

APS at 15: Reflections on the Founding

September 03, 2003

Fifteen years ago, in August, 1988, after an attempt to reorganize the American Psychological Association failed, the Assembly for Scientific and Applied Psychology formed the American Psychological Society to serve the needs of the scientific wing of psychology. That revolution, as it has been called, forever changed the face of psychological science.

To celebrate APS's 15th anniversary, and to honor APS's founding president, Charles A. Kiesler, who passed away in late 2002, some of the founding mothers and fathers of APS gathered for a special symposium at the APS convention in Atlanta.

The symposium, "APS at 15 – Reflections on the Founding: A Symposium in Honor of Chuck Kiesler," was a look back at the origins of APS and an examination of the current and future role of APS in modern science, the discipline of psychology, and the public interest. David B. Baker, Archives of the History of American Psychology, chaired the symposium.

Before APS

Concern about the voice of science in organized psychology dates back to at least the 1920s. According to C. James Goodwin, West Carolina University, in the early 1900s, roundtables were formed, dedicated to preserving scientific psychology. Goodwin said the roundtables were surprisingly well attended, so much so that the 26 charter members placed limitations on membership in the roundtable that they had begun to call the Society of Experimental Psychology (SEP).

To be invited into membership of SEP, one had to be unanimously elected by the current members. Thus, age and experience were often discriminating factors. Eventually, most members were 50 years of age or older and were no longer active researchers. Later, the name changed to PRT, the Psychological Round Table. The members referred to themselves as an "autocratic minority" and did not invite women to the meetings due to a fear of "restricting the raucous events of the meetings." Sociability was also used as a less than objective criterion. During the 1950s, concepts of psychonomics emerged. The goal of each group or society was to "put the lab on a proper basis."

Present at the Founding

B. F. Skinner once said "practitioners will always become more numerous."

APS Past President Sandra Scarr, University of Virginia, said APS was born of psychologists who did not want the scientific basis of practice to be lost and wanted to ensure a voice to the research and academic community.

During the 1980s there occurred what Milton Hakel, Bowling Green State University, described as a "take over" in APA during which private practice psychologists, researchers, and scientists asked for a home within this regime. In February 1987, there was an APA council revolt and 37 members formed

the Assembly for Scientific and Applied Psychology, an organization geared toward working from within APA.

“Research is the most important social institution since the development of representative government,” Hakel said.

According to Hakel, there were numerous attempts at reorganizing APA such that researchers could be heard and the key issues of unity and identity, autonomy, and the erosion of science would stay on the table. The goals of reorganization were: one clear voice for psychology, acting on the behalf of academic psychologists, and addressing waning influence of scientists and scientist-practitioners in the divisions of APA.

One attempt at APA reorganization was the GOR plan (Group on Reorganization), which included legislative changes and at least five scientifically-based subgroups. Bonnie Strickland, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, was chair of the council when the GOR plan was initially approved. Strickland said the practitioners claimed that the council was short two members when it approved the plan and subsequently nullified its approval.

The GOR plan was subsequently rebuked and on August 7, 1988, just in time for the APA convention in Atlanta, ASAP became the American Psychological Society.

By the fall of 1988, APS had 5,000 members and in January 1990, the first issue of the journal *Psychological Science* was published. There was a large showing of new members due to the numbers of people who desired an organization geared towards the science of psychology. Hakel shared an article from the *Ohio Psychologist* that suggested that APS was a “separatist” organization. To the contrary, Strickland hailed APS for having a strong history of including minorities and gays and lesbians and called for the continuance of the revolutionary spirit of APS.

Between 1988 and 1989, many APS advances were made: the journals were published, students were given a voice in the organization, and the annual APS convention was begun. Scarr thanked Chuck Kiesler and APS Executive Director Alan Kraut for the organization’s success.

The new grouped faced resistance from practitioners and APA. Hakel remembered an assertive letter written by Max Siegel, and other members, of what Hakel called the “dirty dozen practitioners” justifying the power of those that practice. The creation of APS, Hakel said has led to universal emphasis on scientific research, visibility of psychology in public policy, communities and career opportunities for researchers, and better intra-professional relations.