

An Auto Biography of APS

February 01, 2003

APS reminds me of VW's recently unveiled prototype that gets 239 MPG. The demo hybrid achieves this by stripped-down engineering (no unnecessary extras), superior materials (strong but not heavy), streamlined aerodynamics (no outside mirrors, just mini-cams), and fuel efficiency (converting energy normally lost). The APS focus on psychological science per se makes the Society just as lean and nice as the VW prototype. (In fact, lean and nice has been APS's unofficial motto from the beginning.) APS has no bureaucracy because it doesn't need any. Its compact size maximizes efficiency. Staff communicate seamlessly. Committees meet electronically. Consultation operates smoothly. Consensus emerges easily. Decisions occur rapidly. Its by-laws, budget, and board provide the minimum fuel needed to drive the projects APS members all hold dear: advocacy, journals, convention. APS resists trying to be something it's not, an SUV of organizations. The hybrid VW prototype can drive from New York to LA, and back, twice, and then to Chicago, on the same 50 gallons of gas that an average SUV needs just to get from New York to Gary, Indiana. APS goes far on a limited fuel supply. But the VW wasn't designed to carry a large group, nor can it go everywhere.

By comparison and by necessity, APA functions as more of an SUV, with all its advantages for carrying a crowd and weathering whatever terrain its more variable road surface presents. Four-wheel drive and a sturdy chassis are essential when the going gets tough within the organization, as it does for the variety of agendas and constituencies APA must carry. To take the analogy further, an SUV is best for the people inside it. But in terms of the environment (i.e., society at large), the SUV may not be the right choice for all. It may waste resources, obstruct the vision of others, take up too much space, and as far as performance goes, is fine for the flat, wide open boulevards, but it can't maneuver easily in the tight corners and tricky curves of science and policy. As a former member of its Board of Scientific Affairs, I reaffirmed my faith in APA's ability to represent psychological science within the framework of a multi-faced organization many times the size of APS. APA speaks with a unique voice, given its size, its history, and its role as an umbrella for all forms of psychology. It also, inevitably, maneuvers more slowly than APS. More people have to consult, in order for anything to happen. But many more people are represented, if it finally does happen.

Compact streamlined efficiency has certain advantages, and comprehensive sturdy breadth has others. Psychological scientists need both organizations.

Unlike APA's current president, Bob Sternberg (see the January 2003 *Observer*), I don't believe that the two APs should merge, because they serve different, and not competing, functions. Even if some of the journals overlap, we need multiple outlets. Even if some of the lobbying speaks with the same voice, such duplication is not redundant but instead represents separate voices endorsing similar (though not always identical) conclusions. Consensus is compelling. Even if the conventions address similar topics, they meet in different locales, schedules, and atmospheres, serving different needs.

Let me be clear: APA is not APS's agenda. Part of APS's efficiency is that it spends its time directly

advancing scientific psychology among policy makers and the public, rather than on the politics of the two organizations, or any other organization.

However, APS and APA can help each other. One of my first actions as APS President-along with immediate Past-President John Darley, and President-Elect Roddy Roediger-was being in contact with our counterparts at APA, Phil Zimbardo and Bob Sternberg. We all agreed that it was important for APA and APS to be allies. APS has contributed to Zimbardo's presidential initiative on psychological science that makes a difference, as well as psychology at science fairs, and we remain open to other forms of cooperation between our small organization and our larger one, all of us belonging to both.

Nevertheless, I would not endorse turning cooperation into absorption. APS has a unique role to play. Bridging boundaries-the theme of this year's presidential columns and presidential symposium at the convention-sprang from the focused niche of APS, all psychological science all the time. Because of its concentration on science, APS nimbly spans the boundaries of research, without trying also to manage all the complexities of purely clinical practice. We have enough to keep us busy facilitating the cross-talk among scientists. In its journal program, APS presents the best psychological research across the discipline, updating its members both within and outside their own specialties, in easily manageable venues: cogent overviews in *Current Directions*, cutting-edge empirical exemplars in *Psychological Science*, and pointed policy implications in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. Each of these journals bridges boundaries in each issue, both between and within articles. Some of the best cutting edge research blossoms at the boundaries between areas, as I argued in my first column.

Like our journals, the APS convention provides compact access to the latest research, across the discipline. Besides the presidential symposium bridging boundaries, several cross-cutting symposia span boundaries, and of course, the whole conference provides the opportunity for listeners to do so.

And our advocacy efforts serve all psychological scientists equally, with considerable success. Each time I hear reports of our APS government relations activities, I feel that if my dues go for nothing else than our representation of psychological science in Washington, it is money well spent. In all our projects, precisely because APS specifically focuses on science, its efforts to represent the interests of its members are fuel-efficient, stream-lined, and compact. But we can share the road with our cousins in the SUV, and sometimes we even hitch a ride in each other's vehicles.