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RUNNING COMMENTARY

Social issues stances: why APA takes them

By Raymond D. Fowler, PhD
Chief Executive Officer

Why does APA take positions on controversial social issues like abortion, women's rights and military orientation? That's a question I'm often asked by members who oppose APA's position on social issues. Other members feel, just as passionately, that we should express ourselves even more strongly on a broad range of social problems. Still other members are not sure why APA has taken positions on some issues—such as desegregation of the public schools—and not on others, such as nuclear war and global warming. I'd like to provide some historical context for APA's social policy stand and describe how a determination is made of which positions to take.

The recent controversy surrounding President Clinton's effort to lift the ban on gays in the military illustrates the conflict that often accompanies social change of any kind. Desegregation of schools and the military, the women's rights movement, the legalization of abortion, AIDS education and others are all significant public issues.

While most of these changes are accepted by society over time, some—such as abortion, continue to stimulate heated debate. Recently, social issues have been so prominent that it is nearly impossible to turn on the television or pick up a newspaper without hearing the story featuring one.

Prior to World War II, APA's official role in social issues was minimal. When a position was taken, it usually centered on the rights of APA members. For example, the APA Committee on the Study for the Social Issues, which later became APA's Div. 9, was created in 1936, and the association's 1942 statement addressed the high rate of unemployment among psychologists during the Depression. In the early 1950s, APA addressed such social issues as academic freedom and the discrimination against African-American members at convention sites.

APA's bylaws were amended in 1956 to permit APA to take on social issues where psychologists have special competence, especially those that jeopardize APA's goals of discovering truth and applying scientific knowledge in the interest of human welfare.

Few would deny that in keeping with our mission of promoting human welfare, APA has a responsibility to share the literature of psychology. However, the membership has long held that whether or not it is included in a position statement is a matter of active stance, passing resolutions and advocating for our positions. Over the years, interpretations of our position have been debated, broadened and narrowed several times.

George Miller, PhD, in his now famous 1969 presidential address, encouraged us to engage with psychology in the public and to experts in other fields so that they could understand the conditions of things in and among us. Large APA President Leonia Tyler, PhD, in the late 1960s published the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Public Affairs, which included guidelines for determining the relative importance of issues to APA and the appropriate level of involvement. The essence of the "Tyler Report," which has often been used to guide the association, is that the association should focus its advocacy most prominently on areas where psychology has solid supporting research data.

While APA has taken stances over the years on issues that lie outside our expertise and for which there are no psychological data, we have, unfortunately, always never taken a position on space exploration. However, the range of issues on which we might take a stand is fairly broad, given that almost every social issue has a psychological component. APA has passed resolutions on a diverse array of issues, including Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, sexual orientation, corporal punishment, handgun control, nuclear arms, homelessness and more.

Since the mid-1970s, APA has kept close contact with policy-makers, federal agency administrators and Congress, with the mission of promoting accurate information among legislators on key issues at the right time. Our objective has been more to inform than to persuade, letting key decision-makers know what the research shows about better ways to treat the aged or the effects of violence on children, for example. In this process, APA has had the luxury of being repeatedly drawn on an incredible database, the PsyCINFO system, a tremendous national asset that also serves the world.

The Board of Directors will be discussing the limits of advocacy at one of its future retreat meetings. Only one thing is certain—that the 21st century will see more controversy concerning overpopulation, new diseases, and increased cultural diversity, among others. Psychology will continue to have a vital role to play and a significant contribution to make.