

Making psychology a household word

MAKING Psychology a Household Word was an overarching theme of my 2005 presidency of the American Psychological Association. As members of a learned profession, we have a great deal to offer society. To accomplish that we must continue to tackle society's most pressing problems and also raise the visibility and perceived relevance of psychology to solving a wide range of personal, health, educational, social, and family problems. Through mobilising members to promote the contributions of psychology to society, I hoped to help the public recognise psychology's position as a premier science and profession.

The germ of the idea for this theme came to me during the 2003 APA Convention. While walking to a program in downtown Toronto, I overheard a snippet of a conversation between two young Canadian women. One said to the other: 'Yuk. He's so weird! He really should see one of those psychologists who are walking around here.' 'That's it!' I thought. 'People think you have to be "weird" to see a psychologist.' The public tends to view psychologists narrowly, associating us chiefly with our expertise in mental illness. From that perspective you might seek out a psychologist if your child has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or if you or someone you love suffers from depression or a substance abuse problem.

In reality, psychologists can promote coping and wellness, in addition to diagnosing and treating mental illness. Many people today have significant stress in their lives, and we all undergo crises and life-stage transitions as a normal part of life. Psychologists can help people assess how they are coping with current stresses and develop new skills and strategies. A lot of people find that their stress levels have



Former American Psychological Association President
RONALD F. LEVANT on how he has mobilised members to promote the contributions of psychology to society.

increased in this era of wars, terrorism and natural disasters. We, as psychologists, could do much more to prevent problems by helping people learn to cope and build their resilience.

Psychological check-ups

I wondered what it would take to normalise our public image, and thought about the idea of the 'psychological check-up'. A colleague, Rosalind Dorlen, suggested I look into dentistry, which changed its public image in the 1950s by teaming up with Ipana Toothpaste in a public education campaign which promoted the idea of the dental check-up. This campaign led to major changes not only in the public image of dentistry but also in the very nature and public impact of dental practice. Dentistry moved from a focus on restorative dentistry to an emphasis on preventive dentistry. You have all witnessed the success of this transition. People no longer wait for a toothache to visit their dentist, and employers routinely include preventive examinations and cleanings as a dental benefit.

I began to imagine a day in the not too distant future when people will make appointments for psychological check-ups. These may address their stress level and their psychological well-being, auditing their work/family life balance, their relationships, how they are caring for their children or aging parents, and health basics like diet, nutrition, sleep, and exercise.

I experimented with the idea of a public education campaign that would help make the public more comfortable and familiar with the role that the psychologist can play in their lives. I developed a public service announcement for radio in January 2004

that discussed how people might get regular psychological check-ups, in the same way that they get medical and dental check-ups, which resulted in over one million 'impressions' (listeners reached) in one day in the state of Florida.

Despite these initial promising results, focus group testing by the APA Practice Directorate in June 2004 indicated that the public did not seem quite ready to accept this approach. Some said they would be more inclined to seek a psychological check-up if their physician suggested it and if their health insurance covered it.

However, the public may eventually come around to accepting the idea of the psychological check-up. After all, when the APA's public education campaign was first launched over a decade ago, the public believed that using the phrase 'talk to a psychologist' seemed too pushy, so the campaign instead used the phrase 'talk to someone who can help'. Yet, today, a new iteration of the APA public education campaign, much more direct in its approach, has begun.

As for APA members, the campaign theme: 'Make Psychology a Household Word' seemed to resonate with many of them. Some voiced a desire to have the public better understand and be more appreciative of the value of psychology, and some even said they voted for me because they so strongly agreed with the idea of making psychology a household word.

While I greatly appreciate members' support for my efforts to increase the public's support for our field, I've also come to understand that any effort to make psychology a household word is bigger than one person and bigger than one

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presidential term. In other words, every member needs to participate in making psychology a household word.

Prior efforts

This is not new, of course. The APA has been doing this for a very long time. My efforts stand on the shoulders of many APA presidents who have gone before me. One of the earlier efforts was George Miller's famous call in 1969 to 'Give psychology away' to the public.

However, as former APA President Patrick H. DeLeon has often said, psychology will become a household word only to the extent that it truly addresses the public's most pressing problems. I want to advance the idea that for psychology to fulfil its promise, we must grapple with the big issues, namely society's most pressing problems.

Psychology has a long history of addressing such public needs. Scientific research has made important contributions to violence and its prevention, poverty, attitude change, racism, homelessness, and conflict resolution. One former APA president exemplified this better than anyone I know – Dr Kenneth Bancroft Clark, arguably the 20th century's most influential psychologist. Dr Clark's pioneering research, conducted with his wife Dr Mamie Phipps Clark, opened school doors for a generation of African-American children, by providing the empirical foundation for Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion, in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, that separating black children from white children in schools 'solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.'

The task force

During my presidential term, I created the Making Psychology a Household Word Task Force. Several hundred members participated. We worked closely with APA's

Practice Directorate, which has a decade of experience in educating the public about psychology, on a limited budget.

The Household Word initiative trained task force members to do community outreach by giving public presentations based on three tool kits available to members. The tool kits provide substantive materials and practical advice for both organising and giving presentations to community groups on the warning signs of violence, building resilience, and – in the newest kit – on the mind–body connection. Once the task force members obtained training they, in turn, provided training to others in their home states or through their divisions. The website provides information about how to order public education tool kits (<http://apapractice.org/apo/public/mbtoolkit.html>).

The tool kit themes are all designed to

values. The tool kits are useful both because the themes are selected using market research, which allows us to assess what the public says it wants from psychology, and also because their content is based on the best available knowledge. Those materials are thus responsive to the public, and are also helpful to busy psychologists who like to have prepared materials to accompany their presentations and who feel most comfortable using such materials.

The stage is set

Research done by the Practice Directorate over the past decade shows that the public believes a connection exists between physical and psychological health, and that their emotional health deserves the same careful attention given to their physical health. In addition, empirical research supports the efficacy, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of psychological interventions in health, wellness, and longevity. In short, the stage is set for the public's (as well as policymakers' and healthcare payers') full embrace of our field and for the true integration of psychology into health care, if we make them aware of our scientific knowledge and professional skills. I was glad to spend much of my energy and the influence of the APA presidency communicating the value of psychology.

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Psychological research made important contributions to challenging racist education policy in the US

help communicate psychology's value in helping people to live well across a broad spectrum of life's dimensions, ranging from health, to employment, to community safety, to family relationships. The themes support our discipline's emphasis on building human strengths, and, more importantly, they speak to issues that our public opinion research tells us the public

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A UK PERSPECTIVE

Turn over for a response from Professor Graham Davey, Chair of the Society's Publications and Communications Board.

Taking psychology to the people... and making them listen

WHAT does psychology have to offer the general public? Would the person in the street be remotely interested in what both professional and academic psychologists have to say to them? Even if they were interested in what we had to say, would we be able to say it in a way that they were able to understand and act upon? These are testing questions for anyone who wants to 'take psychology to the people' and if psychology is to become an influential discipline in society and everyday life, then they are questions that need seriously addressing.

Learned and professional organisations such as the APA and the BPS have an obligation to engage the general public with their discipline, to disseminate knowledge about their subject generally, and to enlighten the public about ways in which their discipline may benefit both society and the individuals who live in it. As members of the British Psychological Society we are often aware of the professional and academic roles that the Society plays, but we often forget that the first words of our Royal Charter are: 'To promote the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology pure and applied...'. One of the three major aims of the Society within the remit of its Royal Charter is 'to raise public awareness of psychology and increase the influence of psychological practice in society'.

Raising public awareness of psychology is largely the responsibility of the Society's Publications and Communications Board, and until recently public engagement activities within the Society were planned and managed through the Public Engagement with



GRAHAM C.L. DAVEY, *Former Society President and Chair of the Publications and Communications Board, responds to Ronald Levant (see previous page).*

Psychology Group (PEPG). The purpose of the PEPG was to increase the number of public engagement events, as part of the Society's strategy of 'Bringing Psychology

Public lectures and seminars reach at best only a few hundred people. If the members of the audience also have status and influence, then the message of the lecture may go slightly further, but probably not much further.

What about features in the media? Each year there is good press coverage of our Society conferences – this gives the general public a feel for the kinds of questions the discipline is addressing and the kinds of answers that we can sometimes come up with. But often these issues are quite specific and quite academic in their approach, and although such exposure might be good for raising the brand name profile of psychology, it does little to give the lay person a broader perspective of what psychology covers, what it can do, and how its application can have a positive impact on daily life.

Recently, the Publications and Communications Board has been reviewing the Society's approach to public engagement. This has involved us asking many more questions than we first envisaged. These include: (a) How do we define the audiences that we are trying to reach? (b) What does psychology have to offer and what aspects of psychology would the general public be interested in and willing to listen to? and (c) How can the Society best achieve its aims of 'raising public awareness of psychology and increasing the influence of psychological practice in society'?

What are the audiences?

Very often the audience is defined by what we want to achieve. For example, pursuing the goal of 'encouraging an understanding

Psychology has a lot to offer on all of the above

to Society'. PEPG operated a small grants scheme which provided funding on a competitive basis for subsystems, branches or individual members to organise public engagement events. PEPG also jointly organises an annual joint lecture with the British Academy; day seminars with the Nuffield Foundation; events with the Dana Centre (part of the Science Museum); and a sponsored link scheme between Society branches and British Association branches.

Is this enough? Is it money well spent?

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British Psychological Society public engagement grants scheme: www.bps.org.uk/pepg

of the role of psychology in everyday life and how psychology can be used to promote well-being, productivity and achievement' would require us targeting not only the general public, but also those who make important decisions about how well-being, productivity and achievement are currently managed in our society.

However, if our aim is to 'educate individuals as to the role and function of psychology, and to develop and sustain the discipline and profession', then our sights should be set on persuading children to study psychology at school, school children to progress to studying psychology at university, and psychology graduates to take their knowledge and expertise into careers where they can use their psychological knowledge to influence policy and practice. We already try to influence policy makers, service users and employers through our responses to government and other consultation processes, and our Policy Support Unit and Parliamentary Office have been particularly successful in raising our level of response to these processes.

However, the Society does need to become more proactive in its attempts to influence policy and opinion. It needs to make position statements on issues of social importance on which psychology has something professionally and academically to offer, and not simply wait until requested to respond to initiatives that have already been grasped by others. For instance, what does psychology have to offer on issues such as terrorism, poverty, racism and cultural integration, child development and education, crime and violence, to name but a few? An awful lot, I suspect – so let's make our knowledge and expertise available now. I will return to this issue in the next section.

Why should people listen?

Try telling the person in the street that, using an emotional Stroop procedure, you've just discovered that feeling anxious makes people selectively attend to threatening material. They are likely to say 'What does it mean for me – a single mother struggling to give my daughter a decent education in a deprived area of an inner city that is riddled with crime and corruption'? People may be interested in what psychology has to offer out of interested curiosity (such as hearing about the role that psychological profiling may have in identifying murderers and rapists),

but much of this is irrelevant to the individual's own experiences of daily living. I share Ronald Levant's endorsement of former APA President Patrick H. DeLeon's view that psychology needs to truly address the public's most pressing problems, and as yet we have made almost no impression in these relevant areas.

So what are the public's most pressing problems? On a broader level, they are issues that we see regularly headlined in newspapers – terrorism, health care provision, poverty, racism and cultural integration, immigration, education, and crime and violence. Or at least this is what newspapers say people are concerned about. Even so, these may not be personal issues, but they are issues on which psychology has something informative to say and that have an indirect impact on how individuals live their lives. On a more personal level, people's problems revolve around daily stressors, relationships, parenting, self-esteem, feeling and expressing emotions, working conditions, financial problems, etc. Psychology needs to find a way of providing knowledgeable and evidence-based advice on how the individual can learn to deal with these matters more effectively.

Walking the walk

How can we/the Society raise public awareness of psychology and increase the influence of psychological practice in society? This is the crux of the matter. When we have identified our audience and the matters on which we believe psychology has something to say, how do we go about conveying this? There are a number of possible approaches. We can try using media that enable us to reach as big an audience as possible (e.g. TV, popular press, etc.) – something that we have actually been doing with our outputs from our conferences, Journals and the like for 20-plus years. We can selectively target those who are likely to have the biggest impact on public policy. And we can attempt to produce sustainable resources that can be duplicated and regularly used across a range of settings and audiences (e.g. DVDs, web-based resources).

We are currently exploring at least some of these options. For example, in 2006 our Board of Trustees approved a joint project with the publishing company EMAP to produce four supplements to the magazine *Top Santé*. These supplements are designed

to introduce the reader to the role that psychology can and does play in dealing with and understanding everyday problems. The supplements intend to be unashamedly positive in their stance, describing how psychology can provide day-to-day solutions to problems, and improve well-being and quality of life. Expert members of the Society will be consulted on the content of articles, and the P&C Board has an editorial panel working with the publishers/editors. The first edition, published in February 2007, contains articles on everyday methods of dealing with stress and anxiety, parent-daughter relationships, understanding your kids, and some personal experiences of psychotherapy, amongst others.

The Society will be reviewing the success of this approach to public engagement when the impact of the first four editions has been assessed and reviewed. The Publications and Communications Board has also revised their small grants scheme to encourage the development of sustainable resources for public engagement (e.g. the production of CDs, DVDs, websites). This is designed to encourage the growth of materials that can be used regularly to raise public awareness of psychology, and we hope that members will be encouraged to use this scheme.

Conclusions

I hope this article has communicated some of the important issues that need to be considered when trying to raise public awareness of psychology. Hopefully, the Society can embark on a more sustained effort to 'make psychology a household word', can try and proactively develop influential views on a range of relevant matters of social importance, and – perhaps most importantly of all – develop ways of effectively communicating to people how they can begin to deal with their 'most pressing problems'.

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HAVE YOUR SAY

Who are our audiences, how do we reach them and what with? Send your views on 'taking psychology to the people' as letters for publication to psychologist@bps.org.uk or at the Leicester office address, or contribute to our members-only web forum via www.psychforum.org.uk.