

Back to the Future: Why APS Stands the Test of Time

October 29, 2020

Perhaps the ultimate APS insider, Sarah Brookhart joined the staff of the new association in 1990, only two years after psychological scientists founded a new society for their science. Over the years, before her retirement at the end of the summer, she ran APS's government relations program, and then its policy and communications program, before becoming deputy director for policy and communications in 2001, deputy director in 2002, and executive director in 2015. In this issue of the Observer, I have invited Sarah to reflect on her long career at APS. I hope you will agree that her reflections are invaluable in orienting us to the past—as well as to the future—of our society.

—Shinobu Kitayama
APS President

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Sarah Brookhart

Who doesn't love the 1980s—Rubik's Cubes, neon leg warmers, Frankie Goes to Hollywood on your Walkman, not to mention the classic movie *Back to the Future*? Happily, the '80s also brought us APS, which was new and exciting in the moment and turned out to be more than a passing fad. Unlike some things that emerged in the '80s, APS has never gone out of style, thanks largely to the foresight of its founders, who endowed the organization with a sustainable vision and mission that have stood the test of time.

I joined APS in its formative years as the first director of government relations, after stints in other psychology and higher education groups and in government. Over the next three decades, I had the rare

opportunity to help build the organization and ultimately to lead it as executive director. It is with that long perspective that I share some reflections on what was envisioned for APS, which, simply put, was to provide a clear focus on science and scientific values, to integrate the diverse areas of the field, and to increase public support and understanding of psychological science. I also offer some examples of the ways in which that vision is embodied in the organization's structure and activities.

So, as APS's founding generation passes the torch, let's jump into the DeLorean, fire up the flux capacitor, and revisit some of the attributes that underlie APS's longevity and effectiveness. I am confident those same attributes will enable the organization's current and future leaders to continue the vitality and stability of the organization as it advances psychological science globally.

“There Is Something Very Important Going on Here”

At 32, APS is young compared to most other scientific and academic organizations. It was formed in August 1988, giving modern psychological science a separate identity and a collective voice.^[1] Past President Mahzarin Banaji recalled the excitement of getting in on the ground floor:

There are times when each of us knows that there is something very important going on here. In 1988, I had such an experience. A society was forming that was to put front and center a commitment to scientific psychology for the first time....

I had heard... that such an entity could change the future of my science, and I wanted to be part of it. I handed out buttons announcing the new society and attended the now famous first conference where the social hour was held in a parking lot! APS has been “my society” since the moment of its existence. (Banaji, 2010)

APS's founders were leading researchers and academics from all corners of this scientifically diverse field, and they baked this diversity into the organization's governance and programs. In doing so, they were determined to embrace the virtues of membership organizations and equally determined to avoid the pitfalls of membership organizations. They ended up creating a streamlined, nonbureaucratic institution dedicated to the shared scientific interests of all areas of the discipline, with the goal of advancing psychological science as a whole.^[2] Those shared interests included connecting traditional scientific values with innovative cutting-edge research, providing access to high-quality findings and methods, and presenting—and representing—psychological science in the public arena.

Seeing Your Science in APS

Because APS covers such a range of areas, occasionally we hear the comment that “APS doesn't have enough of my science” in its journals or convention programs. I would ask anyone who feels that way to look at APS from another perspective, one that was expressed by APS's first elected President, Janet Spence, in her inaugural APS Presidential Column:

“Many now recognize... that the specialized organizations to which they belong... are not prepared to conduct a number of important activities on behalf of academic and scientific psychology.... APS is designed to take on these functions in support of scientific psychology as a whole, and... it is the responsibility of all of us to support these efforts.” (Spence, 1988)

These sentiments were echoed a few years later by APS Past President Gordon Bower in his Presidential Column on taking stock of APS's objectives:

APS must strive to attract and represent a broad spectrum of behavioral scientists, ranging from those in neuroscience, through general academic psychology, and industrial-organizational psychology, to applied clinical and research-based practitioners. We understand how specialization of research and applications seduces scientists into small societies with progressively narrower interests. In fact, many of us belong to such specialized societies, and their meetings fulfill a need for communication of specialized interests. However, APS has a different purpose, namely, to re-unite us around common values, goals, and beliefs so that we identify with a larger psychological "family" that can advocate effectively for its common interests on the national scene. Accordingly, the goal of APS is to be broadly representative, to draw our strength from our diversity and our numbers. (Bower, 1992)



APS held its second convention in Dallas in 1990, when the organization was still known as the American Psychological Society. Over the years, the convention grew from a small gathering to thousands of attendees from all over the world.

Presenting cutting-edge research from your area and all other areas is at APS's core, and this is reflected in the organization's journals, conventions, and public outreach. But as set forth by Spence and Bower, APS has an additional, broader mission as the umbrella organization for the field, which is to do what valuable but more narrowly focused scientific groups, or groups where science is not the primary focus, generally cannot. In pursuing this integrative mission, APS connects you and your science with other areas in ways that strengthen the knowledge base and increase the value of everyone's research.

Further, all parts of the field can contribute to APS's activities independent of their proportion in the organization or in the field, and engage in ways that go beyond "parallel play" to allow genuine mutual influence and interaction. APS is uniquely able to create the necessary space and focus in its journals, conventions, and public outreach that integrative research deserves.

From Parallel Play to Integration

The goal of integration across areas within scientific psychology existed from the very beginning of APS. However, it was taken particularly seriously and pushed forward by Past President Walter Mischel, who wrote in one of his Presidential Columns that overcoming the constraints of "artificial traditional disciplinary boundaries rooted in training programs and department structures set a century ago" is essential to progress in psychological science.

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"Bridge building opens phenomena that lie at the intersections among multiple disciplines, play out at multiple levels, and cannot be seen within the boundaries of any single discipline or captured in the work of any single investigator or lab. Such area-crossing collaborations allow the best tools and perspectives from different levels and disciplines to be focused on important questions. They also can lead to the development and implementation of new shared tools, driven by the questions that the team jointly wants to answer." (Mischel, 2009)

Among other things, Mischel helped bring to fruition the International Convention of Psychological Science (ICPS), which is explicitly designed to showcase integrative science and to bridge disciplinary, geographical, and cultural boundaries that impede progress in science. The initiative leading to the ICPS unfolded over a number of years and began with a series of small, informal meetings of prominent researchers from across Europe and the United States. Mischel generously hosted the gatherings at his apartment in the Latin Quarter in Paris, where, surrounded by his paintings and other artwork, he, his initiative co-chair APS Past Secretary Gün Semin, and numerous other distinguished scientific leaders discussed exciting future directions for the field and brainstormed ways that APS could facilitate integrative activities globally. One outcome of these discussions was the ICPS, which was first held in 2015 and far exceeded expectations for attendance and impact, as did the subsequent ICPS conventions. Although temporarily postponed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ICPS will continue to advance the integrative mission championed by APS and will continue to be at the center of APS's efforts on behalf of psychological science as a global enterprise. (For more about the ICPS, visit psychologicalscience.org/conventions/icps.)

APS's integrative mission also involves facilitating new scientific frontiers: Fields such as social neuroscience, behavioral economics, embodied cognition, epigenetics, and others have been the focus of many APS activities. One such area in particular is clinical science. From its earliest days, APS has been committed to bringing science to clinical training and practice. For example, APS supported the exploration of alternative models of accreditation that emphasize innovation, flexibility, and the advancement of knowledge (M. Brewer, 1992). As part of this, APS organized the summit meetings that led to the establishment of the Academy of Psychological Clinical Science and the Psychological

Clinical Science Accreditation System, which accredits science-based clinical training that draws on the full spectrum of areas within the field and outside of psychological science as well. The clinical science model, now in place in many of the leading training programs, was introduced widely in the APS journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (PSPI; Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008) and is embodied in the mission of another APS journal, *Clinical Psychological Science*, which features boundary-crossing basic and applied research on topics ranging from “neurons to neighborhoods” (“Aims and Scope,” n.d.).

Speaking for, and Through, Science

As the only dedicated voice for all of scientific psychology, APS has a mandate to engage with science agencies and the U.S. Congress regarding federal support for research. Often this means ensuring that the field has a seat at the table when decisions about agency funding and policies are being made. As one example, APS’s advocacy efforts resulted in a separate directorate for behavioral science at the National Science Foundation, which meant that for the first time, our science was represented at the highest levels of the agency (“NSF Directorate,” 1991). That directorate continues to receive congressional support thanks to APS’s ongoing advocacy efforts (DeSoto, 2020). In another example, APS helped the Obama administration establish what is now the Office of Evaluation Sciences, in which multidisciplinary teams of scientists use findings and methods from behavioral research to evaluate federal programs and policies (“US Office of Evaluation Sciences,” 2018).



The APS staff in 1991, including Alan Kraut (top left), the founding executive director, and Sarah Brookhart (top, third from left), executive director from 2015 through August 2020.

More recently, we've seen what happens when psychological scientists aren't at the table when agency decisions are made, as was the case in the inexplicable effort by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to redefine basic behavioral research as clinical trials. I spent many hours educating congressional appropriators about the deleterious impact of this policy and was able to convince key members of Congress to examine NIH's actions more closely ("NIH Delays Clinical Trials Policy," 2018). At the same time, I expressed the view to Congress that this clinical-trial policy was yet another sign that NIH has a "behavior problem"—meaning that the size and scope of the agency's behavioral science enterprise is inadequate compared to the role of behavior in public health—and I asked the legislators to call on NIH to conduct an evaluation of its health and behavior research support. I'm happy to report that House appropriators have responded positively to that idea (DeSoto, 2020).

While APS is recognized as the voice of psychological science, it's important to note that the reverse is also true: Science is the voice of APS. APS disseminates what psychological research says about topics that are related to policy or otherwise of interest to the public, versus, for example, taking organizational positions in court cases. APS's broad-based public outreach initiatives are especially critical now, with behavior at the center of every major challenge facing the world: social injustice and systemic racism, rampant disinformation, climate change, and many others, including of course the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psychological science has never been more important, and APS has never been more essential.

Well before the pandemic, APS published an issue of *PSPI* on vaccination uptake (N. Brewer, 2018), providing empirically supported strategies to improve public health through increased vaccination. That report influenced activities of the World Health Organization ("WHO Working Group," 2019) and continues to have an impact. Similarly, *PSPI* reports on community policing and on eyewitness testimony have great relevance for issues around social justice and racial bias and have influenced justice system policies and guidelines ("Justice Department," 2017). Still other *PSPI* reports shed light on topics ranging from misinformation to treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and post-disaster mental health issues (psychologicalscience.org/publications/pspi/pspi-archive). *PSPI* and the APS website—which each year engages millions of visitors with psychological science—are important public resources and are just some of the ongoing ways APS is giving voice to science and fulfilling its mission of sharing high-quality psychological science to benefit the public.

There are many other APS successes and milestones that could be detailed here: The organization's innovative journals have risen to the top of the field; APS's many legislative and advocacy achievements have changed the infrastructure of federal support for psychological science; APS's outreach has increased public awareness of psychological science and the role of behavior in daily life; and APS is well on its way to becoming the preeminent organization for psychological science globally, having changed its name in 2005 (from the American Psychological Society) to underscore the organization's dedication to science and its international scope and having established the ICPS, described above. This impressive record of accomplishments is due to the vision of APS's founders and to the efforts of thousands of members over the years who have given their time, expertise, and support to these activities. Going forward, I encourage APS Members and leaders to embrace and reaffirm the organization's unique attributes and mission as they take APS into the next decade and beyond. Psychological science has never been more important, and APS has never been more essential.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

As previously announced, I retired as executive director of APS in September, and while there's no way to acknowledge all of the individuals who have meant so much to me and to APS over the years, I want to offer some words of thanks. First, I'd like to thank APS President Shinobu Kitayama for inviting me to write this column and for generously providing me and APS with his wisdom and leadership during this time of extraordinary challenge in the world. I would also like to express my gratitude to the APS Board for the opportunity to work on behalf of such an important field and help build APS over these many years. Psychological science has the potential to change the world, and I believe APS is the best means of getting there. Special thanks go to the Members of APS and to all the incredible people who have served the field through their involvement with APS—it has been my good fortune to work for and with you. Please keep supporting APS during these difficult times.

My deepest appreciation goes to the APS staff, whose exceptional professionalism and dedication are without parallel and inspired me every day. It has been a privilege to work with you all. And I extend my sincere best wishes and support to the incoming executive director, Robert Gropp, as he takes on this important position. Most of all, I want to thank my mentor and friend Alan Kraut, APS's founding executive director, for his guidance, patience, and support over these past three decades. It would take volumes to do justice to Alan's role in establishing APS and its success, but suffice it to say that no single person has done more, and he deserves lasting credit and recognition for his dedication to the field. APS and the science it represents remain in his debt.

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^[1] The events leading to the establishment of APS are well documented and worth looking at as we consider the future of APS and psychological science in a changing environment (Cautin, 2009a, 2009b; West, 2008a, 2008b).

^[2] This intentional design extends to the Board of Directors, the body that oversees the Association’s activities. The Board is single-assembly, meaning that Board members are elected on the basis of their scientific leadership and achievements and are members “at large,” rather than representing a specific jurisdiction or platform. Great care is taken to ensure the Board is balanced over time in terms of the members’ research backgrounds and demographics, and the scientists who serve on the Board serve the

entire field.