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A Brief History of Psychology and the OPA: Celebrating 50 Years of Psychological Advancement in Ohio

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When the Ohio Psychological Association was established 50 years ago, psychology looked rather differently than it does today. Most psychologists then were affiliated with academia, making their living teaching, doing research, or fulfilling administrative duties. Applied psychology was only a small fraction of the total psychology endeavor.

The Ohio Psychological Association, born during the immediate post-war period, was in many respects a miniature American Psychological Association. Its membership contained few clinicians, its dues were quite low, its focus primarily on research and academic matters. Its meetings — hardly large enough to earn the name “conventions” — were primarily paper reading gatherings. The president of the Association was typically a highly respected academician whose works were widely known throughout psychology — individuals such as George Kelley, Sidney Pressey, and Calvin Hall. The leadership positions of the Association were more honorary than active.

OPA continued more or less in this mode throughout that period which later became known as the “Silent 50’s.” But during that time psychology itself was going through a major metamorphosis. More and more psychology students were being trained to do things outside the walls of the college or university. The wartime need for practical applications of psychology had resulted in a gradually increasing number of clinical students throughout the 50’s. For OPA, this meant an increasing number of non-academicians were joining in the late 50’s and early 60’s.

As with so many aspects of American society, the 60’s were a time of extraordinary ferment and change. Psychology came to train many more doctoral candidates in the clinical area than in the research/experimental area. Other applied fields such as industrial and organizational psychology were growing rapidly as well. Psychology became the single most popular undergraduate major. During the 60’s more and more clinicians and other applied psychologists joined OPA. Since viable organizations inevitably come to represent the concerns of the bulk of their membership, the voices of the clinicians became louder and more influential within the Association.

Clinicians and other applied psychologists had some very different priorities from researchers and academicians. Successfully managing professional issues, not exchanging research information, was of immediate concern to the practitioner. At the national level, the American Psychological Association (APA) remained remarkably unchanged during the 60’s even though the composition of psychology was dramatically changing. Frustrated by their inability to effect much change at

the national level, the ever-increasing numbers of newly trained clinicians turned to their state associations as their vehicle of choice for change. In Ohio, that meant joining OPA; as they joined OPA, OPA changed.

By the beginning of the 70's, OPA was almost completely in the hands of the applied psychologists. As they witnessed the Association changing, the academicians left in large numbers (and still have not returned, despite repeated recruitment efforts). Meanwhile, the clinicians were facing the inevitable frustrations of a new discipline attempting to establish itself in an indifferent and sometimes hostile environment. Some psychiatrists, for example, were arguing that psychologists should not be permitted to call themselves "doctors" since they were not medically trained! Psychologists were not licensed. In the early 70's, with David Rodgers, Ph.D., as point guard, Ohio succeeded in securing licensing, the opposition to which came from both within and outside of psychology. This followed a legislative struggle that lasted more than 10 years. Then, in a move unprecedented among state psychological associations, OPA hired its first executive director, Henry Saeman. Actually beginning as a lobbyist, he gradually expanded his role to become the first full-time executive director of any state psychological association. With Saeman's efforts, OPA established an effective ongoing presence in the legislature, and psychology, represented by OPA, made many gains during the 70's including inclusion in freedom of choice and other important legislation.

The 80's were a "golden age" for psychology. The field was firmly established and growing at a phenomenal rate. Third party payers were paying for psychological services with only a few exceptions. OPA's growth during this decade was substantial — from a few hundred members to well over a thousand. Psychologists were making more money and grouched only a little at paying increasing dues. Increased revenues meant the Association could provide more member services as well as become more heavily engaged in legislative and other outside activities. Psychology became a real player in the legislative arena. One of OPA's most significant achievements was its leading role in the creation of the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University. Many psychologists were going into independent practice, and these people voiced to OPA an ever-increasing need for appropriate support activities. To help meet these needs, OPA offered more workshops on business and investment issues, provided legal assistance to its members, and experienced some ambivalence regarding how much assistance it should provide for that small but influential group of entrepreneurs who had learned how to develop the business side of psychological practice to previously unimagined levels.

Gary DeNelsky worked with OPA for many years serving as President and also on the Executive Committee of the Board as twice elected representative to APA. He served on its Board of Trustees for 25 consecutive years. In 2001 he retired from the Cleveland Clinic, where he headed its Section of Psychology, and founded and directed its Smoking Cessation Program. He was one of the leaders in the successful effort that culminated in Ohio's Clean (smokefree) Indoor Air Act, and was inducted into the American Cancer Society's Cancer Care Hall of Fame.