

Shipping News: Increasing Public Understanding Of Psychological Science

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Psychology has no shipping department. We have research and development, but we don't ship. -Robert Cialdini, Arizona State University

Standing, from left: Alan Leshner, Holly Stocking, Carol Tavris, Lduy T. Benjamin, Sharon Begley, Jon Palfreman, Elizabeth, Ruksznis, Eliot Aronson, Robert Cialdini, Richard McNally, Sarah Brookhart. Seated, from left: K.C. Cole, Joe Palca, Elizabeth, Loftus, Peter Clarke, Alan G. Kraut.

Psychology is inherently interesting to people and there is an appetite for information about human behavior and social issues. However, the public image and application of psychology have been co-opted by “pop” psychology publications and TV therapists. Those were some of the conclusions from a meeting organized by the American Psychological Society to examine the issues affecting public understanding of psychological science.

The meeting, held in October in St. Petersburg, Florida, was a first step in planning a public outreach program and other activities that might be funded by the APS Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science. The Fund was launched with a \$1 million endowment from the David and Carol Myers Foundation.

It was also generally agreed that there is a need to develop a “shipping department,” as APS Fellow and Charter Member Robert Cialdini noted, for psychology’s scientific enterprise, both to take back the scientific image of psychology and to disseminate the valuable knowledge that is produced by that enterprise. Meeting participants included experienced correspondents and producers from *National Public Radio*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Dateline NBC*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *ABC Prime-Time Live*, and *Discovery Channel*, as well as several “media-savvy” psychology researchers.

“The purpose of the St. Petersburg meeting was not to pitch stories,” APS Executive Director Alan G. Kraut said. “We asked folks for ideas about increasing both the quantity and quality of public understanding of the science of psychology.” These goals are crucial, Kraut said, when so much of the public equates “psychology” with “therapy,” and when scientific illiteracy in general is so pervasive.

Scientists do science because it is interesting and provocative; the public wants science to produce benefits and serve society. -Alan I. Leshner, American Association for the Advancement of Science

Like all areas of science, psychological science faces challenges when it comes to communicating with the public: translating scientific findings for a more general audience; developing credible, effective spokespeople within the discipline; developing a capacity for media outreach.

But for psychological science in particular, public perception is shaped by the fact that it involves familiar subjects. Everyone's a psychologist; everyone has an opinion on behavior and on issues of social concerns. This is a problem because even unqualified people (including those with PhDs in psychology) can sound authoritative on behavioral and social subjects in print and on the air. This familiarity also tends to limit discussion of psychological science to the applied realm – even to “common sense” – compared with the wider range of the discipline and compared with other sciences where people are curious about discovery and new findings in and of themselves.

We need public intellectuals who are household names. -Elizabeth Loftus, University of California, Irvine

The challenge is to find ways to capitalize on the familiarity of, and interest in, the subject matter, and to draw attention to the scientific underpinnings of behavior, to reveal new knowledge, to describe and define what psychological science is, and even to debunk conventional wisdom and expose non-scientific interventions. In doing so, psychological scientists speaking in the public arena need to think about their research in the context of everyday news, overcome concerns about over-simplifying, and find ways to engage the public.

If the good guys don't speak out, others will. It's not like there will be a vacuum. -K. C. Cole, The Los Angeles Times

Meeting participants included Elliot Aronson, University of California, Santa Cruz; Sharon Begley, *The Wall Street Journal*; Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., Texas A&M University; Robert Cialdini, Arizona State University; Peter Clarke, University of Southern California; K. C. Cole, *The Los Angeles Times*; Alan Leshner, American Association for the Advancement of Science; Elizabeth Loftus, University of California, Irvine; Richard McNally, Harvard University; Joe Palca, *National Public Radio*; Jon Palfreman, Palfreman Film Group; Muriel Pearson, *ABC Primetime Live*; Elizabeth Ruksznis, *Dateline NBC*; Holly Stocking, Indiana University; Carol Tavris, Los Angeles, California. Alan G. Kraut, Sarah Brookhart, and Brian L. Weaver of APS also attended the meeting.

APS already engages in a number of outreach activities. The journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* assesses what research has to say about various issues of national or social concern; *Scientific American* publishes articles based on *PSPI* reports, thus amplifying *PSPI*'s impact. APS has an online media center and issues press releases on its journals and Annual Convention. Journal authors are invited to provide brief summaries of their articles geared toward a broader audience; these summaries are the basis for press activity, and we often work with university press offices who are interested in promoting faculty research. Finally, we respond to numerous press inquiries from reporters looking for experts on a variety of topics.

But, “the overall message of the meeting was that a more systematic effort is warranted to change public perspectives about psychological science. We need a comprehensive infrastructure to engage in the full range of activities aimed at public outreach,” Kraut said.