EDITORIAL: STANDING FOR SCIENCE IS STANDING FOR JUSTICE

The Associated Press recently noted that, “Since President Donald Trump took office, a number of federal agencies have moved to downscale data collection on topics like climate change and homeless people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender and to remove information on such topics from some government websites” (Stobbe, 2017, ¶12). In mid-December of 2017, according to the American Psychological Association (APA), “employees of the CDC and possibly other agencies within HHS were given guidance dissuading them from using seven words or phrases in agency budget documents, specifically: vulnerable, entitlement, diversity, transgender, fetus, evidence-based and science-based. Statements from the CDC indicated that the news coverage misrepresented the intent, which was a tactic to ensure documents would be more likely to be approved by a Republican Congress if certain words were excluded” (APA, 2017, ¶3). Responding to the reported guidance, Antonio Puente, the president of the APA stated:

Restricting these key words follows this administration's disturbing pattern of devaluing science in myriad ways, including limiting its scientists from attending meetings, controlling what its scientists can say to the public, rolling back data collection efforts, and leaving key federal science agency positions unfilled. Federal policies and programs affecting public health and science must rest on empirical research. The way we talk about it is critical as it sets the tone for our nation, and affects our ability to use science to make life better for people. (APA, 2017)

Behaviorists for Social Responsibility (BFSR, the sponsor of this journal) joined many other scientific and service organization in expressing deep concern, not only about the “censorship” issue, but also about the evident broader refusal to shape policy based on well-established science in a broad range of areas, including climate change, the environment, health, and social welfare. Recognizing the serious risks associated with ignoring such science, BFSR further called on behavior analysts, other scientists, and concerned citizens to insist that science be taken seriously, and to resist efforts to establish policy grounded in political expediency that are inconsistent with established knowledge. Standing for science is not merely a matter of intellectual honesty; it is also a moral issue. Standing for science is standing for justice, both social and environmental. Barring or discouraging language referring to vulnerable persons and groups (including the specifically targeted trans* population”) offers clear, though camouflaged and deniable, guidance for what research will, and will not, be valued in funding decisions. There are also news reports that CDC staff were directed not to use the phrase “health equity” in presentations or public talks—despite clear scientific evidence that inequities in this area, as in many others, has profound effects on marginalized groups. If guided by human rights principles, society should in fact direct research and policy attention intentionally and specifically to those populations facing the highest health and economic risks. Furthermore, there is clear scientific evidence that such inequities are damaging to the entire society, including those who are better off (Biglan, 2015). Similarly, the impacts of climate change are most severe for the most vulnerable; environmental justice issues are also social justice issues. Related arguments can be made regarding a range of other federal policy areas: energy, public lands, housing, education, and financial regulations. In each case,

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policy decisions can have profound impacts on the most vulnerable; in each, science can provide guidance for moderating such impacts; and in each, allocation of research funds with an eye to justice is critical for doing so.

As later responses from the CDC suggested, it is possible that the intent of the “guidance” around funding proposals was actually a misguided attempt to avoid loss of funding for valuable programs. It was, however, severely problematic, presenting as a surrender to the anti-science approach of both the current administration and Congress at a time when standing for science (and therefore for justice), and resisting efforts to contest established knowledge for political or economic purposes, are critically important. A public statement from BFSR on these issues follows this editorial.

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References

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