

## Special Section: Doing Psychological Science

## Giving Psychology Away

## A Personal Journey

Robert Epstein

Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, Concord, Massachusetts; University of California, San Diego; and Psychology Today, New York, New York

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**ABSTRACT**—*In this autobiographical essay, I trace the origins of my passion for communicating with the public about mental health and the behavioral sciences and make a case for spreading such passion among psychologists. I also describe the circuitous route that led to my unlikely 4-year tenure as editor-in-chief of Psychology Today magazine and describe some of the inner workings of this New York-based, commercial enterprise—formerly the property of the American Psychological Association. I made some progress in that role to return the magazine to its scientific origins, providing an outlet for hundreds of scientists and practitioners to speak directly to millions of Americans about their work. This is an essential task, I argue, if our field is to flourish. I also detail my departure as editor-in-chief of Psychology Today and describe the magazine’s rapid return to “pop” status. Media sources do not automatically welcome participation by clinicians or behavioral scientists. Through a contingency analysis, I suggest ways of improving our ability to interface successfully with media professionals.*

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I can imagine nothing we could do that would be more relevant to human welfare, and nothing that could pose a greater challenge to the next generation of psychologists, than to discover how best to give psychology away. (Miller, 1969a, p. 74)

As a college student in the early 1970s, I felt I had a religious calling. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I suppose nearly every young American had a calling of some sort. Mine, I thought, was from God—although I was not sure that God existed. In this essay, I talk about the odd journey upon which this calling has taken me, complete with brief stops at Harvard University, the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, *Reader’s Digest*, the White House, several radio programs, and, most notably, *Psychology Today* magazine. Along the way, I talk

about some contingencies of reinforcement and punishment that allow us as professionals to educate, or that prevent us as professionals from educating, the public about mental health and the behavioral sciences. But first, back to God.

The calling came in my late teens, and I interpreted it to mean that I was supposed to become a rabbi. So immediately upon graduating from college at age 20, I sold almost everything I had and, under a program run by the Hebrew Union College (HUC), a Reform rabbinical school in New York, I left for Israel. The HUC program proved to be too lightweight for my religious leanings, so I soon left it to stay in an Orthodox religious academy, a yeshiva, in Jerusalem, where I spent 11 hours a day in prayer and study. It was an extraordinary experience, for which I was not entirely well suited. For one thing, I kept questioning the rabbis and my fellow students about exactly where our prayers were going, and I also occasionally disappeared into the city to binge on nonkosher food.

After 6 months in Israel, I reinterpreted my calling, concluding that I was not supposed to be a rabbi, but that I *was* supposed to help people. I had been a psychology major in college, and I was also an ardent Skinnerian. I had brought my copy of *Science and Human Behavior* (Skinner, 1953) with me to the yeshiva, and I had more faith in Skinner’s book than I did in my *siddur*. So, ultimately, I left Israel, determined to make “significant and lasting contributions to humankind”—actual words from my notes at the time—through a career in psychology.

When I returned from Israel in early 1975, I wrote at length about how I planned to fulfill my calling. In a blue loose-leaf notebook, I made grand plans about how I was going to get the best training I could in psychology and then make the world a better place by spreading the word about the scientific understanding of behavior and its possible applications. My focus, I thought, would be self-management. A number of books on behavioral self-management were published in the early and mid 1970s (e.g., Goldfried & Merbaum, 1973; Kanfer & Goldstein, 1975; Mahoney & Thoresen, 1974; Stuart, 1977; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974; Watson & Tharp, 1972; Williams & Long, 1975), and I had studied every one. I was also involved

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Address correspondence to Robert Epstein, 1035 East Vista Way #120, Vista, CA 92084-4606, e-mail: repstein@post.harvard.edu.

in a modest research project on this topic that was eventually published in *Behavior Therapy* (Epstein & Goss, 1978). In addition, I had collected every book, article, and scrap of paper that Skinner had ever published. I even owned copies of all of his patents and of the abstracts he had published in *Psychological Abstracts* when he was a graduate student at Harvard in the late 1920s. I was, to use Hoffer's (1951) term, a "true believer"—with, it seems, some compulsive tendencies.

In the spring of 1975, at age 21, I gave a formal presentation about my plans to the scholar who had mentored me during my college days: William Mace, an ecological psychologist who was then chair of the psychology department at Trinity College in Connecticut. I even brought snacks and a selection of drinks for him to consume as I lectured to him from his own blackboard. He listened patiently and never laughed once, undoubtedly fighting his natural inclinations.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1976, I entered a master's program in Maryland, where I learned about the experimental analysis of behavior from A. Charles Catania, one of Skinner's most prominent students, and where I learned about applied behavior analysis from Richard Foxx, a pioneer in that field who had worked closely with Nathan Azrin, also a prominent student of Skinner's. In addition to working in Catania's pigeon lab, I worked with Jacob Gewirtz of the National Institute of Mental Health on behavioral research he was conducting with human infants. I was off to a good start.

### CAMBRIDGE

That year I also corresponded with and then visited Skinner, first at his home and then at his office. When he showed me around his basement study, I brashly told him what was on the walls and shelves, and once or twice I completed his sentences for him. Then age 74 and retired, Skinner was visibly shaken by my forward manner, but he was also impressed by my passion and my knowledge of his work. He asked me to do some editing on the autobiography he was writing, and, ultimately, he suggested that I work with him the following summer. Our interactions, which I have written about previously, were intense and highly productive (Epstein, 1980, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1996b, 1997c, 1997d; Epstein, Lanza, & Skinner, 1980, 1981; Epstein & Skinner, 1980, 1981; Willard & Epstein, 1980).

Among other things, I convinced "Fred," as he insisted on being called, to conduct research again; he had abandoned his pigeon laboratory nearly two decades before. Some of our laboratory work was eventually captured in a classroom film that was cited as the best new educational film of the year by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1982 (Baxley, 1982). By the end of the summer of 1977, I was invited to be a full-time graduate student at Harvard,

in the same program that Skinner had entered 50 years prior.

I never told anyone at Harvard about my calling, but I was clearly on a mission. By the end of my 4 years there, I had 21 publications either in print or in press, and I also gave an invited address about the "Columban Simulation Project"—a series of pigeon "simulations" of complex human behavior—at the APA convention in Montreal in 1980. To the consternation of my fellow graduate students, I was excused from having to write a dissertation. The department chair simply called me into his office one day and advised me to "staple some of your publications together and get out while you still can"—a message I did not find entirely encouraging.

I also got married and had two sons during my graduate-student years. One highlight: Skinner, who apparently did not have the good sense to look away at the right moment, fainted at my younger son's circumcision ceremony. After the procedure was complete, the rabbi who had done the cutting—speaking with a heavy Yiddish accent, no less—surprised the assembled group with a lengthy sermon about how my wife and I were supposed to raise our new son "in programmed steps using positive reinforcement." Skinner, seated on a nearby sofa and conscious but still weak at this point, nodded repeatedly in agreement, undoubtedly thinking he had died and gone to Heaven. (I learned later that the rabbi had read about Skinner's work while in rabbinical college in the 1950s. He had planned to write a programmed text to teach the Talmud but had never gotten around to doing so. When he walked into my apartment and saw the elderly man, he asked someone who the man was, thinking he might be the new baby's grandfather. He was shocked to learn that the man was Skinner, and he later shocked everyone else with his Skinnerian sermon.)

Around the time I completed my degree, I founded an advanced-studies institute called the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, dedicated to "advancing the study of behavior and its humane applications in the solution to practical problems and the prevention and relief of human suffering." While teaching and conducting research part-time, I then spent 9 years as the center's executive director. Skinner had objected strongly to my taking this route, telling me that administrative work was "a complete waste of time," but I was on a mission, and I thought I could have more impact through a new institute than through classroom lectures.<sup>2</sup>

After leaving the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies in 1990, I started writing in earnest for national magazines and newspapers—among them, *Reader's Digest*, which had a readership of more than 100 million. I also began doing small on-air segments about behavior for the Voice of America and National Public Radio. I was looking for new venues through which

<sup>1</sup>Twenty-one years later, I dedicated a book to Bill, mainly because he kept a straight face that day.

<sup>2</sup>Now 26 years old, the center indeed spreads the word about the science and technology of behavior, and sizable bequests already in place may ensure it has a relatively permanent position on the scene of public policy.

I could communicate with the general public about behavior. Could I find ways to package the behavioral sciences so that people might enjoy what they were learning? More important, could I develop platforms that would allow other behavioral scientists and practitioners to talk to the public in effective ways on a regular basis?

I spent long hours trying to figure out how to get people in the national media to help me fulfill my mission, which, for some reason, they were seldom inclined to do. I had helped to create and was directing an annual contest of artificial intelligence, the Loebner Prize Competition (Epstein, 1992), and that gave me some good media contacts. The contest got first-page coverage in *The New York Times* in 1990 and over the next couple of years was picked up by hundreds of media outlets, including CNN and PBS. I exploited these contacts vigorously in my attempts to talk to the public about behavior. I also spent several years courting people in the Hollywood area. Psychology, I thought, should have its own daily television show, and I was able more than once to convince writers and producers to put proposals together and shop them around to the studios. There were a number of close calls, and promises were made, but no show appeared. Hollywood is a tough town that I am still trying to crack. The national media can be frustrating, for sure. After a while, though, I did have some success with a relatively venerable—or, I should say, formerly venerable—magazine.

### PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

*Psychology Today* is only one step removed from Skinner's pigeon laboratory. It was founded in 1967 by George Reynolds, a behavioral psychologist who got his doctorate under Skinner; Nicholas Charney, one of Reynolds's graduate students; and Winslow Marston, a childhood friend of Charney's. It was intended to be the *Scientific American* of the behavioral sciences, packaging these little-known sciences in terms the educated public could understand and enjoy. By 1975, it had a subscription base of 1.2 million and a readership of perhaps 10 million, which made it one of the most popular magazines in the United States.

Skinner got ample coverage in the new magazine; that should come as no surprise, given both Skinner's prominence and the magazine's origins. The August 1971 issue excerpted most of Skinner's best-selling book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*; the nearly unreadable psychedelic cover dispensed with the usual cover photo and included, in large type, no text other than "Psychology Today/B. F. Skinner/Beyond Freedom and Dignity." The magazine published portions of Skinner's multivolume autobiography (Skinner, 1979, 1983), as well as original articles he wrote (Skinner, 1969, 1977), extensive interviews with him (E. Hall, 1972; M.H. Hall, 1967b; Yergin, 1979), and excerpts from one of his books (Skinner, 1981).

But Skinner was not the only prominent thinker featured in the magazine. In its early years, *Psychology Today* was a veri-

table *Who's Who* of the behavioral sciences,<sup>3</sup> and because of its visibility, the magazine also gave major career boosts to many young unknown psychologists. Memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus, for example, has long credited her public fame to a 1974 article she published in *Psychology Today* about her successful effort to assist a public defender in a murder case (Loftus, 1974; Loftus & Ketcham, 1991). When the *American Psychologist* announced her receipt of a major award in 2003, the accompanying text reported that after the *Psychology Today* article appeared,

her life would never be the same. The circulation of the magazine was nearly a million [actually substantially higher] and was read by many lawyers and judges. The phone started ringing off the hook . . . and the next few decades of her life would be filled with scientific discoveries and legal cases, intermixed and interwoven. ("Elizabeth F. Loftus," 2003, p. 865)

In the mid 1970s, a survey published in an academic journal identified *Psychology Today* as one of the top six periodicals in which psychologists hoped to publish (out of 100 journals included in the survey), not far behind *Psychological Review* and the *American Psychologist* (Koulack & Keselman, 1975).

Success often leads to ruin, and such was the case with *Psychology Today*. Because of its large circulation, the magazine's founders made a fair amount of money in the 1970s by selling the magazine to Boise-Cascade, a large paper company, which then sold the magazine to Ziff-Davis, a large New York publishing company. Executives there thought they could grow the magazine even further by "popularizing" it. T. George Harris, the charismatic, psychology-loving editor-in-chief who had lifted the magazine to its height, was fired, and psychologists Paul Chance and Carol Tavris left soon afterward. The content began to soften, and the decline began. As Smith and Schroeder noted in a 1980 content analysis of the magazine's performance in the late 1970s, both the empirical content of the magazine and the proportion of articles written by psychologists were dropping fast; as it happens, so was the circulation.

<sup>3</sup>Early contributors included Elliot Aronson (1970), Richard Atkinson (1968), Nathan Azrin (1967), Aaron Beck (A.T. Beck & Jeffrey, 1978), Daryl Bem (1967), Ellen Berscheid (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohmstedt, 1972), Bruno Bettelheim (1969), Sidney Bijou (1968), Gordon Bower (1973), Jerome Bruner (1975), Raymond Cattell (1968), Noam Chomsky (1968), Kenneth Clark (1970), Paul Ekman (1975), Albert Ellis (1973), Erik Erikson (1969), Hans Eysenck (1967), Viktor Frankl (M.H. Hall, 1968), Erich Fromm (1971), Harry Harlow (Harlow & Harlow, 1967), Donald Hebb (1969), Arthur Jensen (1973), Jerome Kagan (1968), Alan Kazdin (1976), Sigmund Koch (1969), Lawrence Kohlberg (1968), Lewis Lipsitt (1971), Ivar Lovaas (Chance, 1974), Masters and Johnson (M.H. Hall, 1969b), Rollo May (1968), David McClelland (1971), Margaret Mead (Harris, 1970), Stanley Milgram (1967), George Miller (1969a), Marvin Minsky (1969), Jean Piaget (E. Hall, 1970), J.B. Rhine (M.H. Hall, 1969a), Carl Rogers (M.H. Hall, 1967a), Robert Rosenthal (1968), Stanley Schachter (1971), Martin Seligman (1973), Hans Selye (Cherry, 1978), Thomas Szasz (1969), Joseph Wolpe (1969), Robert Zajonc (1970), and Philip Zimbardo (1967).

In the early 1980s, in a somewhat secret, multi-million-dollar deal, *Psychology Today* was purchased by APA (Kimble, 1995). APA has a mission, too, and part of that mission is to “give psychology away” to the general public (Miller, 1969a, 1969b; Zimbardo, 2004). But the APA leadership had miscalculated on several fronts. Many members of the organization were outraged at the immensity of the investment that had been made without their knowledge or consent, as well as by the fact that most of the magazine’s revenues came from cigarette and liquor ads. A 1988 report suggested that there was “little support” for publishing the magazine among the general membership (Pion et al., 1988, p. 1044), even though the quality of the content of the magazine under APA’s ownership was considerably stronger than it had been under Ziff-Davis. APA sold *Psychology Today* in the late 1980s at a loss of about \$16 million, forcing the organization to sell its buildings in Washington, DC, in order to avoid bankruptcy (“Five-Year Report,” 1991; Kimble, 1995).

For a year or two, *Psychology Today* ceased to exist, until it was finally purchased in 1991 by a small New York company called Sussex Publishing, which was making its way by resuscitating needy but respectable magazines such as *Mother Earth News* and *Spy*. Sussex made the magazine profitable by keeping operating costs low and developing new advertising markets, mainly in the natural-health industry. But the content was largely “pop,” and APA’s bad experience kept the magazine isolated from the profession that it purported to represent.

In 1995, I published a short article in *Psychology Today* about Skinner’s “baby box” (Epstein & Bailey, 1995), marking the 50th year since the publication of his article about the aircrib in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* (Skinner, 1945). My article summarized the results of a survey in which graduate student Shelly Bailey and I traced aircrib usage with about 50 children. The rumors notwithstanding, the survey showed that the baby box was in all respects an excellent crib.

*Psychology Today*’s reputation was not strong in 1995, but I started making regular trips to New York to try to build relationships there. In 1996, I published a feature article called “Capturing Creativity,” which was about some of my laboratory research (Epstein, 1996a), and I was also made a “contributing editor”—which meant little more than that I got my name on the masthead. In 1997, I published two more feature articles in *Psychology Today* (Epstein, 1997a, 1997b) and continued my visits to New York.

In 1998, I was approached by a salesman from a talk-radio station who said that for a mere \$3,500, he would put me on the air an hour a week for 3 months in Providence, Rhode Island. All I needed was a telephone, he said—and \$3,500. He also said he would get lots of advertisers for the show and that, ultimately, I would make money by splitting the advertising revenues. This was a scam, but I did not know it. Most people on talk radio pay to be on the air—sometimes because they are drawn in by unscrupulous salespeople and sometimes to satisfy

their egos, but usually because they have something to sell. In any case, I told John P. “Jo” Colman, at that time the principal shareholder of Sussex Publishing, about the offer and suggested that we call the show “Psychology Today Live” in order to help market the magazine. He wanted to sell subscriptions, so he agreed to pay \$2,500 of the required amount, and I paid the balance.

Now I had a show, but it was not clear that I had any listeners. Each week, students and interns came to my house in San Diego, and I called in to Providence to do the live program. My helpers spent most of their time calling in to the show from a second line in another room in my house, pretending to be Providence residents who were just dying to learn about psychology. Over the 3-month period, I think I got three real callers, and Colman figured he got 12 subscriptions. But I also got some good experience doing talk radio, and I had done some bonding with Colman, albeit through a failed business venture.

In March of 1999, I learned that Anastasia Toufexis, then editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*, was thinking of leaving. She was a career journalist who had previously been the behavior editor at *TIME* magazine. *Psychology Today* was a bare-bones operation compared with *TIME* and other magazines with which she had worked, and she was getting frustrated by the lack of resources. In particular, she did not like the fact that her editorial budget was too small to provide adequate compensation for the journalists and professional writers who were writing most of her articles. A little contingency-driven lightbulb went off in my head. I called Colman and suggested that I become the next editor-in-chief. No, I knew nothing about magazine production, and no, I knew nothing about journalism, and no, I knew nothing about art or layout, but I just *knew* I could do the job. He laughed.

But then I started talking about money. I told Colman that I could reduce editorial costs while upgrading the content of the magazine, improving its reputation, and restoring its ties to mental health professionals—which, I said, could mean a large number of new subscriptions. I would do this, I said, by going back to the original *Psychology Today* model, the one that had led to its great success in the 1960s and 1970s: I would have psychologists once again write most of the pieces, using professional writers to rewrite and edit as needed. Psychologists are accustomed to writing for nothing, I said, so we would not have to pay them much, and the rewriting could be done inexpensively using in-house staff and freelancers. By getting top psychologists back on our pages, I said, we would gradually improve the prestige of the magazine, and we would also reestablish ties with APA and other professional organizations. The magazine would get back into classrooms and waiting rooms, and Colman, I said, would make more money.

In April of 1999, I became the first nonjournalist editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*, and my first issue was printed in August. Psychologist David Elkins of Pepperdine University

wrote our cover story on spirituality (Elkins, 1999), and we put Madonna on the cover because at the time she was studying *Kabbalah*—Jewish mysticism—in Los Angeles. The cover was far-fetched, but the issue sold well, and Colman was encouraged.

When APA owned *Psychology Today*, a supervisory committee headed by psychologist Gregory Kimble exercised strong, if not total, control over every aspect of the magazine's content, including advertising (G. Kimble, personal communication, October 14, 2005), but my own control was limited. In fact, the experience of running the magazine, especially during the production of my first few issues, was nightmarish, in part because I chose to run the magazine from San Diego (the headquarters was in New York), in part because I was not a journalist, and in part because I was the only psychologist on the staff of "*Psychology Today*." Among other problems, I was unprepared for the brutal way staff members sometimes treated each other (and me), and I could not understand why important prose was constantly being cut to make way for preposterous "art" or ads for breast enhancers.

Over the first 6 months or so of my editorship, I learned, gradually and painfully, about a set of contingencies, rules, and practices of which I had been completely unaware before coming to *Psychology Today*. Here are a few:

- Local organizational culture is always important, and it turns out that it is not uncommon in the culture of New York journalists for people to insult, yell at, and abuse each other—especially near the close of an issue.
- Journalists are trained to reduce beautiful, distinctive, sophisticated prose down to Steinbeckian minibites, even if the prose comes from someone of great standing—say, the surgeon general of the United States.
- The sales, art, and editorial departments of a magazine are in constant competition with each other. Space is always precious because of the financial contingencies that govern printing and distribution, and because ads—solicited by the sales staff—bring in most of the revenues, they tend to take up as much space as they need. Meanwhile, whereas writers and editors want to see every one of their words in print, the art director is determined to fill the pages with large drawings and photos; a magazine, I was told, must be "aesthetically appealing" or the public will not buy it. In other words, the behaviors of sales, art, and editorial professionals are governed respectively by conflicting contingencies of reinforcement.
- In theory, the editor-in-chief gets final say over "the edit," that is, the textual matter in all of the articles, but the sheer volume of content makes it impossible for the editor-in-chief to have complete control, and smart, ambitious staff journalists do not like to be micromanaged. What is more, the publisher—the one with the checkbook—occasionally expresses an opinion, sometimes causing complete chaos.

## PROGRESS

Having provided some context, I summarize—with, I admit, no small degree of pride—how *Psychology Today* changed between 1999 and 2003:

- *Advisory board:* To try to reconnect the magazine with psychology proper, we established an advisory board consisting of some of the field's most distinguished individuals, and several members of the board proved to be especially active in trying to improve the magazine.<sup>4</sup>
- *Circulation:* To boost and stabilize newsstand sales and improve the image of the magazine, we began routinely putting top celebrities on our covers, struggling sometimes to find legitimate reasons for having them there. During my tenure, we maintained a circulation of about 350,000—a respectable number, given that magazines in general were declining (especially after the attack on September 11, 2001), and major magazines like *George* and *Mademoiselle* were being forced out of business. That circulation put *Psychology Today* on a par with *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*—about 100,000 subscribers behind the former and 100,000 ahead of the latter. Consumer subscriptions, newsstand sales, library subscriptions (high for a commercial magazine), waiting-room placements, and "pass-arounds" gave us a readership of well over 3 million.
- *Testing:* I am a researcher by background, and I have also taught courses on research methods on and off over the years, so I suggested that we test cover images before going to press. Covers at *Psychology Today* used to be selected by shouting matches, but we were using street and on-line surveys to determine which images and headlines potential buyers and subscribers preferred.
- *Mind's Eye:* Most issues began with a photo of intriguing people, along with a commentary by a prominent therapist in a feature called the Mind's Eye.
- *Editorial:* I wrote a substantive, fairly serious editorial for every issue, such as one titled "Physiologist Laura: She's Not a Psychologist and We Don't Want Her" (Epstein, 2001a), an attack on radio personality Laura Schlessinger.
- *Informational column:* In each issue, we ran a question-and-answer column—Ask Dr. E—in which I tried to inform and educate, rather than give advice.
- *Authorship:* The biggest change was our shift away from journalists. During my tenure, most of our feature articles were written by distinguished scientists and therapists,

<sup>4</sup>Advisory board members included University of California president Richard C. Atkinson, Nathan Azrin of Nova University, Gordon Bower of Stanford University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, Albert Ellis of the Albert Ellis Institute, Gregory Kimble of Duke University, Harvard's Ellen Langer, Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington, Jerome Singer of Yale University, Robert Sternberg of Yale University, and Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University.

sometimes with the help of professional writers, and other prominent psychologists appeared in interviews.<sup>5</sup> One very successful article we published was a parenting piece by psychologists Jacob Azerrad and Paul Chance (2001), which even included a graph of a single-subject reversal design—not something one sees very often in national magazines. In one of several articles that nearly got me fired, pioneering psychiatrist Loren Mosher (1999) criticized the American Psychiatric Association for its close ties with the pharmaceutical industry, and Senator Arlen Specter was one of many high-ranking government officials who had opened their doors to us (Specter, 2000). We also were the first publication to publish an advanced copy of the executive summary of the new *Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health* (Satcher, 2000).

- *Readings*: To aid students and serious readers, we ended every feature with a short list of suggested readings.
- *Heads Up*: To reconnect with the profession, as well as to help and entertain readers, we started a department called Heads Up, in which the presidents of national organizations answered a question of interest to the general public, such as “How can we stop school violence?” or “Should you punish your child?” Participating organizations included APA, the American Psychological Society (APS; now the Association for Psychological Science), the American Psychiatric Association, the American Counseling Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, among others.
- *News*: The news section of the magazine—usually 12 pages, with more than 20 short articles—summarized recent research studies in lay terms, and the staff took great pains to avoid interpreting correlational studies in causal terms.
- *Health psychology*: We established a Health Psych column, edited for a while by psychologist H. Melbourne Hovell, founder and director of the Center for Behavioral Epidemiology at San Diego State University.
- *Cutting-edge research*: We also created a Frontiers department, which featured interviews with scientists conducting leading-edge research; this column was edited by APA senior scientist Nancy Dess for nearly 2 years and then, briefly, by Kurt Salzinger, the new director of APA's Science Directorate and former chair of the board of trustees of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies. Salzinger was succeeded by Susan K. Fiske, a professor at Princeton and former president of APS.

<sup>5</sup>Contributors included Norman Anderson (Anderson & Anderson, 2003), now APA's chief executive officer; David Buss (2000); Bernardo Carducci (2000); Albert Ellis (Epstein, 2001b); Roger Fouts (2000); John Gottman (Gottman & Carrere, 2000); Michael Lamb (2002); Elizabeth Loftus (Loftus & Calvin, 2001); Paul Rozin (2000); Daniel Schacter (2001); Robert Sternberg (2000); Richard B. Stuart (2002); and Philip Zimbardo (Maslach, 2000).

- *Book and Web reviews*: Our new book and Web reviews section was edited by Chance, who also wrote occasional features for us. We brought him back to *Psychology Today* after a long hiatus, and he was a tremendous asset.
- *Langer column*: We also ran a regular commentary, Just Think About It, by Harvard social psychologist Ellen Langer, who brought her distinctive perspective to many everyday topics.
- *History page*: We concluded most issues with a historical photo supplied by the Archives of the History of American Psychology.
- *My Story*: To connect in a meaningful way with people dealing with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional disorders, we began a department called My Story, in which a reader told about his or her experience with depression, bipolar disorder, a phobia, or some other debilitating problem. In one of the first columns of this sort, a reader provided a meticulous and disturbing account of what it had been like for her to undergo electroconvulsive therapy. In another issue, actor Christopher Reeve gave a moving account of his struggle to regain functioning after sustaining a spinal cord injury.
- *Mental health awards*: In 2000, *Psychology Today* began giving annual awards to people who helped improve the mental health of Americans. Nominations in eight different categories—government, media, research, and so on—were invited each year from 300 leaders in mental health and the behavioral sciences nationwide, and recipients included Tipper Gore, Rosalynn Carter, Fred Rogers, and Albert Ellis, among others, both notables and unknowns. For the first round of awards, we printed a congratulatory letter from President Bill Clinton.
- *National radio show*: Somewhere along the way, I also got “Psychology Today Live,” my radio program, onto the national airwaves. This program allowed me to put nearly 200 distinguished guests on the air over a period of about 2 years.<sup>6</sup>

On one of the occasions when David Satcher appeared on “Psychology Today Live,” I complimented him on the unprecedented efforts he was making to address the mental health problems of Americans. He replied, with great warmth and to my complete surprise, “I have great appreciation for the work that you do, and I think you're reaching a lot of people through the magazine and your program. Keep it up! We need you!” Faced with an endless barrage of deadlines from the magazine, the

<sup>6</sup>Guests on the show included Jimmy Carter, the surgeon general (four times), Ruth Westheimer, Sally Field, Patty Duke, Fred Rogers, Alan Dershowitz, Christie Brinkley, Steve Allen (twice), Jamie Lee Curtis, and dozens of other notables, as well as more than 150 behavioral scientists and practitioners, among them Brian Baird, Herbert Benson, Robert Bjork, Kenneth Cooper, Albert Ellis, Michael Faenza, Raymond Fowler, Daniel Goleman, Thomas Gordon, Judith Rich Harris, Kay Redfield Jamison, Norine Johnson, Peter Kramer, Ellen Langer, Jack Mayer, David Myers, Russ Newman, Sidney Parnes, Susan Perry, Alvin Poussaint, Steven Reiss, Nancy Segal, Dean Simonton, Jerome Singer, and Robert Sternberg. Since 2005, I have been hosting a similar program, “Psyched!” on Sirius Satellite Radio.

radio program, and my professorship, and not having taken a day off in years, I felt more fatigued than appreciated, but signs that my efforts were paying off were indeed appearing.

In 1999, the magazine was invited to participate in the White House Conference on Mental Health, organized by Tipper Gore, who later agreed to be interviewed for the magazine and radio program (she holds two degrees in psychology, after all). In 2002, I was invited to talk about the magazine's progress at APA's annual meeting, and that fall Rhea Farberman, APA's publicity director, and Norman Anderson, APA's incoming chief executive officer, dropped by *Psychology Today's* office in New York to check out our operation. Also in 2002, an empirical report in a volume on teaching suggested that *Psychology Today* articles were helpful in motivating students in introductory psychology courses (Appleby, 2002). We were also getting regular invitations to attend events at the Carter Center, where former first lady Rosalynn Carter had long run an ambitious program to make the mental health needs of Americans a high priority for media professionals and government officials; both Carters appeared on the radio program and in the magazine.

Changes in the magazine were also getting noticed in the media. Articles about our new direction appeared in both *Science* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* early in 1999, and included hopeful but cautious comments from Alan Kraut, director of APS, and APA president Richard Suinn ("Psychology Today, Long Ignored," 1999; "Rehab for Psychology Mag," 1999). And a lengthy article in a January 2000 issue of *The Baltimore Sun*, titled "Serious Therapy for a Magazine," read in part as follows:

After 25 years of sliding circulation, creeping inanity and dwindling respect, *Psychology Today* is undergoing sober analysis . . . For the third time, *Psychology Today* will make a run at "giving psychology away." Its editor has pledged to reassert the voice of authority over the "bubble-headed gurus" and "vacuous self-help books" that he says have tarnished the profession. It may sound like the kind of talk more likely to emanate from a graduate-school lounge than from a New York publisher's suite. But scholars are optimistic.

"Psychology has an image problem," says Gregory Kimble, emeritus professor of psychology at Duke University and one of the new advisors. "*Psychology Today* can help to correct it." (Dorsey, 2000, p. 2)

Although the feedback I was receiving was generally positive, I did run into trouble at one point with some gay activists. In its November/December 2002 issue, the magazine ran a small ad for a new book titled *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* (Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002). Shortly after the issue came out, I received an angry phone call from an APA member who identified herself as a lesbian activist and who strongly objected to the ad. I assured her that I had nothing to do with the magazine's sales department and that I was confident readers

could tell the difference between editorial content and paid advertisements, but she was far from satisfied. I soon found myself flooded by angry e-mails, many from people who said they were canceling their subscriptions—even though, according to our records, some were not subscribers. Some people even protested the magazine's antigay "article." I settled the matter, it seems, to almost everyone's satisfaction with a long editorial titled "Am I Anti-Gay?" in which, among other things, I reviewed evidence suggesting that homosexuality is partly genetic in origin (Epstein, 2003a).

By early 2000, *Psychology Today* magazine was empirically based from cover to cover, delivering valuable and credible information to the American public. It provided a platform for prominent, credentialed scientists and practitioners to communicate directly with a large audience, and some key people had noticed and praised the changes. Those signs I was perpetually seeking—signs that I was making a contribution—were now glowing brightly, but one of them, it turns out, read "stop."

#### ABRUPT END OF A BRIEF ERA

On a Monday morning in March of 2003, the publisher of *Psychology Today* called to inform me that he was replacing me—that very minute, it seemed—with my 27-year-old news editor, a bright, energetic journalist with no background in the behavioral sciences but with a salary much lower than mine. I would now have the honorary title "West Coast Editor."

By this time, I was expendable. In 1999, I had marketed myself by promising both cost cutting and new revenues. I had indeed kept costs low, but my fantasies about new revenue sources had proved to be just that. I had thought that by improving the credibility and prestige of the magazine, I could create connections between the magazine and various segments of the academic and mental health communities, which would in turn generate more income for the magazine. But a collection of classic *Psychology Today* articles I edited for classroom use in 1999 (Epstein, 1999) sold poorly over the next couple of years, and we had no indication that students were interested in the newly renovated magazine.

Moreover, various proposals I had made to APA and other organizations (including APS) for distributing the magazine to their members had gone nowhere. Some APA officials had been around during the dark years when *Psychology Today* had nearly bankrupted the organization; the mere mention of the magazine raised hackles. Ray Fowler, APA's executive director, also pointed out that no matter how good the editorial content, the magazine's ads would undoubtedly stir protests from among the organization's many contentious and passionate factions. Pressure to abandon lucrative ads had helped sink the magazine when APA owned it during the 1980s, and I had had a taste of this kind of trouble over a small book advertisement.

## RICHES TO RAG

The June 2003 issue of *Psychology Today* was my farewell issue as editor-in-chief. It featured actress Susan Sarandon on the cover, focusing on her political activism. A supporting article sought to spell out the conditions that turn people into activists. The issue also included a provocative article about the Bush administration's color-coded warning system; titled "Phantom Menace: Is Washington Terrorizing Us More Than Al Qaeda?" it was written by then APA president Philip Zimbardo (Zimbardo, 2003). My editorial, "Of Ants and Men: The Lust for War," mourned the 175 million people who had been lost to war during the 20th century and listed some of the factors that behavioral scientists say contribute to the warlike tendencies of human beings (Epstein, 2003b). What happened next is not pretty, at least if you have a genuine interest in educating and helping the public.

The Sarandon issue of *Psychology Today*, the last over which I had any influence, was followed by one with cartoon characters Homer and Marge Simpson on the cover. Almost overnight, the complex apparatus I had assembled to connect the magazine to the behavioral sciences was dismantled: The advisory board evaporated, and so did the history page, Heads Up, Frontiers, My Story, the informational question-and-answer column, and so on. The venerable Psychology Today Interview, a staple since the magazine was founded, was also eliminated, because interviews, I was told, were "boring."

The main change had to do with the authorship of articles. Psychologists were eliminated, replaced by freelance journalists. In 2002, 83 credentialed clinicians and scientists contributed original material to *Psychology Today*; in 2004, exactly 1 credentialed individual did so. Even the advice column, which sometimes dealt with serious mental health issues, was now written by a career journalist rather than by a mental health professional. Scientific advances were still described in the news section in the front of the magazine but were otherwise absent. Important social issues—war, mental illness, poverty, and so on—were gone.

The cover of the September/October 2005 issue exemplifies the change. The image is of an attractive model, her face surrounded by segments of a folding tape measure. The "eyebrow"—the strip above the magazine's name—reads, "The Porn Impasse: His Problem or Her Hang-Up?" The main cover line (upper left) is "Status Anxiety: Why Measuring Up Matters," and the other cover lines are, respectively, "Rise of the Trophy Kid," "Crude Rude CEOs: Why the Boss Acts Like a Barbarian," "10 Soothing Truths About Pain," "Are the New Suburbs Right for You?" "Why Funny Women Are Intimidating," and "Infidelity: When to Confess." The only item that seems out of place on the page is the magazine's name. All of the cover lines and most of the content of the magazine could fit easily into *Redbook*! Except in news blurbs, *Psychology Today* magazine no longer said much about psychology—yesterday,

today, or tomorrow—and it no longer provided a means for psychologists to talk to the public.<sup>7</sup>

## ON FEEDING THE MEDIA BEAST

The sinewy path along which my calling has taken me over the past 30 years has been problematic in some respects—it cost me my marriage, for sure—but it has also taught me a great deal, especially about how to use various media outlets to talk to people about mental health and the behavioral sciences. Here are the five most important lessons I have learned:

First and foremost, personal relationships are critical. Who you know is important, but even more important is being strategic about getting to know key people. If you are persistent and patient, you can eventually develop a relationship with almost any journalist, editor, or producer. Without such relationships, you and your message are likely to remain invisible.

Second, media professionals need your ideas, no matter how standoffish they may seem at times. In fact, very few media stories are actually initiated by journalists or producers. Media professionals are constantly, and sometimes desperately, searching for good stories. The media machine is a giant ravenous beast, ingesting tasty tidbits about the world through thousands of small orifices, then quickly excreting those tidbits, barely digested, through a much smaller number of "channels" for public reconsumption. Because the beast is ravenous, and as long as you are willing to do what it takes to hold its attention (see the first lesson), you can become one its feeders, providing it with a diet that meets your own high standards of nutrition.

Third, contingencies of reinforcement are critically important. To produce reinforcers for yourself, you first need to find reinforcers for the media professionals. Never approach a media professional with your "great idea," "wonderful article," or "important story." Rather, find out what he or she needs, and try to help. Say straight out, as I still do frequently, "How can I help you do your job?" And look for areas where your needs and the journalist's needs are both served—that is, where the contingencies of reinforcement overlap.

Fourth, if you have attempted to "help" a media professional by sending him or her a "pitch," a "query," or a media release that you feel might suit his or her needs, and if you have gotten no response or even a negative response, you should not give up or take offense. Send in a "gentle reminder" (that is exactly how I label my e-mail messages) every week or two. Ask for advice on how to improve your proposal—in other words, on how to modify it so that it better serves that individual's needs. Take action to

<sup>7</sup>On a brighter note, *Scientific American Mind*, the advertisement-free magazine created recently by the editors of *Scientific American*, seems to be on solid ground so far, and the French publisher Hachette Filipacchi Médias, the largest publisher in the world, recently launched a British version of their popular French magazine, *Psychologies*. An American version may be coming within the next few years. It will likely prove to be even softer than today's *Psychology Today*, but the competition might push *Psychology Today*, once again, back toward its origins.



strengthen the relationship. Stay informed about that person's ever-changing needs for new "content." Send in new ideas from time to time, and, even if you do not have any, keep the relationship going. Sooner or later, something you have to offer is almost certain to be appealing.

Fifth, and finally, the media machine is flawed by its very nature. If you forget this, you will be deeply disappointed with whatever eventually hits the airwaves or is published in cyberspace or in print. If you understand how and why the beast is flawed, you will be more effective in making it work for you, and you will also be more realistic about the possible outcomes. Journalists move rapidly from one story to another, and because they are always working under firm deadlines, they have little, if any, time for nuance. Generally speaking, they also lack both the training and the inclination to get things entirely right. They are not laboratory scientists; they are trained to produce, not to putter. Stories need to get the critical facts right; they need to be readable by the "average" reader; they need to fit into the space or time or budget available. But despite what you might think, journalists do not need to get your quotes quite right, and they are strongly opposed, by nature, to pushing your agenda in their coverage. It is *their* coverage, after all. Do not let this scare you; as long as you play by the rules, the beast can be tamed (see the first four lessons).

### FINAL THOUGHTS

How many Americans know that the Lamaze method of natural childbirth, now ubiquitous in American hospitals, was inspired by Pavlov's research on classical conditioning (N.C. Beck, Geden, & Brouder, 1979; Lamaze, 1970; Velvovsky, Platnov, & Ploticher, 1960)? Not many, I suspect. Psychologists are notoriously bad at playing the public-relations game. In contrast, the medical fields barrage the public daily with reminders of what they have accomplished in the past, with reports of their recent successes (however modest), and with extravagant promises of advances to come. Our own efforts to reach the public, laudable and substantial as they may be (e.g., see Pallak & Kilburg, 1986; VandenBos, 1992), are modest by comparison.

We are hampered by many factors, but perhaps the most annoying has been the existence of "pop psych," a massive amalgam of pseudo-expertise that has shadowed the legitimate field for more than a century (Benjamin, 1986). The public has no way of distinguishing empirically based findings from the ramblings of self-proclaimed experts, and there is no easy solution to this problem. One sad result is the ever-wavering and often negative image that people have of both clinicians and behavioral scientists. In its early years, *Psychology Today* may have been the best corrective the field ever had for all the pop psychology; in its current form, the magazine is probably harming psychology's name more than helping it.

To me, this means we must redouble our efforts. Prominent psychologists have reached out to the public since the field was

founded (e.g., G.S. Hall, 1894; Jastrow, 1908), and our professional organizations have devoted considerable resources toward this end. But we need more people to take the plunge, and we need to think bigger. To build and maintain a strong image, as well as to share our expertise with people who might benefit from it, we need to reach tens of millions of people every day. To counter the ill effects of charlatans, we need to expose them, to offer sound alternatives to their prescriptions, and to do so aggressively and repeatedly. We need to build infrastructures that utilize fast-emerging wired and wireless technologies in ways that make it easy for thousands of credentialed scientists and clinicians to communicate with the public regularly, and we need to give our graduate students the skills and incentives they need to fulfill this important mission. We have a great deal to be proud of and to offer; we do both ourselves and the American public a disservice when we hide even the smallest glimmer of our light (cf. Bevan, 1982; Pallak & Kilburg, 1986; Zimbardo, 2004).

Miller's (1969a, 1969b) stirring call for action nearly four decades ago—published in *Psychology Today*, by the way, before it appeared in the *American Psychologist*—is as important a guidepost for our field now as it was in the 1960s. We are still guilty of the "public modesty" (Miller, 1969a, p. 53) that Miller protested; the world is still a dangerous, inhospitable place for most of its inhabitants; psychology's public image is still mixed; and charlatans still dominate every branch of the ever-expanding public media empires. Miller (1969a) urged us to "[instill] our scientific results . . . in the public consciousness in a practical and useful form so that what we know can be applied by ordinary people" (p. 68). To do this requires large-scale and continuous communication with the American public; it is here that *Psychology Today* was helpful for a time, and it is here that we must all do better.

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