

Forum Letters

April 24, 2005

An APS by Any Other Name

I WAS PRESENT AT THE CREATION of the American Psychological Society, and at a meeting in New Orleans in April of 1988, I presented the case for our current name [April 2005, “The Case for Changing Our Name”].

In addition to the reasons Bobby Klatzky noted for the choice of the original name, there was one other — it would identify our direct lineage to G. Stanley Hall, William James, James McKeen Cattell, and other psychological scientists who founded and led APA. It made clear our claim to the intellectual heritage they created, and suggested that we might be more substantial and enduring than a mere grousing rabble.

Now we are substantial and enduring, and it is time to look forward rather than back. Psychological science is a global pursuit and to build on our heritage we should look to the future. Yes, let us become the Association for Psychological Science!

— **Milton D. Hakel**

Bowling Green State University

Look for more opinions on the potential APS name change in the June Forum.

Fill of Phil

REGARDING BOB LEVENSON’S interesting column in the April 2005 *Observer*, I have found that Dr. Phil has emerged as the public persona of psychology. When undergraduates started quoting Dr. Phil more often than Oprah or the assigned readings, I decided to bring him into the classroom.

I am showing selected episodes of Dr. Phil to an advanced seminar on child behavior and development, with the intent of developing critical thinking and skepticism. A weekly writing assignment is to take a Dr. Phil pronouncement from an episode and examine the scientific basis (or lack thereof). Some of his recommendations do have a basis in the literature, but he does not go deep enough in explaining during the program. We have found no support for some of his statements. We also discuss “infotainment” and Dr. Phil’s approaches in the format of commercial television with the need to maintain high ratings (and the muted warning that this is not therapy).

Students have noted the oversimplification, hype, book marketing, stage set-up, and editing, but still occasionally seem enamored with what he says and how he says it, much as some people believe in magic even after the trick has been explained.

— Michael C. Roberts
University of Kansas

Love Sick

A BRIEF GLANCE AT THE literature provides a sense of the probable nature of the “strong relations between factors” that eHarmony bases its matching algorithms upon [“For Modern-Day Cupids, Dating Replaces Data,” February 2005]. In a study that provides a good example of research in the area, Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese (2000) were able to account for 34 percent of the variance in marital satisfaction using measures of personality and trait affect. Needless to say, such explanatory power is insufficient for making predictions about outcomes for individual couples.

According to Steven Carter (that article’s author), eHarmony’s method involves declaring a match between two users only when their profiles are “similar to those of married couples who report a high (top quartile) level of marriage satisfaction.” Although this may sound safe, the fact is that eHarmony is making predictions concerning an event that has a base rate well below 50 percent. As Meehl & Rosen (1955) poignantly instructed, given such a dichotomous classification task (i.e., happy marriage or not), the accuracy of a diagnostic algorithm drops precipitously as the base rate of the events departs significantly from 50-50.

eHarmony should be very concerned about false positives (i.e., bad marriages). Across the 273 married couples who met via eHarmony and participated in a study the company conducted (available on their [Web site](#)), the mean period of dating prior to marriage was *12 weeks*.

Despite this, paradoxically, eHarmony’s focus is on avoiding bad marriages, and it is this that may do the most harm. Research has established that neuroticism is associated with relatively high levels of interpersonal negativity and low levels of marital satisfaction (e.g., Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000). It follows that individuals who possess such traits were under-represented in the top quartile on measures of marital satisfaction in the studies that eHarmony conducted to identify the profiles it deems acceptable for matching. If true, eHarmony’s method is biased against its more vulnerable users.

In addition, the actual odds of finding a spouse through eHarmony may be particularly discouraging to such users. Based on the number of users and marriages eHarmony advertises, it seems generous to estimate that the service has resulted in 10,000 marriages out of roughly 7.5 million users. Thus, eHarmony provides success to only 1 in 375 users, assuming that every marriage persists happily ever after. And, again, the odds are likely worse for those who experience high levels of negative affect.

Finally, eHarmony’s longstanding advertising strategy is troubling. The term “soul mate” implies that there is one person meant for each of us and that the great challenge is finding her/him, rather than doing the work necessary to make a relationship strong. Yet eHarmony relentlessly invites the public to join in order to find a “soul mate” or “true love.” eHarmony’s perpetuation of this myth — particularly in tandem with its utter inability to deliver — may be truly damaging to vulnerable users.

— Glenn Hutchinson
weAttract, Inc

Editor's Note: WeAttract, Inc develops personality measures and matching algorithms.

Not Buying 'Infomercial'

I DEEPLY RESENT THE publication of "For Modern-Day Cupids, Data Replaces Dating" by Steven R. Carter [February 2005]. The article is more like an infomercial for eHarmony than a serious report. It is rife with unsubstantiated claims and overblown rhetoric, and in general fails to meet journalistic standards, much less professional ones. It would be unlikely to receive a high grade for a college freshman in a decent introductory course. Furthermore, the author may have a proprietary interest in the method described. The commercial status of eHarmony is proudly trumpeted in their personnel ad in the March issue (Page 54).

This is only one example of the kind of weak publication that too frequently characterizes what psychologists are shown to be doing. There are many signs that psychology as a whole is losing its status as a serious scientific endeavor. The action by NIMH of phasing out its basic sciences program is a recent, and perhaps the strongest, example of the loss of that status. Publishing questionable, trivial, or poorly designed or analyzed papers contribute to loss of respect in the larger community.

It is a psychological truism that the best reaction to unpleasant messages from the environment is neither ego-defensive rationalization nor denial, which characterizes most of what I have seen as responses by the psychological establishment to the NIMH action. More appropriate would be realistic self-criticism followed by housecleaning, one aspect of which could be the raising of publication standards.

— **Norman Cliff**

APS Fellow and Charter Member (retired)