Are Repeated Conference Papers Really a Problem?

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Like everyone else in the discipline, we have seen multiple appearances of a single paper title on conference programs, within vitas of job applicants, and in tenure/promotion files. Depending upon the context, our reactions have either been amusement, irritation, or (most frequently) indifference. To bring the entire situation home, consider the following: About three weeks ago, both of us submitted (separate) paper proposals to the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. And, sometime within the next five weeks, one of us intends to submit a proposal to the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, while the other plans to submit a proposal to the 2008 State Politics and Policy Meeting. In each case, these will be the same proposals that we sent off earlier to the Midwest Political Science Association.

Perhaps the preceding admission means that we are part of the problem. If so, then we are willing to admit our complicity. But, we take a different perspective: Proposing a paper for, and presenting it at, more than one conference is not a serious problem, either for the discipline as a whole or for the individual political scientists who do this.

Let us begin by considering one of the central questions motivating this symposium: Why has the number of repeated conference paper presentations increased over the past 15 years or so? We suspect that this is just part of a broader trend toward heavier research output within our discipline. The sheer number of practicing political scientists is growing (at least as that number is reflected in conference attendance), research productivity requirements are more stringent, and graduate students are expected to become professionally active at earlier stages within their period of training.

For all of these reasons, there is enormous pressure to participate in professional conferences. It is both unrealistic and undesirable to expect that every political scientist will produce a completely novel paper idea for each separate conference. Scientific research is an ongoing, and often incremental, process in which ideas, arguments, analyses, and conclusions are continuously refined, rather than generated anew. This will inevitably result in substantially similar manuscripts being presented at successive conferences.

In fact, we would turn the topic of this symposium on its head. Far from being a problem, we believe that there are both professional and practical reasons to expect—and, perhaps, even encourage—multiple conference presentations of a given paper. For most scholars, a central professional objective is to achieve success in research productivity by making high-quality contributions to a cumulative body of theoretical knowledge. This inevitably requires that we lay out our ideas for consideration by multiple audiences of our peers. Furthermore, there are several ways that the infrastructure of our discipline strongly encourages multiple conference submissions. Of course, this practice should not be carried to extremes; there are norms of scientific behavior to which all members of our profession should adhere. Let us explain our reasoning in more detail.

We assume that conference presentations are aimed at eventual publication. And, competition for space in our professional journals is fierce. Therefore, enormous incentives exist to refine manuscripts to the highest possible degree before sending them off for publication. The best opportunities for doing so are panel and poster presentations at professional meetings. A major purpose of a conference panel is to provide high-quality feedback to the paper authors. Presumably, those authors will employ the comments from discussants, other panel members, and the panel attendees in order to revise their work. After doing so, the obvious next step is to take the "new and improved" version of the paper back to the same kind of audience. In other words, it is natural—indeed, logical—to present the revised version of the manuscript at a subsequent conference. And, there is often no reason to change the title of the paper from one venue to the next. Thus, multiple conference presentations of what seems to be a single paper (according to its title) are an inevitable consequence of the iterative revisions that characterize the process of scientific inquiry.

At the same time, there are practical considerations that motivate many political scientists (including us) to submit the same proposal to several conferences. For one thing, the timing of submission deadlines is often such that a proposal must be sent to conference B before the submitter knows the outcome of his or her proposal to conference A. In fact, this is precisely what both of us have in mind with the multiple submissions we described at the outset of this essay.

In addition, the quality of panel discussants can vary enormously. So, it is often necessary to present a paper several times before receiving any constructive or useful comments. Furthermore, panels are limited-duration events.

With three to five papers on a given panel, even the most conscientious discussant can make only a few brief comments on each one. This latter situation is exacerbated with poster sessions, in which the ratio of authors to discussants is typically extremely large. The end result is that many political scientists believe that multiple conference presentations are necessary in order to circulate their work among its intended audience and to receive effective feedback.

So, we believe that there are several reasons for sincere and committed political scientists to submit the same paper to several conferences. However, a distinction should be drawn between serial presentations seeking feedback for improvement and those that are used merely to justify conference attendance. We do recognize that there are some people who present a single paper over and over again, with no apparent revisions or movement toward eventual publication. What are the consequences of such "serial submitters"?

As far as the profession goes, we believe that any detrimental effects stemming from multiple conference presentations of the same paper are minimal at most. Admittedly, this kind of activity uses up slots on a program. Apart from the APSA Annual Meeting, however, conference participation is not too restrictive. In fact, many professional associations solicit submissions in order to complete their roster of panels. Furthermore, a previously-presented paper may still make a valuable addition to a particular panel. It could round out the subject matter, make useful connections to other lines of work, and stimulate interactions among political scientists working on a common topic. Stated simply, the costs of allowing previously-presented papers onto a conference program are probably outweighed by the potential benefits of inclusion.

Any negative effects of multiple paper submissions are more likely to be felt by the individual engaging in this behavior than by the broader scholarly community. If an author fails to incorporate constructive feedback from participants at earlier conferences, then the quality of his or her work will suffer accordingly. At the same time, "vita-padding" (multiple and separate listings of a single paper title with no corresponding publication after a reasonable period of time) is obvious to any careful observer. Individuals who routinely submit an unchanging paper to multiple conferences are probably going to hurt only themselves through that practice.

In conclusion, we do not believe that repeated conference paper presentations are much of a serious problem. Please understand, we are not condoning the mindless resubmission and repeated presentation of exactly the same manuscript at multiple conferences. The latter is a practice that definitely should be discouraged. But that can be accomplished through professional socialization. Similarly, all political scientists should avoid misleading practices in reporting their professional activities. It is preferable to list a single paper with multiple presentations on a vita, rather than multiple separate listings of a single paper title (even if some revisions were made across the various presentations). Overall, we believe that there are much more serious violations of professional norms and practices that occur with disturbing frequency. These include: conference "no-shows," people who propose a paper but then fail to deliver it; discussants who, for whatever reason, fail to provide effective feedback on panel papers; and (we are sorry to say), individuals who distort (and, occasionally, even falsify) the information on their professional records. From our perspective, repeated conference presentations pale in comparison to the latter activities.