

Professional Psychology and the Seduction of Passivity

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By devoting this issue of the SGVPA newsletter *Analyze This* to politics, the editors advocate passionate action over quiet passivity. To become involved in an organization, to take a stand, to write or to speak out – these all constitute outward activity of some sort. In contrast, professional psychology tends to be an unusually passive vocation, rendering its practitioners' participation in political activities unusual or even rare, and for several distinct reasons.

Regardless of whether practicing psychological assessment, psychotherapy, or some other professional activity, we psychologists tend to work in isolation. We may practice in a suite of colleagues, but our days are passed working individually with our patients. Unlike our medical colleagues, we have few routine consultations with our peers. By virtue of the extreme sensitivity of our work, we share little if anything of the details of what we do with our family and friends. In essence, we work alone. And as our colleague Rico Gnaulati pointed out, our work requires extreme concentration and focus. Arguably unlike any other professional, even surgeons or anesthesiologists, we cannot leave the room during a session, even to make a telephone call or use the rest room.

Also, since we are working towards helping others in virtually any aspect of our work, we can rightfully feel that we are contributing to society in some fashion. While legitimate on one level, this is a rationalization on another. We may rely on this form of giving to avoid other forms of philanthropy. Why serve humanity in a broader sense when each and every day involves care for others?

Finally, the work is tiring. Except perhaps for those psychologists who solely perform assessments, psychotherapy is extremely intimate, satisfying some needs and exhausting others. Some of us err (somewhat cheaply) by obtaining our needs for closeness through our work; this allows us to remain in an invulnerable position while enjoying high levels of interpersonal intimacy. Ironically, the very personal nature of the work is likely the most exhausting element of it. We often feel intensely fatigued by the end of the day or the end of the week. Who can blame us for eschewing political action and instead taking refuge in hiking, theater, reading or other non-political pursuits during our precious free time?

Despite these basic truths of the isolated, helpful, and intimate nature of our work, we psychologists are nested in an unavoidable, larger social context. Starting from within the field itself, we are under attack by insurance companies who would like to reduce or eliminate reimbursements for our services; we are surrounded by a mass media that typically misunderstands what we do; we struggle with a portion of medicine and of course the massive pharmaceutical industry which derogate our work and push “medicines” for help with any kind of mental pain.

If the circle opens even just a bit wider, well, then we face real horror: Haiti, the Middle East, Somalia, global economic recession, hunger within our own borders, and oh so much more. (A recent Gallup survey revealed that one in four Americans has trouble providing food for themselves and their families).

In the final analysis, then, and despite our good works, we should really escape from our offices and do something more for the society and the planet. Our Ethics Code suggests it, but even more powerful universal ethical principles demand it. We are blessed with involvement in a wonderful profession: How many offer an ability to help others in such an intimate way? But the limited populations we serve just don't make enough of a difference; we have skills that could have much broader impact, and for that the world awaits. So, whatever means works for you – volunteering, leading, writing, or shouting, please make sure that – in consonance with the theme of this issue –you venture away from your offices and share your talents with the wider world.

The End