

- ▶ HOME
- ▶ LEADING STORIES
- ▶ COLUMNISTS
- ▶ BOOK REVIEWS
- ▶ HOSPITAL DIRECTORY
- ▶ RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL DIRECTORY
- ▶ ADVERTISING
- ▶ CLASSIFIEDS
- ▶ ABOUT US

LEADING STORIES

Social responsibility: psychologists address global community needs

(November 2009 Issue)



Issues such as national health care and climate change could benefit from a psychologist's involvement, according to Stephen Soldz, Ph.D., president-elect of Psychologists for Social Responsibility. (photo by Tom Croke)

By Phyllis Hanlon

Social responsibility dictates that businesses, organizations and individuals abide by an ethical standard that contributes to the welfare of society. Psychologists, who use their knowledge and expertise to improve people's lives and benefit society, can help promote ethical behavior in many of today's social issues.

The 1980s gave birth to a number of social justice groups, including state-run organizations. At that time, Maine formed two groups; one that lobbied for psychiatric patients' rights and another that concentrated efforts on reducing nuclear war-related anxiety, according to Peter O. Rees, Ed.D., a retired private practitioner in the Bangor, Maine area. He notes that these two groups combined to form the Peace and Social Responsibility Committee, which worked with the Maine Psychological Association (MePA) and local, national and international justice organizations, held annual retreats to build community and sponsored an annual essay contest for high school students.

"We got a lot of submissions on war mentality and changing it," Rees says. "We also identified some psychologists who made real contributions to the organization and gave them an award."

When deinstitutionalization began, the group rallied to help find appropriate placements for patients. "They threw everyone out of mental hospitals with no one to catch them," Rees says. More recently, the committee has begun to focus on gay rights.

Doug Kimmel, Ph.D., of Hancock, Maine, current chairperson of Maine's Peace and Social Responsibility Committee, reiterates the group's mission to apply psychological knowledge to social peace and justice issues and to help members become informed and involved, particularly about sexual orientation, gender identification and same sex marriage. "The APA supports this and has lots of documents to back it up," he says.

In 1984, the APA removed homosexuality as a diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). "The APA instructed psychologists to work to change the concept and followed through with the creation of the lesbian/bisexual/gay/transgender groups and committees," Kimmel says.

A specialist in gerontology, Kimmel is planning a spring conference on sexuality and aging. "Elders' special issues go hand-in-glove with some of the current issues," he says. "We're focusing on home care and assistive living for LGBT elders."

At the national level, Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR), an independent, non-profit organization with some 800 members, also came into existence in the 1980s in response to the nuclear armament issue. Like Maine's organization, PsySR's focus has expanded and now encompasses several areas where psychological knowledge and expertise can exact change in the public sphere and also bring more awareness to the profession.

Stephen Soldz, Ph.D., president-elect of PsySR and a professor at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis, indicates that the organization promotes six programs: human rights and psychology; war, violence and the alternatives; peace building and reconciliation; social health, justice and well being; climate change; sustainability and psychology and education for social responsibility. He has been one of the national leaders in the campaign to remove psychologists from the torture process and is excited that psychologists, the military intelligence and a former army interrogator collaborated to develop a case book for military intelligence, which is helping to build bridges in their ways of thinking about torture. To foster peace and extend its reach beyond the psychology world, PsySR has also collaborated with Amnesty International, the Center for Constitutional Rights and other organizations.

Newer issues, such as national health care and climate change could also benefit from psychologists' involvement, Soldz says, citing "American exceptionalism" as a major stumbling block. "We think we are uniquely endowed, that nothing we do is wrong and that we have nothing to learn from other countries," he says and suggests psychologists lobby legislators to examine the strengths and weaknesses of other national healthcare systems to produce a workable American plan.

Global warming also warrants attention from psychologists. "At times, it feels all else is irrelevant if we don't solve environmental issues. Humans are not good at anticipating problems," says Soldz. "With the environment, we tend to push [the matter] down the road and this can lead to disaster."

According to Soldz, incorporating socially responsible behavior into clinical work requires collaboration and open-mindedness. Psychologists need to work with institutions in matters such as determining the appropriateness of forced hospitalization, electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) and psychopharmacological intervention. When dealing with patients, psychologists should offer an array of treatment options, rather than dictating one specific therapy, he adds.

In his leadership role, Soldz hopes to raise the level of ethical uses of psychology. "For instance, what is the role of psychology in marketing? Are we manipulating people to buy things they may not need? It's a complex psychological issue," Soldz says.

Susan Hawes, Ph.D., professor and director of accountability research and director of assessment training and contracts at Antioch University New England in Keene, N.H., takes

a more global perspective of social responsibility. While attending a conference in South Africa four years ago, the country's extreme poverty deeply touched her. "Poverty has a huge damaging effect. It limits your ability to participate in a democratic society," she says.

This past summer, she and a student traveled to Soweto where they performed psychological and educational assessments on children between the ages of six and 15 who were HIV+ and had been identified by a non-governmental organization (NGO) as having serious cognitive difficulties. Not only did her research yield important findings, but she also underwent a personal transformation. "When you work with people not like ourselves, it's an incredible growing experience," Hawes says. "You come away from it a different person."

In the classroom, Hawes attempts to apply divergent thinking to her lessons. "History looks at psychology and its social context and how psychology has influenced society, how encouraging reflexivity can be a means to enhance communication," she says. No formal training is required to practice ethical behavior, according to Soldz. "You learn by doing," he says. And having a bit of passion and excitement for making the community a healthy place also helps.

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