

# Editorial

## Science, Politics, and Violence in the Media

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The report in this issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (*PSPI*) has a unique history. As regular readers know, the goal of *PSPI* is to publish reports that summarize what the best of behavioral science has to say about issues of public importance, and we actively manage the editorial process in pursuit of that goal. We identify and prioritize possible topics on the basis of input from multiple sources, including the *PSPI* editorial board, the leadership and membership of the American Psychological Society, and policymakers. We then recruit teams of eminent scholars to write reports summarizing the state of the research findings relevant to the topics of highest priority, and those reports are then subjected to rigorous peer review before they appear in *PSPI*.

The focus of the current report—that is, the behavioral, emotional, and social effects, if any, of the violence that pervades many segments of the public media—was previously nominated as a possible high-priority *PSPI* topic. We did not commission such a report, however, because other reports on the topic, including one requested by Congress and commissioned by the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, were understood to be in the pipeline. In fact, in the summer of 2000, the Surgeon General commissioned panels of experts to prepare reports dealing with various aspects of youth violence; one of these panels was charged with preparing a report on media violence. It is that panel's report—revised substantially, but with the gist unchanged—that now appears in these pages.

As this group of scholars explains in the "Authors' Note" accompanying this issue of *PSPI*, it appears that their report was dropped from the overall report on youth violence because of nonscientific considerations. The current report did not, therefore, come to fruition via the normal *PSPI* process, but it was subjected to the same stringent review process that all *PSPI* reports must survive. In short, the following monograph did not materialize in the way that typical *PSPI* reports do, but the topic is of exceptional individual and societal importance and was nominated as a *PSPI* topic several years ago; the authors are distinguished researchers and scholars in the domain of research on media violence, and the report itself was subjected to the usual *PSPI* review process and revised accordingly.

### **PSPI AND THE INTERMINGLING OF SCIENCE AND POLITICS**

During our nearly 5 years of coediting this journal, we have watched *PSPI* grow from an idea that captured our imagination—and the imagination of the Board of Directors of the

American Psychological Society—to reality. It has become a unique vehicle for communicating behavioral research findings that are relevant not only to overcoming the individual and societal problems that characterize this era, but also to seizing the opportunities that characterize this era. We have been excited and gratified by the evidence that *PSPI* reports are having a significant impact: high citation rates; changes in public practices (such as the skepticism given projective tests in legal proceedings after the appearance of Lilienfeld, Garber, and Wood's, 2000, report on the scientific status of such tests); external recognition (such as the George A. Miller "best article" award given by a division of the American Psychological Association to the report by Hollon, Thase, and Markowitz, 2002, on efficacy of alternative treatments of depression); and coverage of *PSPI* reports in the media (such as the *New York Times*, *Science*, and the *Wall Street Journal*). Writers for *Scientific American*, working with the authors of *PSPI* reports, have done a superb job of rewriting *PSPI* reports for *Scientific American*'s large and diverse readership. Our partnership with *Scientific American* has been an important component of the success story that is *PSPI*.

Along with the joys and rewards of editing a journal devoted to commissioning and publishing studies in the public interest, however, we have had to confront thorny questions related to the intermingling of science and society. Such questions include

- When, if ever, should the political consequences of research be used to judge its scientific merit?
- To what extent, and in what ways, are a scientist's personal, political, and religious views relevant to his or her work as a scientist?
- What role, if any, does societal relevance play in judging the acceptability of research and its dissemination?

These and related questions have plagued other editors, of course. In a highly publicized event last year, for example, a European scientist refused to honor a request by an Israeli scientist to share cells from a clone she used in expression analyses that she had reported on in two peer-reviewed journals. Citing her institution's protest against Israeli incursions in the West Bank, she declined to provide the requested cell to the Israeli scientist. Putting aside the fact that the Israeli scientist in question was involved in a collaboration with Palestinian scientists, a collaboration that could be expected to result in benefits for the Palestinians, her protest raises questions about the intermingling of science and society.

Such a campaign to punish an individual Israeli scientist for perceived misbehavior by the State of Israel is merely one in-

stance of the intermingling of science and politics; other examples range from U.S. and European scholars' boycotts of South African institutions and colleagues during the Apartheid era to criticisms of colleagues accepting money from tobacco or pharmaceutical companies. And psychology has been no stranger to these difficulties. In 1997, the American Psychological Foundation decided to withdraw, retroactively, the prestigious Gold Medal Award for Lifetime Achievement in Psychological Science that it had awarded to Raymond B. Cattell. The award was contested on the basis of Cattell's lifelong promotion of eugenics theory and policies. He was charged with racism, a charge he and a number of his supporters vehemently denied.

In an influential editorial in the journal *Science*, Donald Kennedy, while bemoaning the politicization of science, nevertheless saw such attempts to insert politics into science as a testament to the importance of science to society. A moment's reflection drives his point home with examples of entanglements over the environment, cloning, and the safety of food additives, to name a few recent ones: "These entanglements [between science and politics], although not always welcome, are an inevitable consequence of the fact that science matters" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 1765). And yet, understandably, scientists bristle at attempts by federal agencies to put a "spin" on findings to conform to a political agenda (see, e.g., Sluzki, 2003).

If unchecked, the intrusion of extrascientific considerations into deciding what should be published portends a bleak future in which scientific values will be subjugated to a political agenda that is by its very nature inimical to the core values of science—openness, peer referential nature, proof by disproof—values that scientists have jealously guarded, notwithstanding the occasional exception (see Bjork, 2000). Scientists protested, for example, when the well-documented lack of relationship between abortion and breast cancer, which had been described on the Web page of the National Cancer Institute, was changed to a statement that claimed the evidence was inconclusive.

## POLITICS AND THE CURRENT REPORT

As we have mentioned, the Surgeon General of the United States, during the summer of 2000, commissioned a large panel of accomplished scholars to write a definitive report on the effects of media violence in society. It was to be part of a larger volume on youth violence. As it turned out, however, when the Surgeon General's report on youth violence was released, the section on media violence was missing. Exactly why that happened is not completely clear. However, there are indications that preconceived ideas and perhaps extrascientific considerations played a significant role.

What is known is that the panel's initial draft, when returned to them, was altered in so many substantive ways that it was difficult for the panel to recognize certain parts of it. Conclu-

sions were weakened, and studies that were formerly emphasized were deemphasized or completely deleted. According to the authors, some of the changes were justified as "definitional." For example, the panel's report had been rewritten to include primarily studies in which the dependent variable or measured outcome was an actual "criminal act that physically harmed people." The importance of studies that measured less extreme forms of aggression, although sometimes still discussed, was generally downplayed. This restriction, of course, meant ignoring the rich corpus of social and developmental laboratory studies and field studies on children—even though these studies, collectively, have great relevance to the theories of how observation of violence affects behavior. Other alterations, according to the authors, were justified on the basis of what—in the authors' view—are misunderstandings of methodology and statistics.

Given that they had been selected precisely for their expertise and knowledge in the domain of the report, the authors were stunned by the substantial alteration of their writing and conclusions. Ultimately, they indicated to Delbert Elliott, a distinguished criminologist and the editor of the overall youth-violence report, that they were not willing to have their names associated with the altered report. Key members of the panel met with Elliott in an attempt to resolve the conflict and to develop a draft that the committee members would be willing to sign. However, Elliott subsequently reported that the Surgeon General's staff had decided (against his advice, according to the authors) to drop the media-violence section from the youth-violence report and, instead, simply to discuss media violence in another section of the overall report as one risk factor to be considered. The authors concluded that the staff of the Surgeon General's Office did not want to include any relatively uncensored report on the effects of media violence in the Surgeon General's broader report on youth violence.

Rather than allow their report to be suppressed by those who were unhappy with its conclusions, the panel of media-violence experts agreed to submit their report for *PSPI*'s peer review and publication. As we mentioned earlier, the report that follows has the same gist as the original report, but it has been revised in response to feedback from *PSPI* reviewers and editors. New theoretical sections have been added, and the report has been updated to reflect the literature that has appeared since the original report was drafted. Whether the analyses and conclusions of this report stand the test of time is a matter to be adjudicated by subsequent research. What can be said with confidence, however, is that the best light policymakers have—in this and other domains of public interest—is the accumulated knowledge of experts. It is the mission of *PSPI* to summarize that knowledge for researchers, policymakers, and the public in an effective, balanced, and scientifically rigorous way. Toward that goal, a fundamental principle, and one that needs to be constantly reaffirmed, is that scientific considerations, not extrascientific ones, should determine what is fit to print.

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