



Psyched Out in Left Field

The APA's psychologists never shrink from controversy.

In August 16,500 people came to Boston for the American Psychological Association's annual convention. The APA, which represents 159,000 clinicians, researchers, and educators, bills itself as the premiere scientific organization for psychologists in North America.

But anyone who wanted just plain science from the APA convention would have been mighty disappointed. In five days of meetings spread out over the Hynes Convention Center and four hotels, APA members could hear such leftist luminaries as Jesse Jackson, lawyer Angela Oh, and radical feminist Carol Gilligan. Or they could watch the latest play of psychotherapist Fred Newman, co-founder of the New Alliance Party with Lenora Fulani, which premiered at the convention.

The APA has long pushed an unabashedly left-liberal agenda. The Washington-based organization has filed amicus briefs before the Supreme Court in favor of unrestricted abortion rights and gay rights. It wholeheartedly supports affirmative action and even government employment tests adjusted to benefit minorities. Lately it's even developed a taste for perversity.

In July 1998, the APA's prestigious *Psychological Bulletin* published an article that seemed to condone pedophilia. "A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples" argued that the "negative potential" of sexual abuse has "been overstated." Its three co-authors contended that "child sex abuse" was too broad a term for a whole

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range of behavior that isn't always bad. Instead they suggested more "value neutral" descriptions; voluntary encounters could be called either "adult-child sex" or "adult-adolescent sex."

You might think that would raise eyebrows among the scientific community, especially since most of the research the "study" cited had not even been subject to peer review. Moreover, the authors had publicly expressed similar views before.

Nonetheless, the article went practically unnoticed until "Dr. Laura" Schlessinger attacked it on her nationally syndicated radio show March 22. The press took note. And soon Congress was turning the screws on the APA, or so it seemed.

On May 12, House Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas and three other GOP congressmen came to the National Press Club to denounce the APA. Joined by pro-family advocates, the congressmen were livid. DeLay said that "the lack of judgment shown by the APA in publishing the study absolutely confounds me." Arizona Rep. Matt Salmon lamented that "we as a society are not shocked by anything anymore. And now we have a so-called credible psychological organization in this country that purports to be saying that maybe sex with children isn't bad."

Evidently these congressmen didn't know that this "so-called credible psychological organization" has long been in bed with the federal government. Last year alone, the APA was awarded \$4.78 million in federal grants, most of them multi-year.

Indeed just one week before the pedophilia controversy broke on Dr. Laura's show, the Centers for Disease Control had given the APA the first installment

of a five-year AIDS education grant worth \$878,695. Around the same time, the APA was busy collaborating with another of its federal benefactors, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Under a congressional earmark, NIOSH has provided funding for APA support of workplace psychology training programs at the university graduate level since 1991. Other joint efforts date back to 1985.

Squeezed between praise by the North American Man/Boy Love Association and congressional attacks for its pedophilia article, the APA hid behind science. As an APA spokeswoman put it: "I think the issue is not so much about pedophilia but whether science should be allowed to ask tough questions. This is what science is about. You ask the question, and it begets another. If you don't report the data, then there is never any progress."

But as congressional outrage mounted, the APA backed down—just a bit. In a three-page letter to DeLay and Rep. David Weldon on June 9, APA Chief Executive Officer Raymond Fowler conceded "inconsistencies" in the report and he promised an independent review its research methods. Moreover, he wrote, "we recognize that we must take into account not only the scientific merit of articles but also their implication for public policy." And the APA takes the position that "the sexual abuse of children is a criminal act that is reprehensible in any context."

This was sufficient to satisfy Congress. DeLay happily accepted the APA apology and hailed the organization for "publicly recognizing its error in judgment." And on July 12 the House of Representatives voted 355-0 to condemn the study—but not the APA.

Just when the pedophilia controversy was petering out a new one erupted. In June 1999 the *American Psychologist*, which

all APA members receive, published "Deconstructing the Essential Father." The authors attacked the "neoconservative" claim that fathers are crucial to a child's development. Psychologists Carl Auerbach and Louise Silverstein insisted that the promotion of fatherhood discriminates against gay couples and single mothers. "We do not find any empirical support that marriage enhances fathering or that marriage civilizes men and protects children." Sometimes the presence of fathers is "detrimental" to both mother and child because they may squander the household money by gambling or buying alcohol or cigarettes.

Rep. Joseph Pitts and other congressmen complained to Fowler in an August 6 letter. Again, Fowler hid behind science. In a September 20 letter to Pitts, he said APA publications are designed to engender scientific debate. (Fowler did not return a phone call for this article.)

If the APA was stung by this criticism it wasn't evident at the August convention. True to form—psychologists, after all, coach their patients to avoid guilt and remorse—APA President Richard Suinn in his opening remarks said nothing about the recent unpleasantness. "Those controversies were initiated by a person in the public media," he later told *TAS*. "We thought it was clarified and we had closure in these areas."

So instead of harping on the past, APA honchos reveled in their diversity. A Hawaiian Ohana (family) ceremony celebrated various ethnic minorities—American Indians, blacks, Asians, Latinos, even "Euro-Americans"—each of them represented by an APA division president.

Suinn, a Hawaiian lei around his neck, then introduced keynote speaker Jesse Jackson, whom he called the "conscience of the nation." Ignoring the recent controversies, Jackson railed against the "jail industrial complex," demanded universal health care, accused the U.S. of rape (forced colonialism), trashed George W. Bush and even Ronald Reagan. "I would rather have Roosevelt in a wheelchair than Reagan on a horse," he offered to loud applause.

Jackson did make a brief reference to one of the convention's theme issues, cancer—he had just lost his brother to the disease and buried him earlier in the

day. Otherwise he was content to rehash most every leftist slogan uttered since the 1970's. He even closed with his trademark "keep hope alive."

It was the perfect kick-off for a convention dominated by panels that either relegated science to a mere afterthought or invoked science only to confer legitimacy on manifestly political assertions. The latter approach often required quite a leap of logic. Just consider the convention's two themes: cancer and diversity. The connection between psychology and cancer is obvious, if tenuous (helping families and victims cope). Although some of the cancer sessions were devoted to the "empowerment of women with cancer," most were straightforward and not politicized. Not so, of course, with the other co-theme. Unfortunately, there were all too many efforts to explain what psychology has to do with "diversity."

Perhaps the most curious explanation came from Julia Ramos-Grenier, a psychologist from Collinsville, Connecticut, who spoke at a panel on the "Promotion of Social Justice—Addressing Minority Issues in Psychology and Law." It offered all the usual complaints about the disproportionate number of minorities in jail because of the biased criminal justice system. But Ramos-Grenier tackled a slightly different problem.

Her paper on "Cultural Factors in Child Abuse and Neglect Evaluations" explained that white psychologists fail to be culturally sensitive and miss all sorts of nuances, even when a Hispanic mother smacks her kid in the head. In the example she cited, a Puerto Rican mother had her four children taken from her after she fractured one child's skull with her shoe. A non-Hispanic psychologist recommended the "termination of her parental rights with all children." Ramos-Grenier, however, later examined the mother at her lawyer's request and disagreed. She urged that the mother get all her kids back.

Ramos-Grenier explained that the white psychologist's judgment was impaired by a "lack of knowledge of the relevant cultural factors." Anger, for example, "is suppressed in the Puerto Rican culture during the development years." Consequently, Puerto Ricans often grow into adulthood with a "tendency to suppress anger until a

build-up and eruption occurs, leading to an over-reaction in the parent."

Lawyer Angela Oh made a valiant effort of her own to explain the seemingly unexplainable. Best known for her stint on President Clinton's race commission, the soft-spoken Oh first made her name apologizing for the virulently anti-Korean L.A. rioters. At a Sunday morning panel, Oh told a bizarre story. An Asian client had complained to her of racism by two of his colleagues. But she warned him against reaching any rash conclusions—to avoid the "seduction of reduction." Besides, where did he get this idea that they were racist? Nothing really; it's just that when he wasn't around they would urinate on his desk.

Oh was one of the convention's most popular figures, as crowds swooned around her both before and after her presentation. By contrast, Carl Auerbach, co-author of the fatherhood study, was barely noticed. With his gray suit and closely-cropped gray beard, Auerbach blended perfectly into the crowd as he and others went from meeting room to meeting room. As he looked over papers left outside a meeting room—just beyond a television light's glare—no one seemed to realize that this mild-mannered man had recently launched one of the most public attacks on fatherhood since Murphy Brown.

Other controversial figures were more visible. At a symposium on "Critical Issues for Women in the New Millennium," University of Arizona Professor Mary Koss shrugged off criticism that she had grossly exaggerated the prevalence of rape on college campuses. Her NIH-funded study had "found" that 27 percent of women on campuses had either been victims of rape or attempted rape. (The actual number may be less than 1 percent—it turned out that many women Koss classified as rape victims hadn't described their experience as such.)

Meanwhile, at a packed meeting for Division 44, the society for gay psychologists, members passionately discussed whether to welcome the "transgendered" community into their ranks. How quickly we forget that it was only in 1975 that the APA decided no longer to classify homosexuality as a mental disorder. At a left-liberal advocacy group like the APA, scientific progress can be rapid indeed. ❀