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EDITORIAL

An Introduction and Mission of Building Bridges to Reach the Unknown

James Houran

editor@scientificexploration.org

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1725-582X

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The founding of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* (*JSE*) in 1987 coincided with my graduation from high school and start of higher education. Even then I was deeply interested in all types of anomalies thanks to my parents' gift about ten years earlier of Jane Werner Watson and Sol Chaneles' (1976) *The Golden Book of the Mysterious* (Golden Press). That book was a childhood obsession that steadily evolved to serious academic curiosity, which then quickly transformed into ardent participation in scholarly research and writing. My curiosity and passion certainly endure, but these have been become increasingly balanced with skepticism that erupted from several negative experiences over the years with ideological-motivated academics. Of course, bias cuts both ways (Drinkwater et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2016, 2017; Kennedy, 2005; Truzzi, 1987), so my own work has disappointed—and sometimes even irked—both debunkers and fervent believers in otherworldly phenomena. My appointment as the new Editor-in-Chief (EIC) might thus surprise individuals who do not view me as a sympathetic champion for the advancement of 'edge science,' or what amounts to empirical observations that challenge scientific principles or concepts as presently understood.

This Editorial avoids reciting my professional background and interests, which anyone can easily read at the Parapsychological Association website (https://parapsych.org/users/jhouran/profile.aspx) or via my ORCID record. Rather, the goal here is to introduce readers to the underlying philosophy that will be the backbone of my *JSE* tenure. Indeed, readers deserve to know what the EIC stands for. I have also not been immersed in the Society for Scientific Exploration's (SSE) activities and culture in recent years, so some members might understandably deem me an outsider. However, my academic career has consistently centered on edge science and advancing its cause. The diligent efforts of past Editors, Associate Editors, Editorial Board, and the unsung hero known as Kathleen Erickson (Managing Editor) have achieved notable strides in the *JSE*'s quality and impact over the years (including becoming 100% platinum open access in 2018). But my primary aim is now to take the journal to the next level by bolstering its familiarity, reach, and influence within academia and the mainstream consciousness alike. This pursuit involves diversifying the provocative research in its pages and making that content more accessible and useful to non-specialists in other fields, as well as to journalistic outlets and the mass media. The latter forums can and should play a valuable role in public science education (Höttecke & Allchin, 2020; Huber et al., 2019; Olson & Kutner, 2008), although they can easily miss the mark as illustrated by my own frustrating experiences with misreported research. To these ends, my commitment as EIC will be to promote the publication of articles with the features discussed below.

Collaborative Approaches

In a time of growing cynicism about scientific organizations and academic institutions (more on this below), it is imperative that we reach out to new researchers to broaden the interest and participation in edge science. This is also an opportunity to serve as an

example of how science ought to be more fairly conducted, interpreted, and shared. Thus, studies leveraging different fields or methodologies can facilitate this goal and help to ensure that our work properly 'connects' to the concepts and empirical findings of other disciplines.

In this spirit, we strongly encourage submissions that build bridges by being collaborative in nature (Aboelala et al., 2007). This can happen in different ways. "Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes, and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social, and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries" (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 351). Transdisciplinary approaches also include non-academic stakeholders in the process of knowledge production (Rigolot, 2020). It has been argued that research is increasingly being conducted in teams like these and that transdisciplinary teams are best able to address *complex* challenges (Tebes et al., 2014). Of course, edge science is inherently defined by dilemmas of ambiguity, nuance, and complexity.

In terms of corresponding changes to the *JSE*, we will actively solicit and support research that involves public engagement in science via approaches such as 'citizen science' (Bonney et al., 2014) and "participatory team science' (Tebes & Tai, 2018). For instance, some authors contend that hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic laypeople around the world can conceivably be trained to act as citizen scientists in certain field studies in parapsychology (Hill et al., 2019; Laythe et al., 2021, 2022). This could eventually lead to well-coordinated citizen science projects that parallel those routinely embraced across different disciplines including ornithology (see: https://www.birds.cornell.edu/citizenscience) and astronomy (see: https://science.nasa.gov/citizenscience). The same vision easily applies to other areas of edge science, such as ufology (e.g., certified MUFON field investigators) and cryptozoology (e.g., The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization). But these niche topics are a minority among the vast array of controversies, paradoxes, and anomalies that remain elusive within mainstream biology, cosmology, geology, history, meteorology, physics, medicine, and the social sciences. More participatory team science is clearly needed everywhere (Hall et al., 2018). Plus, we envision mandatory data sharing obligations to avoid thorny issues related to the validation or further analysis of published outcomes (see, e.g., Nelson, 2016). All this aims to increase cooperation, balance, transparency, and validity concerning the research published in the *JSE* (for a discussion, see Ioannidis, 2005).

Cumulative Model-Building and Theory-Formation

Dare it be said that, over time, we 'anomalists' might have bought into our 'fringe' positions more than has been helpful or needed. Of course, a consequence of continual social, cultural, and scientific isolation is that we start to see the boundaries of our science as purely residing within journals that specifically cater to our interests or approaches. And all of us become citation heavy with respect to these journals, including perhaps the *JSE*. The edge science community has isolated itself, in part, due to insufficiently tapping into broader areas of mainstream science which very importantly informs and contextualizes our empirical work. Some scientific models have supremely powerful predictive capabilities and so salient deviations from such frameworks should be done with extreme care and caution. Relatedly, and certainly within premier journals, a failure to conduct a thorough, accurate, and up-to-date literature review identifying an important problem and placing the study in suitable context is consistently identified as one of the top reasons for article rejection in some journals (Maggio et al., 2016).

Thus, one of my goals is to encourage and facilitate comprehensive and inclusive empirical discourse on topics versus publishing merely standalone or 'silo' papers that lack a broader and relevant context or framework. Shon (2014) described the issue as academics always trying to reinvent the wheel, instead of understanding that scientific model-building and theory-formation is more like 'wheel modification.' Vipond (1996) more candidly cautioned researchers not to "expect to develop your own knowledge claim without first examining and understanding those of other scholars. Claims are seldom completely original; instead, they are connected to, and grow out of, the claims of others" (p. 39). Accordingly, articles in the *JSE* will be pushed to more explicitly build on or extend current research and theory (e.g., Lange, 2017) or to show how specific anomalies refine or refute existing assumptions in academia (e.g., Walach & Schmidt, 2005). This campaign will also include a series of peer-reviewed invited papers and commentaries to stoke constructive debate, inspire innovative thinking, and drive new investigations.

Readability and Utility of Conceptual Arguments and Empirical Findings

Not only do we hope to further connect the *JSE* with other fields of science but also we openly welcome the wealth of 'citizen scientists' and lay readers who are interested in our various pursuits. To the former, we are instituting for research papers a closing subsection called

'Implications and Applications' that will succinctly summarize or explain how the study's methods or findings potentially inform other fields of study. To the latter, however, a campaign of readability and utility also involves articulating and communicating concepts to non-technical audiences. This includes the mass media and general public, whose constant interest and support certainly helps to sustain edge science (McClenon, 1984/2016). Part of the first steps in this endeavor is to address both the accessibility of research findings and their implications that can translate to the general public and mass media. On this point, there is a push in certain academic circles for the use of 'lay summaries (or abstracts)' to complement or replace technical summaries (Kuehne & Olden, 2015). Recognizing that it can sometimes be difficult for scientists to communicate effectively with generalist audiences and the press, it remains a necessary step of *JSE*'s outreach. The literature already contains cogent guidance on this issue (Salita, 2015), and our editorial team will certainly be available for resources and assistance as we transition.

These focus areas are incorporated in our updated *JSE* Author Guidelines https://journalofscientificexploration.org/index.php/jse/about/submissions, which are complemented by other important changes. Readers will hopefully appreciate the *JSE*'s new and larger format. Reflecting on it now, *The Golden Book of the Mysterious* engaged me so effectively, in part, because it brought information to life via highly readable content that was reinforced by memorable illustrations. This is unsurprising given that research suggests 'high-strangeness' (e.g., ghosts) has a particularly strong and enduring 'brand personality' precisely because diverse audiences can interact or participate in these topics as narrative constructions (Hill et al., 2018, 2019; Houran et al., 2020). But I digress. Tremendous appreciation goes to the team of Kathleen Erickson, Garret Moddel, Mark Urban-Lurain, and Annalisa Ventola for spearheading this redesign. Also note that three of my Ph.D. colleagues have agreed to join our mission and complement the excellent assembly of current Associate Editors: Rense Lange (the most brilliant statistician and predictive analytics professional known to me), Brian Laythe (an experienced field researcher with a passion for innovative methodologies, public education, and citizen science), and Álex Escolà-Gascón (applied mathematician and strong generalist in the social sciences). No doubt we will continue to extend and round-out the Editorial Team in due course.

As part of my introduction as EIC, this issue includes an essay that Laythe and I originally submitted to the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies (BICS) contest on the best evidence for postmortem survival (see, e.g., Blumenthal, 2021). Our thesis did not place in the competition, but we heartily congratulate those colleagues whose arguments did. Still, the main value of that exercise for me was the opportunity to think and argue counterpoint to my normally skeptical leanings.[1] Maybe it was recreational to *play chess against oneself* (e.g., Shand, 2014) or perhaps therapeutic to engage in a type of *self-talk,* i.e., our inner voice that combines conscious thoughts and unconscious beliefs and biases to help interpret and process questions, ideas, or experiences (e.g., Fernyhough, 2016). Ultimately, though, it was educational being a '*devil's advocate*' to my own ideas and assumptions (e.g., Charlan, Brown, & Rogers, 2001). Regardless, we purposely designed our essay as an adversarial collaboration that empirically weighed the purported empirical evidence *for* and *against* the survival hypothesis to arrive at a net probability. It thus illustrates and reinforces several of the approaches sought for new *JSE* submissions as outlined earlier. Hopefully, this essay also tangibly demonstrates to the readership that their new EIC is suitably open-minded, curious, and data-driven.

There have been several journals devoted to topics in edge science, albeit some sadly are now defunct. Occasionally, more mainstream periodicals also solicit conceptual and empirical articles that 'foster the diversity and debate upon which the scientific process thrives; ideas with a great deal of observational support and hypotheses where experimental support is yet fragmentary'—a sentiment lucidly explored in David Horrobin's (1975) rousing editorial that introduced the broad-minded journal *Medical Hypotheses*. His position statement is as relevant today as when it was first published, maybe even more so. Yes, it is an admirable that some journals deliberately seek to disseminate and debate controversial ideas, but it is also disheartening that this stance should itself be controversial, as research should serve solely to push the boundaries of knowledge. The problem is not just that the general public perceives ideological bias in research and reporting (MacCoun & Paletz, 2009) but that implicit agendas, in fact, do exist (e.g., Eitana et al., 2018; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Silander et al., 2020).

To me, this situation is greatly worsened by two forces tainting mainstream consciousness and conversation: (a) the failure of many scientific authorities in political positions, academic institutions, or the public spotlight to rigorously defend academic freedom and necessary open debate on empirical matters (e.g., climate change science or pandemic issues), and (b) the rise and normalization of big tech's frequently dubious 'fact checking' and censorship that sabotages data-driven dissent on certain issues with ease and impunity but lacking academic or moral authority. The public is therefore justified to view the 'scientific community' and 'news media' with incredulity and downright scorn. The sociopolitical mantra of 'follow the science' simply rings hollow. Indeed, many commentators on current

events and academic authorities who thoughtfully question popular narratives have been ridiculed by the press as 'conspiracy theorists'—a loaded and misguided term (Wood, 2016). But such maverick voices have arguably been more correct about pertinent issues in recent years than many journalists, politicians, and even some high-profile academics who are empowered to shape public policy and educational norms. Therefore, I relish the thought of our journal playing devil's advocate to many biased or unproven assumptions that proliferate in mainstream academia and public discourse; that is, for this forum to serve as a dependable, accessible, and best-in-class outlet of grounded insights and observations that challenge *what* we think we know . . . and *how* and *why* we think we know it.

Accordingly, the *JSE* is uniquely positioned among various journals to present a wide swath of studies that can inform and integrate normally disparate disciplines, constructively confront current scientific thought, and help to shape and sharpen future research across all areas of science. It is humbling and daunting to follow in the footsteps of distinguished thinkers and writers who previously served as EIC, but my firm conviction is that the editorial team will realize many more important advancements with the dedicated support and active participation of our readership. Hopefully this encompassing philosophy and mission resonate with formal SSE members, as well as with those informal but interested students and scholars who collectively share our passion for discovery. However, 'interest' alone is not enough; progress and impact will come only from 'energy and momentum.' Mission statements are nice but most useful, in my opinion, when they are a clear call to action. And with that, let me close. Now is the time for us to purposefully work together to build the necessary bridges that lead to unknown territories, untapped knowledge, and a deeper understanding of reality—whatever that turns out to be.

NOTE

[1] Maybe we will also prepare a rebuttal to our proffered arguments at some point, akin to the next move in the chess match against myself (see e.g., Colombo & Sprenger, 2014).

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