Using Women’s History Month to look toward women’s futures

The celebration of Women’s History Month in March has always been a chance for me to reflect on where women have been in the past, what we have accomplished, and what our goals should be to continue our progression into the future.

American women have overcome many hurdles built by patriarchy over the past several decades. And there is still a great amount of work to do. For example, African American women are the most at risk of contracting HIV in the U.S. (but even the vice-presidential candidates did not know this was an issue). The majority of those living below the poverty line are women, many of them single mothers. We still face sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual objectification on a daily basis. Many of us feel limited by the fact that women are still expected to take on a vast majority of child-rearing responsibilities. And our reproductive rights are forever being challenged. It is clear where there is room for improvement for U.S. women.

But this year my thoughts about our future goals have taken on a global perspective, one that is more urgent to the immediate survival of women in the developing world. This has stemmed out of a trip I was fortunate enough to take to Nepal over winter break.

The main purpose of my trip was to conduct research on the trafficking of girls and women for sexual exploitation. Along with my advisor, I conducted interviews with the staff of an NGO in Kathmandu that rescues girls and women who are sold (often by their families) to brothels in India. I heard stories of how young girls are forced to serve as sex workers, contract HIV and are sent back to Nepal, only to be rejected by their communities because they have been “soiled.”

Sex trafficking does not only occur in Nepal, but all over the world. Young women and girls are taken from their countries with promises of high-paying jobs in exotic places, only to find themselves slaves to a madam or pimp, servicing dozens of men a day.

This is just one of a laundry list of issues faced by women. There is also the burgeoning HIV epidemic. In many countries, particularly in Africa, the number of women living with HIV has outnumbered that of men. The reasons for this are multiple, some of which include sex work as the only way for women to make a sufficient income, contracting the virus from an unfaithful male partner, or not having the ability to negotiate condom use for fear of being beaten by a partner or accused of promiscuity.

Alas, for the first time this past January, Iraqi women were permitted to cast their votes. Although the Administration has paraded this and the fact that many more Iraqi women are now receiving an education as the guise for the war, it is doubtful that Iraqi women are really any freer than they were a few years ago.

So for Women’s History Month 2005, I propose we look at our future goals for women on a more global level. We need to focus more on the millions of women who are living in fear on a daily basis because of their gender and who continue to be neglected by much of the Western world. This includes raising awareness through research and pushing findings into the hands of policy-makers. Global women’s issues should not be a matter of concern just for NGOs, human rights groups and Peace Corp volunteers, but for all women and men, especially those of us who have the luxury of living in the Western world.

Michelle R. Kaufman
Newsletter Editor
2005 National Multicultural Conference and Summit (NMCS): Student reflections

The 2005 NMCS, entitled The Psychology of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Disability: What Works, With Whom and Under What Circumstances, was held in January in Hollywood, California. Three professors and 6 graduate students were sponsored by SPSSI to attend this year’s conference. The program included:

- Keynote addresses by Derald Wing Sue, PhD, Nancy Boyd-Franklin, PhD & Anderson Franklin, PhD, and Oliva Espin, PhD
- Distinguished Elders ceremony recognizing Donald Atkinson, PhD, Oliva Espin, PhD, Robert Guthrie, PhD, Allen Ivey, EDD, Reginald Jones, PhD, Bernice Lott, PhD, and Felicisima Serafin, PhD

Three of the graduate students sponsored by SPSSI offer their reflections:

Adam Fingerhut, 4th year Social Psychology, UCLA

Having never attended the National Multicultural Conference and Summit before, I truly did not know what to expect. Within moments of walking into the poster session, where I was scheduled to present a poster, I immediately knew that I had found a home. I was overcome by the energy and the diversity of the people I encountered, and by the very clear commitment to socially relevant research. Even before I finished setting up my sturdy cardboard tri-fold, people were approaching me to chat about my work.

Throughout the evening, I interacted with dozens of individuals who were eager to ask questions and to engage in a dialogue about my research concerning the experiences of lesbians and gay men in our society. It was a unique opportunity to get feedback from people from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it was a chance to get support from people who care about the same things as do I and who understand the value of research focused on minority populations.

Jamie L. Franco, 4th year Social Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz

As a first year attendee of the NMCS, I had few expectations regarding conference programming and events. Based on the program information, I was enthusiastic about attending the Difficult Dialogue on classism and the few sessions devoted to sexual orientation.

On the first day, I attended a session entitled Sexual Minorities: Clinical Considerations for the Coming-Out Process submitted by Mark Yarhouse, Psy.D. Surprisingly, the presentation included a discussion of the “benefits of numerous clinical interventions”, including conversion and reorientation therapy. Session attendees were astounded by the talk featured information that was counter to the past 35 years of research findings. Attendees (some of whom are active in Division 44, the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues) were quick to respond. Critiques were offered during and after the session, and Division 44 leaders shared research findings with attendees that highlighted the detrimental effects of “conversion and reorientation” therapy.

Despite the initial shock, anger and/or pain caused by Yarhouse’s submission (as presented by his graduate students), much of this subsided. Attendees were supportive of one another and agreed to band together to fight those who attempt to infiltrate our “safe spaces” or disperse false pseudoscientific information.

So what are my expectations for next year’s conference? I expect to be surrounded by supportive colleagues truly interested in promoting diversity and fighting oppression. And maybe, just maybe... there will be an increased dialogue surrounding these issues that are rarely highlighted: classism and disability.

Ludwin Molina, 4th year Social Psychology, UCLA

I would like to highlight the symposium on “Increasing Diversity in Psychology: Barriers and Strategies”, chaired by Dr. Sheila Grant from California State University, Northridge and co-facilitated by Dr. Enedina Garcia-Vazquez (Co-training Director of the School Psychology Program at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces). This was a remarkable symposium that brought together a diverse group of professors, graduate students, and staff psychologists of color and with disabilities to discuss their experiences and struggles in their training and current work within an academic setting. The symposium also addressed strategies the panelists encountered in their training or work environment that proved useful and beneficial. Whether the speaker was presenting the perspective of a graduate student of color within a predominantly White department, the experience of a professor with a disability in an academic setting, or a professor at the intersection of two or more of these identities, the results were equally penetrating and enlightening. It was remarkable to listen to the panelists’ journeys in academia and realize that there is some connection among all these experiences—a connection fashioned out of struggle. One was left with a bittersweet feeling that some progress has been made, but more needs to be done to create fully inclusive and welcoming environments within many of our departments. This was a message that resonated with me and much of the audience.

Visit www.multiculturalsummit.org/index.php for more information on the Summit. The 2007 conference will be held in San Diego, California.

Objectification and the City

Why Sex and the City is not as progressive as we think

By Tamar Saguy, University of Connecticut

I am an addict. Oh, yes. Even after watching the current season of Sex and the City for the third time, I still want more. It’s fun, what can I say? As an “approaching 30” bachelorette who is practically in love with her girlfriends and still looking for the right guy (which, of course, does not exist), the series manages to touch many aspects of my life.

Another thing about me: I am a feminist, and as such I pay a lot of attention to what might empower women, and what might allegedly empower them. Sex and the City can easily be considered a very progressive feminist series. Besides being witty and clever, the episodes often challenge common perceptions about the female gender role. A few examples are Carrie refusing marriage at the age of 35, Samantha’s unwillingness to commit to men, and Miranda’s preference to raise her baby alone rather than with someone she doesn’t love. However, there is one aspect that is left completely unchallenged by this popular series: the role of beauty. Although the series manages to question the traditional female role, it harms women more than empowering them by perpetuating what Naomi Wolf termed the “beauty myth.”
According to Frederickson and Roberts’ objectification theory, women's bodies are constantly looked at, evaluated and treated as objects in American society. The cultural message communicated is that women's worth is determined by their appearance: if you look good, you’ll do well. The consequences of this are harmful for women. Ample research has shown that when appearance is made salient for women they show higher levels of body shame, lower cognitive ability and engage in damaging self-surveillance behaviors (like restricted eating). Why? Women adopt the objectifying view others have of their bodies. They come to believe they are what they look like and expend a lot of cognitive and emotional resources trying to look good.

The four smart and funny characters in Sex and the City are very much preoccupied with their bodies. It doesn’t matter what they are going through in their lives, their looks are always of utmost importance. The message is clear: you need to look “fabulous” in order to get attention, you need to look “fabulous” in order to succeed and most importantly, you need to look “fabulous” in order to love yourself. Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte are past their thirties alright, but somehow they manage to keep a Linda Evangelista figure and all have perfect hair, makeup, clothes, high-heeled shoes and very pretty faces. It’s not easy to look like them (nor is it cheap). The body ideal these women are representing is completely unattainable.

Since Sex and the City highlights the value of female beauty to such a tremendous extent, it cannot be considered feminist—not if we take into consideration the consequences of being objectified. Even if a woman is smart, successful, sensitive, and popular, she will suffer from the negative consequences of objectification as long as her appearance is so highly valued by others.

And the fact that Sex and the City fails to be completely progressive is sad, because the characters hold such great values concerning women’s behavior, freedom of choice and power to make decisions. As a viewer, you want to identify with them. But once you do, you realize you will never be like them because you will never look like them. The message is that you can be a free woman, but you will never get rid of the chains of beauty. According to Sex and the City, thinking about your appearance and putting considerable time and effort into its improvement are of primary concern.

Objectification theory outlines the severe consequences of being treated as an object—as a body to be looked at. One way to change the cultural message is to make women's success not contingent solely upon perfect looks. Unfortunately, Sex and the City fails in this regard.

Call for Nominations – SPSSI GSC Elections

It's that time of the year again! Have you been wondering how you can get more involved in SPSSI? Do you have ideas on how students can bridge the gap between science and public policy? The Student Committee is looking to fill several positions: Chair-Elect, 2 Member-at-Large positions and Student Newsletter/Web Editor. To run for one of these positions, e-mail nominations to spssigsc@yahoo.com. Include university affiliation and platform statement, not to exceed 200 words. Nominations are due no later than April 15th.

Chair-Elect (2-year term)
The Chair-elect serves for one year as a committee member helping the Chair carry out the planning and running of activities for the year. This year of guidance helps to prepare the Chair-elect for the following year as Chair of the committee.

Newsletter/Web Editor (1-year term)
Each quarter, the Student Committee develops and distributes a newsletter to all student members. The editor is responsible for soliciting stories and reports for the newsletter and preparing the newsletter for publication each quarter. In addition, the editor is responsible for the upkeep of the student committee website and may help with other functions of the committee, including providing input and voting on committee business.

Member-at-Large (1-year term)
The Member-at-Large position was created to provide more assistance to the Chair for various Student Committee tasks. Members-at-large are appointed to head a sub-committee (e.g., elections, ASAP/JSI student editor appointments, and travel awards) and to coordinate important committee functions (e.g., SPSSI and APA convention panels).

We hope to see your name on the ballot!
SPSSI Student Activities  
2005 APA Convention

The Graduate Student Committee has been creating a program for the 2005 APA convention in Washington, D.C. to be held August 18-21. We plan to offer a series of roundtable discussions throughout the convention. More details will be made available in the next newsletter. Here are the highlights:

Benefits and Challenges to Conducting International Research  
Thursday, August 18 6:6:50 pm  
Hosted by Demis E. Glasford, Member-at-Large and Michelle R. Kaufman, Newsletter Editor, University of Connecticut

Researchers conducting international and cross-cultural research face many unique questions and obstacles. Where do I begin? How do I establish contacts? How do I tailor measures so they are culturally appropriate? What about international IRB committees? This discussion will address all of these issues and more.

Changing the World through Social Science  
Thursday, August 18 7:7:50 pm  
Hosted by Lori A.J. Scott-Sheldon, Chair, University of Connecticut

Wondering how you can use your research to effect social change and public policy? Curious about opportunities awaiting you at non-academic institutions once you receive your PhD? Social scientists inside and outside of the academic world will discuss ways you can make a difference, including opportunities offered by SPSSI.

The Bridge between Community and Academic Work  
Friday, August 19 2:2:50 pm  
Hosted by Jamie L. Franco, Chair-Elect, University of California, Santa Cruz

Are you currently involved in both community and academic work? Or, are you interested in becoming more involved in the communities and populations you study but are not sure how to go about connecting with community agencies? This discussion will include the ways in which graduate students have been able to connect their community activism and academic research.

What Next? Options and Alternatives after Graduation  
Friday, August 19 3:3:50 pm  
Hosted by Teresa R. Robbins, Member-at-Large, Claremont Graduate University

Are you nearing graduation or currently on the job market? Are you a new graduate student wondering what your career options will be? This panel will focus on a variety of options available after graduate school. Special attention will be paid to the experiences of members of marginalized groups.

Beginning a Career in Public Policy (co-sponsored with APAGS)  
The GSC will be co-sponsoring (with APAGS) a symposium/training session on "Beginning a Career in Public Policy." This training session will focus on how psychologists can work professionally on Capitol Hill as lobbyists, activists or policy makers. Speakers include: Roberta Downing, PhD, APA Congressional Fellow, Office of Senator Kennedy, Diane Elmore, PhD, APA Congressional Fellow, Office of Senator Clinton, and Diane Zuckerma, PhD, the President of the National Center for Policy Research (CPR) for Women & Families.

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Call for Research Participation:  
Experiences, perceptions & aspirations of psychology students – A web-based survey

An interdivisional task force representing multiple APA divisions is aiming to better understand the psychology student experience. We are seeking volunteer participants from a diversity of backgrounds to complete an anonymous web-based survey of students’ experiences, perceptions and aspirations.

The anonymous survey should take about 30 minutes to complete. Both closed-ended and open-ended survey items are included. Participants who complete the anonymous survey will be given the opportunity to enter into a lottery in which 50 winners will each win a $25 prize. There is also an opportunity to take part in a 30-minute paid, post-survey interview conducted by psychology graduate students. Interview participants will each receive $25.

The survey includes questions about your reasons for studying psychology; challenges met, support received and plans for the future; experiences in psychology to date and whether aspirations are associated with student ethnicity (being a person of color being European-American/White); perspectives about affirmative action and the representation of race/ethnicity and gender in the field; and demographics.

We strongly encourage you to take part in the survey and contribute to our field’s understanding of the student experience—and our attempts to improve it.

For more information and to participate, go to www.psychstudy.net/studentexperiences/. Questions can be addressed to Dr. Kenneth Maton, psychology professor and chair of the interdivisional task force, at Maton@umbc.edu.

Mentor Social Hour  
The GSC will be hosting a mentor social hour that gives students an opportunity to interact with other SPSSI members and discuss how to use research to affect policy change. More details to follow.

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