

The Preamble of the American Psychological Association Ethical Code: A Message for Our Time?

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Abbreviation

APA: American Psychological Association

For 126 years, psychologists throughout the world have looked to the American Psychological Association (APA) as a respected public voice for psychology and as an organization that sets the standards for ethical research and practice in the field of psychology [1,2]. The APA's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct [3] was among the first ethical codes in healthcare. It has served as the foundation for the subsequent ethical codes developed by most behavioral healthcare professions. The Preamble of APA's ethical code establishes the purpose for which the science and practice of psychology exist: "Psychologists are committed to increasing scientific and professional knowledge of behavior and people's understanding of themselves and others and to the use of such knowledge to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society" [3]. From the more than 600,000 licensed and certified behavioral healthcare professionals in the United States [4] and the 552 behavioral health journals currently in publication worldwide [5], one could effectively argue that the behavioral health professions have embraced the Preamble's charge to improve the condition of individuals and organizations. It may be valuable, then, to pause and consider the extent to which the behavioral health field is working to improve the third identified focal area in the Preamble-society.

I pose this question as Western societies appear to be experiencing a rise in significant social problems, namely, prejudice, social division, and even fascist sentiments [6-8]. The field of psychology has a respected history of seminal studies investigating severe social problems such as these [9,10]. Given this history, it is fair to ask whether the currently emerging social problems have been the subject of scholarly research in recent years.

From 2006-2018, I served on the editorial board of APA's book review journal, *PSYCCritiques*. During these years, *PSYCCritiques* reviewed approximately 800 books per year. In my experience, it was rare to find a book of profound social significance, such as Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* [9] or Riesman, Glazer, and Denney's *The Lonely Crowd* [10]. To be sure, the final issue of *PSYCCritiques* published a review of *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, edited by Yale psychiatrist Bandy X Lee [11]. Yet even this book-which was read widely-does not represent scholarly research. Rather, it contains a series of clinical opinions offered by psychiatrists. Although an important work of relevance to current events, the lack of scholarly research in this book, in my judgment, represents the extent of socially relevant book content being produced in the behavioral health field at the present time. Such books sell well in the moment, but do not generally have lasting impacts on the development of psychological research and theory into social problems, precisely because they lack in-depth quantitative and qualitative research.

Of course, scholarly research articles containing findings that can be used to improve society do exist. Yet they are far outnumbered by those of relevance to specific clinical situations and organizational settings. For example, a Medline search of peer-reviewed articles

published during 2018 and containing the subject term, *discrimination*, revealed that 2,467 were published on this topic; 2,184 on *prejudice*; and 1,073 on *racism*. In contrast, 22,734 articles were published on *stress*; 9,880 on *depression*; and 5,863 on *anxiety*. Thus, there were 5-10 times more peer-reviewed articles published on clinical topics relevant to individual well-being than topics related to societal problems.

Of persons in the United States, approximately 70% can be considered ethnic, gender, or sexual minorities [12] who may be subject to discrimination, prejudice, or racism; approximately 40% of persons in the United States have depression, anxiety, or clinically significant life stress [13,14]. Therefore, one could argue that the number of scholarly articles on discrimination, prejudice, and racism should outnumber articles on depression, anxiety, and stress by a factor of 7:4. Obviously, reality in no way approaches this proportion. Rather, the actual proportion is heavily skewed in the opposite direction, based on my literature search. In light of these data, one could posit that the behavioral health field may not be sufficiently prioritizing its research resources to address the most pressing social needs of our time.

One wonders about the source of this imbalance in scholarship. Certainly, the preponderance of research into personal and clinical issues may reflect the fact that most behavioral health professionals choose to be practicing clinicians rather than researchers—suggesting that most mental health professionals, perhaps even researchers, may be more interested in clinical than societal concerns. With academic freedom, one would then expect most researchers to investigate clinical issues more than societal problems. Quite likely, funding sources also play a major role in the imbalance, with some contribution from biases in the peer-review process or scholars' concerns about challenging social norms and being identified as activists. Regardless of the causes, a dramatic imbalance exists such that the behavioral health professions may not be sufficiently accepting the charge to address social problems through their work.

I therefore suggest a gentle challenge to behavioral health professionals, particularly researchers, to remember the counsel that our forebears in the field left us in the APA ethical code: "Psychologists are committed to... improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society" [3]. Those who wrote these words lived through the social horrors of the 20th Century—including Mao's, Stalin's, Hitler's, Pol Pot's, Gaddafi's, and Kim Il Sung's mass genocides. Our forebears wrote their words with import and intended those words to guide our professions for generations to come. Given the rise of social problems in Western societies at this juncture in history, it may be time to refresh our perspectives and foci to reinvigorate the research base that will assist us in overcoming these social problems and building a better society for our children and grandchildren. Time would seem to be of the essence.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no financial interests or any conflicts of interest regarding this work.

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