

(Code: APANewOrleans)

## **The APA and Psychology Need Reform**

**Nicholas A. Cummings, Ph.D., Sc.D.**

**Presented as part of the panel, “Psychology Needs Reform –**

**APA Presidents Debate the 10 Amendments.”**

**Former Presidents Frank Farley, Bonnie Strickland, & Nicholas Cummings**

**APA Convention, New Orleans, August 12, 2006**

Intelligent Americans who look beyond Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura or other media pop psychology shows may well be wondering what is going on with psychology, as it seems to have lost touch with the American people. Especially is this enigma expressed among persons old enough to remember that in the post-World War II era and well into the 50s, 60s and 70s psychology was a rising star and even considered the hope for the future. How far we have fallen is illustrated by the publication in 2003 by four prominent psychologists who found that on their test the personality of Ronald Reagan was almost identical with those of Hitler, Stalin and Mao. I have long ago learned not to be surprised when my intelligent colleagues are not outraged, and I mused that if a test in biology could not differentiate between jackals and humans, it would be tossed out with disdain and the researchers would be drummed out of the science. But I was curious why the media did not make more of this. I called the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and got a ho-hum response. The report was dismissed as another peculiarity of an esoteric profession. “Besides,” one editor told me, “psychology is not that important to the public anymore.”

The disconnect between psychology and the American people is large and growing. How this happened is a matter of little known APA history. In the late 1960s there began

a loud clamor within psychology that the APA advocate for the science and the profession, especially with Congress and the White House. I was part of that movement, and was one of three founders of CAPP (not the more modern CAPP, a professional-advocacy organization, but the Council for the Advancement of the Psychological Professions and Sciences) which in its first year made more presentations on Capitol Hill than the APA had done in its entire previous history. Its success led to the formation of the AAP, the Association for the Advancement of Psychology, which remains strong and active to this day. But with advocacy came an array of political agendas far outside APA advocating for the science and profession, and a need arose as to why and when official policy pronouncements were made by the APA. In 1973 under President Leona Tyler the Council of Representatives and the Board of Directors established the principle that when we speak as psychologists we speak from research evidence and clinical experience and expertise. Without that, every psychologist is free to speak their opinion as a citizen through a myriad of advocacy organizations, but when we spoke as psychologists the evidence had to be there. To violate this rule the APA would risk loss of credibility, making it just another ideological voice clamoring to be heard in a sea of opinions. Those of us who followed Leona Tyler as APA presidents zealously guarded our scientific and clinical integrity, and for years psychology continued to enjoy public respect. Soon, however, the Leona Tyler Principle, which was never repealed, was repeatedly ignored and even trampled. It was inevitable that we lost credibility as a science and profession speaking from evidence, and we now are regarded as an opinionated body that is in a huge disconnect with the American public.

Worse, we are the only scientific/professional society ever censured (and I might add unanimously so) by the United States House of Representatives. Most APA members are unaware of the event, and those who know seem to blame “Dr. Laura” Schlesinger who seized upon the publication by an APA journal of a meta-analysis and interview study of college students who had been sexually molested as children. The publication challenged the notion that these experiences had been deleterious, setting off a firestorm that culminated in the APA being summoned by a Congressional committee to explain its views on the effects of pedophilia. The public and the Congress are strongly in favor of academic freedom, but not at the risk of harm to their children. Apparently not realizing this, or dismissing it as unimportant, the APA testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives focused on academic freedom, thus relegating pedophilia to a subordinate role. So bad was the disconnect between psychology’s leadership and American society that it was shocked when the censure motion passed unanimously, with even the two psychologist members of the House of Representatives abstaining rather than voting against it.

Now that we have visited this monumental disconnect between society and the American people, let us look at just a sample of other disconnects, but first, a disclaimer, included here because in March 2005 the editor-in-chief of the *Monitor on Psychology* cavalierly dismissed the Wright/Cummings book on which this panel is based as a “right wing manifesto” that should be ignored by APA publications.

I have been privileged to serve over many years in a variety of government advisory roles, all with Democrats. I served President Kennedy’s Task Force on Mental Health and President Carter’s Mental Health Commission. I was advisor for 3 years to the U.S.

Subcommittee on Health when it was chaired by Senator Ted Kennedy, and the Senate Finance Committee when it was chaired by Democrat Russell Long. I have never served a Republican president or Republican member of Congress. I have always been an activist for social justice, including gay marriage, and appointed psychology's first Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs and the first Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Issues during my APA presidency. But I also believe in patient choice of therapeutic goals and respect and treat both my liberal and conservative patients accordingly. In an era when the profession of psychology is in decline, incomes are flat, and the science of psychology is at the crossroads, I resent my APA squandering what little public respect that remains on a pronouncement about the names of athletic team mascots. We were not only a public laughing stock, colleagues, this is NOT the burning issue facing the beleaguered profession and science of psychology.

Now, some more disconnects. I have a list of over 100 and these are only a small sampling, chosen because they address vital societal concerns.

- A large body of evidence outside psychology reveals that children of single parents are several times more likely to be in trouble with the law in adolescence or early adulthood. Why is psychology not studying this? Is it because it is politically incorrect to question challenges to traditional marriage? A woman has a right to be a single mom, but do we not have an obligation to help her make an informed decision about pregnancy?
- Teenage girls who are sexually active are three times more likely to be depressed and three times more likely to attempt suicide than girls who are not sexually active. Where is the psychological research on why? Is it because it is politically

correct to counsel teenage girls to use latex but incorrect to encourage them to refrain from early sex?

- How many here have heard of the hormone **oxytocin**, extensively studied by the neuroscientists? It is chemically a peptide (amino acid) chain manufactured in the hypothalamus, stored in the posterior lobe of the pituitary, and released into the blood to trigger a fascinating group of related functions. In the brain, oxytocin receptors are found in the amygdala, the ventromedial hypothalamus, the septum and the brain stem. Of importance to us, it is a “messenger” from the brain to relevant organs, such as to the uterus to induce labor and control post-delivery bleeding, and to the breasts to let down milk. It is instrumental in mother-child attachment, and is thought to play a role in bonding, such as in friendship and romantic attachment. We now know it is released in sexual activity, and may account for why young women are more devastated by the casualness of casual sex than are males. It should be of prime interest to psychologists that oxytocin release can be classically conditioned, often with unintended consequences, such as causing the female to be more susceptible to depression in superficial relationships than the male. Or to be overly trusting of undeserving and even violent males. Where is the psychological research? Is it politically incorrect to say women and men are not the same in this regard? Our physician counterparts do not hesitate to warn smoking women that they have twice the risk of lung cancer over that of men. They do not hesitate to tell women they are several times more likely to suffer illness from excessive drinking than do men. Are they more committed to science over political correctness than we?

- 60% of physicists and chemists on college faculties profess a religious affiliation, while only 10% of their counterparts in psychology do. Religion is regarded as unscientific. Are physicists less scientific than we who inhabit the so-called “soft” science, or are they less concerned with political correctness? Almost 90% of Americans express a belief in God. Is this disconnect causing more and more religious Americans to distrust psychotherapy and to ask for religiously affiliated counselors, resulting in a rapid proliferation of faith-based counseling centers?
- Taboo is the study of intelligence that might reveal innate individual differences and thus lower self-esteem, preventing meaningful research that might address the so far elusive reason why so many children cannot learn.
- The APA’s official endorsement of gay marriage, citing the flimsiest of research evidence, may have contributed to the escalating backlash against gay marriage. Does any serious scientist regard as evidence the following: loving relationships are mentally healthy, gay marriage is a type of loving relationship, therefore gay marriage is mentally healthy. Good grief! This statement is so elastic it could be stretched to justify polygamy, marriage to your own mother, or even your lovable pet dog.
- Questioning the efficacy of certain popular but potentially harmful therapies is equated with lack of compassion toward those who are ostensibly benefiting from such dubious treatments. Thus, when it became apparent that over-zealous therapists were implanting false memories of repressed incest in their patients, the APA’s politically correct propensity for disbelieving the accused male paralyzed for years a special committee assigned to study false memories, and prevented it

from taking corrective action. It remained for the courts that had first incarcerated innocent fathers based mainly on flawed psychological testimony to now release them.

- Similarly the APA did not take a stand on rebirthing therapy that resulted in a Denver child's suffocation when the birth process was simulated with tight blankets. Again, it left it up to the courts with no help from psychology. However, the leadership in the APA has not hesitated to attack therapists practicing reparative therapy, treatment to help willing patients to overcome same sex attraction. On the other hand, therapy to help patients "come out" is highly encouraged, making sexual preference a one-way street. The APA Council came within a couple of votes of declaring reparative therapy to be unethical, and the leadership vows to try again. In the meantime the attacks on reparative therapy have made patient choice more difficult, rendering the APA rather than the consumer the de facto determiner of therapeutic goals.

There is a long list of topics the APA deems politically incorrect about which it responds, "There is no evidence to that effect." But is the evidence lacking because it is politically incorrect to engage in that research? As has often been pointed out, the most limiting and dangerous biases are those that are unexamined and thus exert their effect in an unreflective manner. Frighteningly, those who defy the unwritten politically correct edicts are demonized and their scientific contributions marginalized. As a fledgling psychologist I lived through the McCarthy era with its Hollywood witch hunts, and as abominable as this was, there was not the insidious sense of intellectual intimidation that exists in my politically correct profession today. Then I knew the oppressors, the John

Birch society and others who would stifle free speech, seeing psychology as dangerous because it championed the individual's right to fulfillment of intellectual and emotional potential. Now those who would tell me what to research or practice are all around me. They are my colleagues, our teachers, our supervisors, our journal editors, and our APA leadership, and all those who have sacrificed patient welfare and jettisoned scientific investigation in favor of ideology. Has the potential harm to our patients now made us the dangerous profession we were once falsely accused of being?

When Dr. Wright and I were preparing our best selling book, *Destructive Trends in Mental Health: The well-Intentioned Path to Harm*, we were startled by how many colleagues who at first agreed to contribute chapters later withdrew, fearing that their participation could result in loss of promotion, denial of tenure, and even shunning. This was especially true among younger colleagues. Such intimidation is lamentable in a discipline that purports to be the champion of academic freedom and free speech.

Societal upheaval and individual dysfunction seem to be steadily getting worse, and psychology cannot proffer any comprehensive, understandable solutions that are readily implemented. So pitifully small are psychology's lasting societal solutions compared to the advances in medicine that in 1993, the never shy Albert Ellis was driven to say in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, "...the Judeo-Christian Bible is a self-help book that has probably enabled more people to make more extensive and intensive personality changes than all professional therapists combined." We psychologists may take issue with AI, but most of the American people would most heartily agree.

The future credibility of psychology as a profession and a science will rightly be assessed by general improvements in our society, just as medicine is being assessed by



the innumerable treatment advances and life style improvements that are contributing to well-being and remarkable increases in longevity. It is unfortunate, but perhaps understandable, why most Americans today believe that psychology is contributing little or nothing to societal cohesiveness, while perhaps even increasing divisiveness and social upheaval. How can we counter this? Certainly not by political correctness, or by increasing our disconnect with the public, thus making it less likely we will serve the public welfare as we are committed to do. This is why, of the over 100 disconnects in my repertoire I chose the ones I did, as attention to down-to-earth problems such as these is to be engaged with pertinent societal matters that we can bite off, chew and not only proffer workable and understandable solutions, but also ones that have preventive aspects as well. For example, I firmly believe that availability of abortion has resulted in less unwanted single parent pregnancies and thus helped reduce the crime level. But whereas psychology is strongly pro-choice (politically correct), it neglects the aspect of single parents producing future criminals (politically incorrect), rendering psychologists to be politically entangled, not scientifically respected. In the end, we are seen as part of the problem, not the solution.

The APA has more than 100,000 members, associates and affiliates, yet less than 200 elitists control its governance. They rotate year after year through its offices, boards, Council of Representatives, and its plethora of committees, in a kind of organizational musical chairs that assures the perpetuation of a political ideology and essentially disenfranchises the thousands of psychologists who might disagree. This same organizational structure hand picks the editors of its many journals, who, then, cherry pick reviewers who will not pass for publication any scientific or professional paper that

is not in synch with sanitized thought. Hundreds if not thousands of psychologists have chosen not to belong to the APA, have recently dropped out, or have defected to the APS and perhaps to the new NAPPP, while others feel their needs are not being met but hang in there to maintain their malpractice insurance and other benefits offered only to its members. Our national organization is balkanized into 60 divisions and even more by its affiliated state associations that represent special interests that vie for seats on the Council of Representatives. There is even more fractionation. Some of the divisions have sections, sometimes as many as six, thus honing the special interests into especially special interests, and adding even more to the already high dues burden. The Council chooses the members of the various boards, including the Board of Directors. The only office the membership at large votes for directly is the president, and since many members do not belong to a division, they have little voice in the manner in which most of the APA policies are promulgated and how the public declarations which repeatedly violate the Leona Tyler principle are foisted on us. A long time APA watcher who has attended the Council meetings for the past two decades sums its member activities thusly: 20% of Council's time is spent on diversity, 60% on assuring the perpetuation of the incumbents' participation in the various aspects of governance, and only 20% on issues of vital interest to the general membership. And why should it be different? Not being elected by the members at large, those in governance are only tangentially, or even unlikely to be responsive to their interests.

I have been urged to call for a new division that might somehow balance the APA's tilt to the left, but this seems like just another band-aid. At present the warring academic and professional coalitions on Council are unable to prevail against each other without

making alliances with the third, or public interest coalition from which most of the ideologies spring. In this way we sell out our science and profession to political ideology and political correctness. What we need is a gut-wrenching sweep of our troubled house. I propose that we do away with the current divisional governance, wiping out the fiefdoms of the special interests, and returning the organization to the membership on a one-member-one-vote democratic election process not only for the president, but also the Board of Directors and the Council of Representatives. Divisions and state associations could continue to exist, and can even advance candidates for election to Council and the Board of Directors, but they do not solely determine them. Yes, I am aware that such a clean sweep of our fractionated special interests for the good of the science and profession is a drastic step and will be fought tooth-and-nail by the status quo. In 1945 the APA saved itself by forming a dozen divisions. In the 1970s it saved itself again by granting power to the divisions to elect the Council through an allocation system of votes that determined how many seats each division/state association would have. These reforms sufficed for years, but now we are bogged down in fractionation, growing divisiveness, and member alienation. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we need another force, independent of the current corrupt governance, somewhat like the Albee Commission that prevented the self-destruction of the APA decades ago by arriving at our present system. George Albee, who died just a month ago, never envisaged that the solution of the previous crisis would eventually result in the present one. But George was an agent of change and of progress, and I am sure he would have agreed to our need for an overhaul.

---

Dr. Cummings is Distinguished Professor, University of Nevada, Reno; President, Cummings Foundation for Behavioral Health; Board Chair, The Nicholas & Dorothy Cummings Foundation; Board Chair,

CareIntegra. He served as APA president in 1979. He may be reached at 4781 Caughlin Parkway, Reno, NV 89519 or [CummFound@aol.com](mailto:CummFound@aol.com) The book on which the APA panel in New Orleans is based is R.H> Wright & N.A. Cummings (2005), *Destructive Trends in Mental Health: The Well Intentioned Path to Harm*. New York: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group).