

Thwarting modern prejudice

APA divisions hosted a conference that frankly, and sometimes even painfully, showed how far psychology and the association have to go to improve their acceptance of others.

BY TORI DeANGELIS

Eight hundred psychologists and students descended on Santa Barbara, Calif., in January to discuss a common passion: how to better incorporate diversity into psychological research and practice.

The gathering--called the National Multicultural Conference and Summit II--combined state-of-the-art research, summary discussions, and informal and sometimes provocative gatherings. At sessions called "Difficult dialogues," participants shared their views on the nation's progress--or lack thereof--in accepting those who aren't white, male, heterosexual and able-bodied. In large-group forums, they suggested ways APA can better address multicultural issues in its training programs, publications and infrastructure.

Hosted by APA divisions concerned with multicultural issues--Divs. 17 (Counseling), 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women), 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues) and 45 (Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues)--the conference comes at an important time, when there is growing interest in and knowledge about multiculturalism and at the same time a backlash against it, says conference organizer Melba J. Vasquez, PhD, a Div. 35 representative to the meeting.

The conference was also wildly popular: People were turned away two months in advance. Other conference organizers were Rosie Phillips Bingham, PhD (Div. 17), Steven E. James (Div. 44), Lisa M. Porché-Burke, PhD (Div. 45) and Derald Wing Sue, PhD (Div. 45).

"There's a growing awareness in psychology that incorporating multicultural understanding in service delivery, research, training, teaching and social advocacy is really, really important," Vasquez said. "Psychologists of color and white psychologists are hungry for a focused forum that addresses these issues. It's inspiring to have the attendance growing at a time when attendance at many academic conferences is going down."

A major conference theme and an emerging one in multicultural research was multiple identities--what it's



"There is very little difference between one person and another, but what little difference there is, is very important."

-- William James

like to traverse the intersecting worlds of, for example, being gay and Latino, disabled and Chinese-American or African-American and female. Speakers referred to "sexualities" and "sexual orientations" to describe the complexity of people's sexual behaviors and desires (see article, page 35); pinpointed distinctions made by people with disabilities between those who use wheelchairs and those who can walk or stand; and highlighted the importance of including women's issues in ethnic-minority research, a combination neglected in most multicultural research.

It's no accident the meeting was only the second of its kind, participants commented. Society--and for that matter psychology--has a long way to go before it's multiculturally competent, they emphasized.

"What happens in America is we don't know each other," said Joseph L. White, PhD, who was honored as one of four senior men of color at the conference (see page 32). "In order to come to reconciliation, to mutual enrichment, you have to experience people up close. And in order to do that, you have to lose your safety zone."

Stereotype threat, modern racism

Two social psychologists well-known for their work on the effects of racism--Claude Steele, PhD, of Stanford University and John Dovidio, PhD, of Colgate University--launched the conference from an academic end. Steele described new research amplifying his theory of "stereotype threat," and Dovidio demonstrated that a new form of white racism--an essentially unconscious one--can affect blacks' ability to get jobs and do well in them.

In addition to diminishing people's performance, Steele has found that stereotype threat can heighten blood pressure. The effects of this threat are particularly strong for minority students invested in performing well.

In dozens of studies over the past 12 years, Steele and colleagues have shown that stereotype threat--simply recognizing that others could judge you based on a negative cultural stereotype--can dramatically undercut your performance. This is true for any group, including white males, but affects women and minorities more sharply because negative stereotypes about them are more relevant to the important domains of schooling and achievement.

In one recent study, Steele gave either a stereotype-threat or a neutral task to two groups of black students: those heavily invested in academic performance and those not. In the stereotype condition, the blood pressure of the academically invested students' rose, while that of the noninvested students stayed the same. In addition, both groups in the stereotype condition

performed at roughly the same mediocre level, while in the neutral condition, the invested students performed much better than their noninvested peers.

Steele is now trying to understand what drives the negative responses of invested students. While traditional social psychological theory says they internalize the negative view and act it out by performing poorly, Steele believes these normally high achievers are instead trying too hard to prove themselves, as evidenced by their increased blood pressure.

It's possible that the environment itself is loaded with cues that make such minority students feel they must try extra hard, as might women or blacks who work overtime to prove they're not "tokens," he said. The educational system must address this kind of subtlety if it's to fully benefit minorities, Steele believes.

Dovidio discussed his work on what he calls "a type of modern racism"--a surface belief in racial equality that masks latent though unconscious prejudicial feelings. Nearly half of all whites demonstrate this propensity, Dovidio has found. Their hidden prejudice can create problems for blacks in a range of arenas, including job interviews and the workplace, he maintains.

Dovidio has conducted several studies with University of Delaware colleague Sam Gaertner, PhD, to support this theory. These include subliminal visual experiments showing that this form of prejudice is indeed unconscious, and studies demonstrating that "modern racists" show their prejudice only in ambiguous situations such as job interviews where a black person is similarly qualified to a white person. These findings reflect that many people have dealt with racism only on a surface level, complying with legal prohibitions against it but not understanding or addressing their own subliminal attitudes.

In addition, the team has found, modern racists subconsciously find ways to rationalize their biases on the basis of factors that seem on the surface to be unrelated to race. In experimental job interviews, for example, whites may arbitrarily shift the criteria to disqualify black candidates by claiming that the candidate needs to possess a technical degree or special computer training.

Although this motivation is hidden to whites, blacks see it clearly, Dovidio added. He's conducted recent studies showing that blacks pick up whites' negative facial cues in situations where whites show no overt bias, but that whites remain "clueless" to their own subtle behaviors.

These findings can affect workplace performance, Dovidio is finding. In a study tracking the time it took teams of blacks and whites to solve a problem, the most

efficient teams were those that joined a black person and a white person who demonstrated no covert or overt prejudice. Interestingly, the next most productive teams were made up of blacks who worked with whites who were clearly and overtly prejudiced. The least efficient were those made up of blacks and unconscious racists.

Blacks who work in companies with mostly white professionals--of whom probably half display these subtle behaviors--are therefore at an unwitting disadvantage, Dovidio believes.

'Difficult dialogues'

Aspects of Steele's and Dovidio's talks reverberated throughout the meeting. Many participants noted that white men are seemingly oblivious to the fact that they use their privileged status to further their own ends, both with people of color and with women. One white professor said he's seen myriad cases of white male instructors and therapists who neglect the chance to foster equal relationships between men and women, for example by failing to intervene when males dominate a class discussion or neglecting to advocate for a woman who's doing too much of the household work.

Several presenters discussed ways they're trying to improve the cultural diversity climate in organizations. University of Delaware social psychologist James Jones, PhD, described a model he's testing that gauges how well companies help minority employees feel equal and valued. He's finding that people who identify strongly with their ethnic heritage are less satisfied with their jobs if the diversity climate is poor, and that ethnic minorities perceive more justice if their work groups are truly multicultural. Whites, on the other hand, see the workplace as less fair if they're not in the majority, he's finding.

Other minority group members at the conference said they continue to encounter not just hidden prejudice, but outright blatant discrimination.

In a dialogue session on gay male issues, participants discussed what to do when others--most notably fundamentalist Christians--reject them. While some said tolerance was still the best approach, others noted their patience was at a limit. One man who identified himself as a gay male said that after experiencing numerous prejudiced reactions from others, he now feels comfortable terminating some relationships with prejudiced clients.

"I don't have a lot of motivation to work through something with someone who's prejudiced and not willing to work on it," he said.

A gay male professor said that when he encounters

students who say they're against gays, his weapon "is to understand their belief systems better than they do.

"When they say the Bible rejects homosexuality, I say, 'Who's read the Bible from cover to cover?'"

In other dialogues, participants discussed issues affecting people with disabilities, women and ethnic minorities. In an impassioned discussion on race, participants discussed the problem Americans have in accepting men of color in authority roles. Those in a dialogue on gender pointed out that the way men handle work and sex hasn't changed much--they still tend to overwork, use work to avoid other issues and overvalue sex compared with women, they said.

The most outstanding feature of the disabilities dialogue was that anyone attended at all, one participant said.

"A lot of times we find ourselves talking to an empty audience," she explained. An issue that emerged in that dialogue was how difficult it is for all people to discuss disabilities. This awkwardness "suggests how vulnerable we all are to this issue," she said.

Improving multicultural research

The state of multicultural research is a good gauge of where the field needs to go, conference presenters asserted.

In the disabilities arena, there's little research that explores the overlap between disabilities and other types of minority status such as sexual orientation and gender, said Rhoda Olkin, PhD, a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology and a researcher at Through the Looking Glass, a nonprofit agency in Berkeley, Calif., that serves people with disabilities. Research is also spotty on abused children with disabilities, even though the reported incidence of such abuse is twice of that reported among able-bodied children, she said. The sexual and romantic lives of people with disabilities are likewise a research vacuum, and little is known about dating between people with disabilities and able-bodied people, she said.

Pamela Trotman Reid, PhD, of the University of Michigan, noted that researchers often ignore issues of gender, class, religion, disabilities and sexual orientation when they study ethnic-minority groups. Consequently, they miss the real context of people's lives, she maintained.

Much ethnic research compares gross racial groups--most often black and white--without providing adequate controls or displaying understanding of differences within or between groups, Reid said. Such research tends to use standards and norms as if they represent universal

values: Fathering styles, for example, vary across cultures, yet researchers fail to account for these differences, she noted. Moreover, ethnic researchers tend to bypass the complexity within ethnic groups and to miss studying others entirely. An example is the large communities of poor Chinese-Americans in New York City and San Francisco, which have been largely overlooked by researchers, she said.

In general, "research on ethnicity often ignores gender and takes the male perspective, while research on gender often neglects ethnicity and takes the white perspective," Reid has found. "Women of color are left out of the discourse."

It's likewise important not to let the multicultural perspective eclipse other important social-justice considerations such as gender equity, said discussant Olivia Espin, PhD, of San Diego State University. "It's very, very easy to value culture, then make women carry culture on their shoulders and in their lives," she said. "You have these wonderful ethnic meals, and they're prepared--by whom? And who washes the dishes afterward? Sometimes we go along with that, thinking we're being culturally sensitive. Do we excuse wife abuse because it's a part of someone's culture?"

Joseph Trimble, PhD, one of numerous psychologists of Native American origin and a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, plead for more culturally sensitive research. The longer he's been in academia, the more skeptical he's grown of psychologists' tendency to exclude culture and spirituality from "multicultural" research, he said.

Each culture must be studied on its own terms, he emphasized. Among the 800 Native American tribes living in the United States, for example, "the customs are as varied as you can find anywhere." Many psychological instruments are irrelevant and culturally insensitive as well: giving traditional Inuits a forced-choice survey questionnaire, for example, is "completely out of the realm of their thoughtways."

It's important that psychologists carefully assess conceptual, functional and metric equivalence--that is, the similarity in meaning of abstract and latent constructs, in this case among ethnocultural groups--to determine if psychological scales are truly capturing the meaning and intent of various psychological constructs, Trimble added. For example, such measures should take into account that the concept of self differs significantly for people from individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Unfortunately, most ethnic-group research glosses over such deep-culture issues, he said.

Where we need to go

In large-group comment periods at the conference conclusion, participants flocked to microphones to air their opinions on what APA and psychology can do to move a diversity agenda forward:

- APA needs more and better accredited training programs in multicultural competence, including in disabilities and gay and lesbian issues, they said. In fact, many senior faculty have never received multicultural training, leaving such teaching to younger, less experienced faculty or graduate students, they said. Likewise, it's important to have courses that help minority faculty survive in the culture of white academe, participants added.
- It's more important than ever to figure out ways to recruit and retain students of all minority groups, participants added. Members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community suggested that APA grant them minority status, which would allow them to mandate training sites that address their cultures. Others suggested holding "difficult dialogues" during the main APA convention, and said more dialogues are needed between and across all minority groups.
- One graduate student shyly made a suggestion that met with thunderous applause: "Our challenge to APA is to create a measure that behaviorally and objectively measures cultural competency" among psychology students and those who train them, he said.

Although multiculturalism still meets with resistance, it's creating a revolution in psychology where conventional philosophies of knowledge no longer hold up, Trimble argued.

"Psychology's colonial traditions are under challenge and it's about time," he said. "We're coming to a time when the truths of our inner lives are becoming consistent with the truths of our outer lives."

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