EDITOR'S NOTE

Exploring a Controversy

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When the American Psychological Association (APA) Board of Directors asked me to serve as the editor of the *American Psychologist* for this special issue, I agreed in spite of being largely unfamiliar with the issues and events that apparently so strongly inflamed the passions of the participants and others. I was told that the editor-in-chief, the regular editor, and the special issue guest editor could not be the overall editor of this issue because they were all involved in the events to be discussed. Perhaps I was chosen by the board because I am 80 and I do not own a computer. Because of the latter fact, I was not part of the extensive e-mail discussions in May of 2001. Broadly defined, this special issue is about the opportunities and challenges that exist when scientists and policymakers (and the media) interact.

I have a long history of involvement in APA affairs. I worked in the APA Central Office from 1951 to 1953, when the Association was small and the Central Office was housed on the third floor (non-air-conditioned walk-up) of the old American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) building. Later, I was APA president in 1969–1970, when major crises involving the demands of Black psychologists and women psychologists threatened to disrupt the established ways. I negotiated with both groups and helped find compromises all could live with.

My duties as editor have been quite simple and straightforward. I have read all the articles, made modest suggestions for changes in the interest of clarity or tone, made the final determination of the order in which the articles appear, and written this introductory piece. The major responsibility for initiating this special issue and making the initial invitations to potential contributors of regular articles was handled by the guest coeditors Nora S. Newcombe and Richard McCarty. Contributors initially received a manuscript copy of the Lilienfeld (2002, this issue) article with their invitation, but they were invited to focus broadly on the interface between scientists and policymakers. During the final revision process, contributors also received a manuscript copy of the Garrison and Kobor (2002, this issue) article. Finally, I invited a couple of individuals to comment on specific aspects of the controversy.

The integrity of psychological science is based on the academic freedom to explore fundamental questions about the nature of human behavior, thoughts, feelings, and social processes. Certain standards for the conduct of scientific inquiry must be adhered to, and the resulting report prepared for potential publication must go through strict editorial review by peers for the evaluation of methodology, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Along with academic freedom of inquiry goes the academic responsibility to present one's results clearly, drawing out the implications and noting cautions about what cannot be concluded. The latter is particularly important when the findings are sensitive, controversial, or potentially inflammatory.

Academic freedom is fundamental for science and scholarship. Political and economic forces often try to influence scientific findings and scholarly speculations to make them conform to conventional beliefs and practices. Historically, in America, the tenure system has evolved whereby one's faculty peers across several disciplines make recommendations about retention, promotion, and tenure. Violation of such peer evaluation and recommendations may subject an educational institution to widely noted censure. In the 1950s, the Regents of the University of California, Berkeley, demanded that all faculty members sign a loyalty oath swearing that they were not Communists. The resulting opposition to the oath, with refusal to sign, included distinguished psychologists E. C. Tolman and Nevitt Sanford. The APA was the first national society to urge that its members not apply for positions at Berkeley. Soon, the APA was joined by dozens of other academic–scientific disciplines, and, after great turmoil, the university dropped the requirement that the oath be signed.

Psychological science collectively should make a difference. That is, the results of the collected body of psychological research should be used to benefit individuals and society. This is part of the process that George Miller described as "giving psychology away." To do this, organized psychology has moved into activities often referred to as *media relations* and *government relations*. Movement into such activities is a normal development in the maturing of a discipline (and an association). The APA became more involved with the media in the early 1950s (I describe this in more detail below). The APA involvement in public policy formation came later, with the so-called starting date varying from the early 1960s, according to some authors, to the early 1980s, according to others.

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Involvement in media relations and involvement in government relations, however, are strikingly different arenas of activities from those most psychologists are familiar with. These arenas have audiences, purposes, goals, and common practices different from those of scholarly research and publishing. Thus, both individual psychologists and the APA as an organization must adapt to the differing environment. The challenge, in many ways, is finding the right balance between working effectively in a new arena and operating in a manner consistent with the basic procedures and values of one's own discipline. Perhaps, more importantly, it is critical to keep the three worlds partially separate, so that assumptions and common practices from the media and political worlds do not inappropriately affect the academic world. As psychologists, we, of course, hope that our scientific approach and logic will influence the media and political worlds because it is for that reason that organized psychology became involved in such activities.

It is clear conceptually what the APA wishes to do on the media front and the public policy front—provide the best scientific information possible to the public and policymakers so that the nation has a psychologically informed population and federal policies that are based on the most solid research possible. However, the challenge is doing this through the media and public policy lenses—lenses that are very different from that of the research community. This is where the core of the current controversy lies. This special issue makes an archival record of an important set of problems and controversies that will be studied over time and that will lead to constructive changes in ways psychology responds to future crises.

Psychologists would all agree that the news media, the public, and politicians must become better informed about psychological science, about its scientific methods, about the importance of open discussion, and about the self-correcting nature of carefully peer reviewed scholarly publications. Psychologists are also more aware today than ever before of the hunger of the media for emotional and controversial issues that will attract the maximum number of listeners, viewers, and readers. The same desire for the controversial is true of politics, where appeals to emotions appear to be valued equally with logic and data.

In 1953, the APA hired an experienced science writer, Michael Amrine, to work half time as an in-house science writer and media relations contact. He stayed on for many years. Amrine had written a science column for the North American Newspaper Alliance, had been editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, had with scientists including Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard written explanatory pamphlets for the public, and was friendly with Oppenheimer, Fermi, and others. He ran the first APA newsroom at the 1953 convention. Over the years, he built trusting relationships with the principal science writers of the time. In those days, half a century ago, most science reporting was in newspapers and newsmagazines.

With the growth of television news and the tightening of newspaper budgets, specially qualified science writers largely disappeared for a while, although there has been a reemergence in the 1990s. As fierce competition for viewers (and advertising revenue) has developed, more sensational stories interpreting science findings have replaced thoughtful and balanced reports in some (often highly visible) media outlets. With the proliferation of new types of news media, including especially the 24-hour video news programs, the supermarket weeklies, and shock radio, there is intense competition for readers and viewers. The more readers or viewers, the greater the advertising revenues. So, successful articles and programs are those that maximize emotional issues, celebrities' sexual peccadilloes, and controversy involving religion and morality. Although it is interesting and important to point out the logical errors and distortions of pop media talkers and writers, it is most unlikely that they will change the formula that makes them so highly successful.

There are still war correspondents who reveal in their questions and writing a sophisticated knowledge of weaponry and military matters, and there are other reporters sophisticated in specific areas of the law. However, by the mid-1970s, science reporters were rarely in evidence, particularly in psychology. Since that time, there has been steady but slow improvement. Several universities have established graduate programs in science writing. The AAAS has developed a Media Fellows program that provides scientists with an opportunity to gain firsthand experience in an array of media outlets. National Public Radio now has several well-trained science writers on its staff, and most major newspaper outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, among others, have specialized science writers on staff, some of whom specialize in writing on psychological topics. During the fall of 2001, the United Press International added seven additional science writers. In addition, *Science News* has on its staff a full-time psychologist–reporter, Bruce Bower, and *The New York Times* features a science section every Tuesday that often includes Jane Brody's informed articles on health and mental health.

As science and scientific findings become more important in affecting major national and political policy decisions, there is increasing political pressure on science and scientists. Examples are the issues of cloning, global warming, decisions about air quality, water pollution and deforestation, and genetic engineering of crops and animals. The list is extensive, and all its items are based on scientific findings whose implications are enormous. The rapid changes in human sexual behavior from procreational to recreational, for example, based on scientific findings that have led to effective contraception, have resulted in profound societal disagreements about what is acceptable sexual behavior.

Some observers suggest that the social and behavioral sciences are more subject to popular criticism and misunderstanding than other fields of science. This may not be true. The field of biology has been a major target of attacks by conservatives because of its strong reliance on a foundation of evolution. A recent 2001 Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series on evolution showed the current passionate attacks on the teaching of evolution in the public schools and the frequent demands for presenting the cre-

ation story as described in Genesis along with, or instead of, the theory of evolution. Sometimes, this conflict leads to bitter campaigns for election or defeat of members of school boards depending on their view on life's (and human) origins. The PBS series reported that currently, 2,000 public school boards across the nation, along with a large majority of private religious schools, insist on equal time in presenting the creation story (with some even forbidding the "evolution story").

An important point, it seems to me, is that science ultimately wins out. Scientific findings may elicit passionate opposition, censorship, and official (religious and secular) condemnation, but scientific findings that are valid and reliable persist, whereas their critics do not. It took 500 years for the Catholic Church to publicly admit that it was wrong in its opposition to Galileo's findings. Contrariwise, a political insistence on invalid, supposedly scientific conclusions does not survive empirical scientific ongoing evaluation. Lysenko's genetics, supported by powerful political authority, were doomed from the start.

I personally have experienced federal censorship of academic inquiry. For many years, the Vermont Conference on Primary Prevention of Psychopathology planned and hosted conferences on factors thought to be involved in producing stresses and other variables leading to emotional disorders in groups at risk. The papers presented were edited and appeared as books. Topics like family stress, child foster care, school programs, neighborhood changes, genetic and prenatal problems, the stresses of aging, delinquency, gender inequality, and marital disruption were covered in detail. Many of the conferences received financial support from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Yet, when I called to ask about support for a planned conference on the stresses of heterosexism and homophobia, my NIMH contact laughed at length and told me to forget about receiving any federal funding. He named several members of Congress who would block any such funding because it would be seen, incorrectly, as supporting homosexuality. Legislators themselves have a range of religions and moral views, and they are sensitive to the views of important blocks of constituents. They obviously do not always support research on sensitive topics or the publication of scientific findings that contradict conventional beliefs.

It upsets me when contemporary federal scientists remain silent, for example, when their leader, a powerful scientist–administrator, states as proven, "Mental illness can be cured with drugs," or says, "We now know that schizophrenia is genetic," or "All mental illnesses are diseases of the brain." Why is there no outcry about these politically correct scientific inaccuracies? It is sometimes dangerous to speak truth to power. How can psychology, as a discipline, work to see that true facts are ultimately made publicly available?

Everyone agrees that, as psychologists, we must do a better job of educating the public about science and scientific methods, as well as about the ways science corrects itself. However, it is probably the case that such activities will not totally solve the problem. To suggest that psychology (or biology) must educate the media or politicians on scientific methods, as though such information would change their readiness to attack views that contradict deeply held attitudes, is not realistic.

There is also another way for psychology to educate the public. That is through the traditional educational process. Nearly everyone going to college takes at least one course in psychology. This is usually a broad survey of the field. When I took Introductory Psychology more than 60 years ago, the first half-dozen classes were devoted to establishing psychology's credentials as a science. There was detailed consideration of scientific methods, including hypothesis testing and the logic of the experiment. The concepts of reliability and validity were stressed. Today's introductory course has much more content to cover, but instructors should be encouraged and prepared to emphasize the discipline of scientific research and to be sure undergraduates understand the logic and power of scientific methods.

More and more, psychology is being offered as an elective in the high schools, and high school teachers of psychology are being recognized, included, and supported by the APA. Here is another large and significant path to reaching young people with solid information about scientific psychology and its methods. Efforts within the APA Education Directorate, as well as portions of the Year 2002 Presidential Initiative to develop an APA high school psychology textbook, should prove useful in this area.

Graduate students in scientific fields of psychology and applied areas like clinical psychology (as well as in social work and related disciplines) should receive thorough education in scientific logic and methods. However, it may be worth noting that the defense of the peer review system in the current controversy was made by people with solid scientific credentials who were not listened to or believed. Though the best preparation in science is highly desirable, there are sometimes circumstances that challenge reason and weaken resolve. The present controversy should provide a warning and may well provide material for further education of tomorrow's leaders in psychology.

Long ago, as a student, I learned that science insists on framing its hypotheses as falsifiable sentences and then tries mightily to falsify them. Science then holds onto the statements it cannot disprove, even if they run counter to widespread beliefs. However, nothing is ever accepted as certain; the null hypothesis must always be rejected at some level of certainty less than absolute. Scientists must defend the hypotheses they hold onto from the criticism and rejection of those who find them unacceptable for political, religious, or economic reasons.

All of this sounds good in the abstract. In the real world, though, where religious or political or economic power may control one's funding, one's job security, even one's personal freedom and the well-being of one's field, one's choices may not be easy. Scientists are fundamentally correct in saying they must not reject or deny their findings because they are not acceptable to groups with

enormous power. Yet it is also true that one may sometimes retreat to fight another day. Eventually, however, scientists believe scientific truth endures and false knowledge does not.

With the appearance of this special issue, the published exploration of these events in the pages of the *American Psychologist* is concluded. As promised, moderated discussion of new ideas and perspectives will appear at the *American Psychologist* Web site, beginning this month. The URL is http://journals.apa.org/comments. Interested parties should offer reasoned comments no more than once a month per person.

It is my expectation that this controversy, like earlier controversies in psychology, will have a positive effect on focusing the attention of psychologists on critically important issues. I believe there will be major efforts at better informing the public about science. Also, there will be increased sensitivity to the power of and danger from exploiters of controversial issues.

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