

WASHINGTON UPDATE¹

Ronald F. Levant

Go Boldly Forth! Making Psychology a Household Word

From my vantage point as both a dean of a graduate school of psychology and an officer of the American Psychological Association I have unique opportunities to reflect on the applicability of psychology to everyday life.

Over the past few decades, psychology has, commendably, gained a higher profile in our society. But I envision a future in which psychology will become a household word, and psychologists will enjoy the status of physicians in our society.

Certain qualities of our dynamic discipline/profession have been moving us toward greater relevance to our society. There is tremendous creativity within psychology that enables us to respond to an expanding set of human needs, developing increasing areas of science, application, and service. Moreover, psychologists tend to question authority and put things to the empirical test, which helps advance the field. Many psychologists are also activists, and choose not to wait in the ivory towers for the public to clamor over their discoveries, but instead use sophisticated political skills to insure the public's access to psychological services and public support for psychological science. Psychologists are also tremendously responsive to people in need, whether they be victims of disasters or minorities who are chronically underserved and discriminated against, such as ethno-cultural minorities, gays and lesbians, women, the poor, and persons with disabilities.

When lay people think of psychology, they often think of helping people suffering from emotional illness (like anxiety or depression), marital and family problems (like

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domestic violence or unmanageable children), or substance abuse. While psychology certainly deals with these problems, few realize how broadly applicable psychology is to everyday life.

Psychology, 110 years old, has grown and diversified beyond the dreams of its early pioneers, and has produced research-based applications for nearly every aspect of human endeavor. From health care to education, family life to corrections, religion to the arts, business and industry to law, and from sports to the military and on to engineering, it is hard to find an area of human activity where psychology doesn't have relevance. A few examples illustrate this point:

- ❑ Psychology helps teachers design instruction to meet individual student needs;
- ❑ Psychology helps patients manage chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension manage;
- ❑ Psychology improves safety by advising the aviation industry on how to design cockpits and fire departments on the color of fire engines;
- ❑ Psychology helps athletes and executives reach their peak performance;
- ❑ Psychology advises the FBI on how to combat terrorism.
- ❑ Psychology helps public health officials prevent injuries and violence.

The broad applicability of psychology is reflected in the careers of some notable psychologists: Colleen Hacker, Coach of the U.S. Women's Soccer Team; Ted Strickland and Brian Baird, U.S. Congresspersons; Judith Albino, Richard Atkinson, Judith Rodin, and Sharon Brehm, University Presidents and Chancellors; John Gardner, Secretary of the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare; Nicholas Cummings, CEO of American Biodyne, Inc.; Joyce Brothers, media psychologist; Bill Cosby, entertainer;

Jonathan Kellerman, novelist; Dick Suinn, Mayor of Fort Collins, CO; Tom Osborne, Coach of the # 1 Nebraska football team and now U.S. Congressperson; William Bevan, Bel Williams, and Ruby Takanishi, leaders of major foundations; Alan Leshner, Director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse and now CEO of the American Academy of Science; Kathy Hawks, Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons; and Beverly Malone, Deputy Surgeon General of the U.S.

Furthermore, the scope of psychological practice is expanding and diversifying into new areas, areas where the distinction between applied scientist and professional practitioner begins to blur, such as health psychology (and its related aspects such as psychology in primary care, psychoneuroimmunology, and applied psychophysiology), and also: neuropsychology, rehabilitation psychology, forensic psychology, child and family psychology, multicultural psychology, geropsychology, business and industry consultation, and psychopharmacology. The future evolution of professional psychology will entail the development of roles that do not now exist or are just emerging, in general health care, public sector care of those diagnosed with serious mental illnesses, the public policy arena, the courts, the correctional system, the military, schools, businesses, communities of faith, and the media in the numbers that psychologists entered the role of outpatient therapist in the 1970s and 80s.

But above and beyond the career paths of extraordinary psychologists and evolution of new roles responsive to public need, I envision a future in which psychology becomes a household word and psychologists enjoy the status of physicians in our society. Consider this: most of us see our optometrist once per year, our dentist twice per year, our internist once per year. I can imagine a day in the not too distant future when people

will make appointments for **annual psychological checkups**. At these checkups they will address such matters as their stress level and their psychological well being, auditing their work/family life balance, their relationships, how they are managing children and/or aging parents, and health basics like diet, nutrition, sleep and exercise.

Less than 5% of the population have doctoral degrees. Hence, we are the educated elite of our time. Our chosen field, psychology, is applicable to every aspect of human life. As former APA President Patrick DeLeon has said, if we take care of society's most pressing needs, society will take care of us. The future of psychology is as bright as we dare to imagine it to be.

As always, I welcome your thoughts on this column. You can most easily contact me via email: Rlevant@aol.com.

Biographical Sketch

Ronald F. Levant, Ed.D., A.B.P.P., is in his second term as Recording Secretary of the American Psychological Association. He was the 2002 recipient of the Herald Hildreth Award from APA Division 18, Chair of the APA Committee for the Advancement of Professional Practice (CAPP) from 1993-95, a member at large of the APA Board of Directors (1995-97), and APA Recording Secretary (1998-2000). He is Dean, Center for Psychological Studies, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL.