscape that makes the focal activities of conducting research possible,” and in the process, they take their ways of conducting research for granted, “as something that could not be otherwise” (Marshall and Barritt, 1990, p. 590).

And this is one of the things that terrifies me about the Dragon the most, more than its hedging claws, reality-obscuring wings, and smoldering breaths: its stunning ability to hide in plain sight despite (or maybe because of?) its terribly large body made of rhetoric. It polices the borders of many realities unnoticed, while “authors conform to a ritualized rhetoric of legitimizing membership in an exclusive academic discipline in order to be published in a prestigious journal” (Marshall & Barritt, 1990, p. 604). So, perhaps, Titchener and Hollingworth were right—the Dragon did “smother the life of science” (Sigal & Pettit, 2012, p. 360) after all, just as they feared?

It is difficult to imagine what educational research might look like if it was not disciplined by the APA dragon—maybe researchers would finally stop writing in specialized jargon and leave the comfort of their ivory tower... and then, maybe educational research

journals might become “public spaces for public dialogues, and many people might be interested in reading, if not in contributing to, what was being said there” (Marshall & Barritt, 1990, p. 607). Yet, no one can be certain that a different monster—even more terrible than the APA dragon—will not show up to fill the void left by the exiled dragon. “Better the devil you know,” goes the adage. And so, this problem cannot be posed in terms of “Should we or should we not eliminate the dragon?”—such a problem, as Marshall and Barritt (1990) rightly warn, may not be solvable. But maybe apprehending it, even if for a little bit—by making it visible, and not just it writing, but in a visual form, might be a good way to bring it out of the shadows?

This work is still unfolding in the sense that it has no definitive answer, and it is also being (re)worked to become a chapter in my dissertation. Follow its development online:

www.monsters.anna-gonzalez.com

I welcome your feedback and ideas.

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