

Public Psychology: Demand, Supply—An Exploration

Frank Farley (frank.farley@comcast.net), Annette McMenamin Bakley, Ting Dai, Kristin Funk, Brad Litchfield, Tamarah Smith-Dyer, and Julia Walsh

“Science’s sole aim must be to lighten the burden of... human existence.”

—Galileo Galilei

Has psychology become a 130-year-old discipline that has promised more than it has delivered, has insufficiently contributed to the improvement of the human condition, and is misleading and under serving an unwary public? Is the American public being well served by psychology? Are we seeing crime and violence diminish, health improve, education improve, marriage and family life get better and happiness in an upward trajectory, all objectively attributable at least in part to our field? We are not a young discipline in the family of sciences if we date our beginning to Wundt in 1879. We are not a small discipline if one examines the membership numbers in our professional societies, which dwarf those of other fields such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science.

Despite this massive discipline, with our continuing huge college enrollments promising yet more future psychologists, it's not very clear what the correct answers should be to the questions posed above. The American public is facing a number of large scale social issues: a problematic healthcare system; an educational system that is the envy of no one, it seems; divorce and marital problems; and it remains a violent society by any international standards, with one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. Intergroup tensions, racism, sexism, and ageism remain high, despite some progress in these areas. Given all this, and our large mature discipline that talks about all these issues, and grinds out thousands of studies each year many of which are allegedly directed at these issues, why is psychology's impact on improving American life not more clear? This question is too big for the present brief report but a related question we provisionally tackle here is: how is all that work of psychology and psychologists being represented to the public through the media? The media is a conduit to understanding the public's perception of psychology and may be a means to estimate our public impact, and allow for some purchase on whether what we are “giving away” (Miller, 1969) is good, or whether some of it should be “taken back!”

In the present brief report, we looked at two aspects of “public psychology”: (1) the quantity of public media reference to our discipline and (2) the estimated quality of the media's psychological sources.

We examined print, television, and radio via 10 consecutive samples, which in some cases included 10 weeks (e.g., weekly magazine; July 13 to September 14, 2009) or 10 days (e.g. TV, radio, daily newspaper; August 26 to September 4, 2009) of material as constrained by each medium's publication schedule. The online search was restricted to two terms “psychology” and “psychologist.” The media websites examined included the weekly newsmagazine *Time Magazine*, Oprah.com and daily publications of episodes of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the daily content of *The New York Times*, CNN.com, FOXNews.com and National Public Radio. All original material identified by these search terms was reviewed to determine relevance to the field of psychology as defined by the use of identified psychologists as experts or references to published research. Consensus was reached by the present authors regarding the following criteria: if the media piece referred to psychological research and then, when possible, we examined the quality of the research cited including research design features of the original source document such as control group, reliable and valid measures, and the like (Agnew & Pyke, 2007), peer-review status of the journal, and the qualifications of the researchers.

A total of 107 media pieces or articles were retrieved referring to “psychology” or “psychologist” of which 62 met relevant criteria as defined above. Of these 62 psychologically relevant stories, 66% referred to a psychologist as an expert and approximately 44% referenced a published study. However, a substantial number of the studies cited by the various media utilized convenience samples which were very frequently college students in introduction to psychology courses, made unsupported generalizations, had weak methodology especially regarding external or ecological validity, were one-shot unreplicated studies, or failed to consider alternative interpretations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This is a very provisional/exploratory snapshot of one slice of psychology's public exposure with a limited methodology. It is an initial report which could be replicated and expanded over a longer time sampling of media coverage, examining more media sources, and made to include some more sophisticated design features. However, based on this limited examination, we would like to offer the following set of recommendations for discussion:

For Psychologists:

Psychological science should be producing research that has the PUBLIC GOOD as a priority, can be easily and clearly communicated to the public, and provides them with solutions



The Authors

Public Psychology

(continued from p. 9)

("SOLUTION SCIENCE") or preventative strategies. We urge the conducting of research with real-world applications or, even better, the conducting of research in real-world settings, using well-designed, proven methodologies, especially with both internal and external validity, and with a publication requirement that the study be replicated.

For the Media:

Support journalism school curricula that provide better training in critical thinking and understanding of the basics of behavioral research methodology and appropriate representation of findings and expert quotes. Bring the best research forward; reduce reliance on "infotainment" and "pop psych" as opposed to psychological science. Provide resources for the public to seek more information

on psychological topics covered in the media including one or more references or links to peer-reviewed citations when possible.

Popular media now have the ability more than ever to provide information and misinformation on topics related to psychology, however, consumers must understand that the content they are viewing and reading represents a small and possibly biased sample of the psychological information or knowledge available.

References

Agnew, N. M., & Pyke, S. W. (2007). *The science game: An introduction to research in the social sciences*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Miller, G. (1969). Psychology as a means of promoting human welfare. *American Psychologist*, 24, 1063-1075.

This brief report was a project of a "Public Psychology" course at Temple University.

Welcome to Our New President-Elect



Pauline Wallin, PhD

Pauline Wallin, PhD, comes well prepared for assuming the role of President-elect of Division 46. For the past 5 years she has served as Secretary of the Division, and coordinated the revision of the bylaws.

She has extensive experience with using (and teaching others how to use) the Internet for marketing and public education. Last August she presented three workshops (including an invited address) on this topic.

She has also done presentations on working with the media. For her media training workshops at the Pennsylvania Psychological Association she brought in local TV news reporters who coached workshop participants in effective media communications (e.g., sound bites, plain language).

Pauline is in private practice in Camp Hill, PA. She is author of *Taming Your Inner Brat: A Guide for Transforming Self-Defeating Behavior* and is frequently interviewed by mainstream media on related topics.

She was a content expert for two online courses (not yet published) by the APA Practice Organization: Using Technology in Psychological Practice; and Marketing Your Practice. She also teaches her own course: Market With Authority: Build Credibility and Professional Name Recognition on the Web.

Pauline invites all members to become more involved in Division 46 activities. Do you have a specific interest in some aspect of the media? There may be an opportunity for you to develop and/or work on a project within the Division. Contact Pauline: drwallin@drwallin.com.

Welcome to Our New Members-at-Large



Frank Farley, PhD



Lilli R. Friedland, PhD

Subscribe to Division 46 Listserv

Looking for a forum to join with others interested in a dialogue about Media Psychology issues? To subscribe to the Division's listserv, go to the following URL: <http://lists.apa.org/cgi-bin/wa.exe?HOME> Scroll down to DIV46-MEDIAPSYCH, click on it, and follow the instructions for joining the listserv. (Please note: You must be either an APA member or a Div. 46 member to be eligible to join.)