

NOTE

An error uncorrected: a case study in intellectual corruption

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ABSTRACT: A reviewer of a book I wrote claimed an idea presented therein could be found elsewhere. Eight years later, no one could say where, but no one would correct the erroneous allegation. The citations submitted proved to be fallacious, and the file on the dispute maintained by the American Psychological Association (APA) really is not about my case at all. There was a basic conflict between the conduct of the organization's functionaries and its ethical code. Those involved created a cover-up characterized by secrecy, irrelevancy, misrepresentation, failure to communicate and an adamant refusal to deal logically with my complaint and the facts of the case—everything inimical to the ideal academic/scientific end: the truth.

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In September 1993, my book 'Understanding Stupidity' (Welles 1986) was reviewed in *Contemporary Psychology* by Dr. Thomas O. Blank (1993) of The School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut. *Contemporary Psychology* is a journal of reviews sponsored by the American Psychological Association (APA). I took justifiable exception to a number of his comments and availed myself of the opportunity to respond in the 'Point/Counterpoint' format provided by the journal to aggrieved authors. This consisted of an exchange of 4 statements between myself and Dr. Blank and appeared in the May 1994 issue. In his last comment, to which I had no opportunity to reply in print, he alleged that my challenge to Darwinian psychology that 'Normal human behavior is not necessarily adaptive'¹ (quotation marks his) could be accessed, i.e. found, elsewhere.

I received an advanced copy of Dr. Blank's claim and twice challenged him in writing to document his claim but received not even the courtesy of a reply. I then turned to the APA in hopes of resolving the problem by obtaining a valid reference or effecting a correction, but all my attempts were rebuffed. Not only did all al-

leged attempts to document this claim prove to be fallacious, but my complaint in the APA file was falsified.

In general, the approach of officials at the APA was to try to fob me off. Over a period of 8 years, more than 30 of them sent me some 80 communications (including e-mails) in which the overwhelming majority of comments made were designed to shut me down or get rid of me, rather than to deal with my complaint and resolve the problem. Most statements were either true and irrelevant, or relevant but untrue, but almost nothing written by the APA was true and relevant. Striking by its absence in almost all letters was an effort to communicate candidly and frankly. Equally striking by its presence was a bad faith commitment to leave my complaint unresolved: Specifically, not only could no one document Dr. Blank's claim, but no one would even ask² him to do so nor explain why no one would ask.

¹In my book, I allege that normal human behavior can be maladaptive, but the weaker, more general phrase cited here is the one I used in *Contemporary Psychology*, so I am unfortunately stuck with that. (Note: a computerized literature search produced no reference supporting the notion that normal behavior is non- or maladaptive)

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To this end, one tactic adopted by the APA was to claim that documentation had been provided, and in an e-mail to me on April 22, 1999, Dr. Gary VandenBos, Executive Director, Publications and Communications, averred 5 people had succeeded in this regard although none actually had. The best case was a citation which enumerated a few specific examples demonstrating my generalization was true but not that anyone else had made it. I obtained a letter from the author cited stating his position to be the exact opposite of mine and sent a copy to the APA. It made no difference: The author's written statement to the contrary notwithstanding, the official APA position remained—the 'Reference' constituted documentation of Dr. Blank's allegation.

The other alleged citations were even worse. One constituted nothing but a citation of one example of a form of abnormal behavior—i.e. a subclass of slips of speech. This hardly qualified as the intellectual equivalent of a generalization about all normal behavior, but it was nevertheless accepted by the APA as if it did.

Worse yet was a reading list of books (with no page numbers) provided by Dr. Blank. No one could cite a single statement in any of them to support Dr. Blank, but I found two which contradicted him. I made copies of the appropriate pages, underlined the statements and sent them to Dr. Blank and several of his supporters and never heard from anyone about them again. Nevertheless, the APA claimed this reading list constituted successful documentation of his claim.

A totally irrelevant 'Citation' indicated that normal learning can lead to maladaptive behavior. The author acknowledged that this had nothing whatsoever to do with the issue in dispute (which was about the adaptiveness not the ontogeny of normal behavior) but the APA deemed otherwise. Finally, a non-reference was provided by Dr. VandenBos himself when he claimed, without a shred of evidence to support him, that he had used my idea in developing the concept that schizophrenia and normal behavior are on a continuum.

Nearly a year after Dr. VandenBos erroneously claimed 5 people had successfully dealt with the problem, a 6th failed when Dr. Merry Bullock, Associate Executive Director for Science, responded to my phone call to her on March 13, 2000, regarding the case. In an

e-mail to me 3 days later, she provided a number of examples from psychology and physiology which demonstrated that my idea is valid and of far reaching significance, but she did not show anyone else had published it, which is what the APA was supposed to be doing.

Finally, Prof. Don Dewsbury of the University of Florida provided some citations explaining that maladaptive human behavior could be the result of set systems mismatched with new conditions—that is, behavior resulting from psychological mechanisms shaped in the Pleistocene interacting with stimuli from the contemporary, rapidly changing technological environment. Those cited did not claim this insight applied to normal behavior, and although in the context provided, and considering the nature of the examples given, a reader might so construe it, it was not a conclusion reached by the authors nor a point they explicitly made. This was fairly typical for someone committed to claiming documentation of the equation 'Normal human behavior = maladaptive': Someone would find a comment about one side of the equation (e.g. an explanation for maladaptation), complete it in his own fevered mind and then creatively (mis)attribute the whole, muddled concoction to the writer. However, careful reading of these citations showed no universal generalization clearly and explicitly linking normal human behavior with maladaptation.³ The psychic mechanisms discussed could be producing abnormal or simply idiosyncratic behavior which was maladaptive, so referring to them hardly constituted providing valid citations for Dr. Blank's allegation.

Along with falsely claiming valid citations had been provided to document the claim, my complaint in the official file maintained at the APA's Washington office was falsified. I came to that realization after reading an e-mail (July 7, 1999) from Dr. Bruce Overmier (one of the APA's Board of Directors), in which he lent me a glimpse of what was going on behind the organization's curtain of secrecy, which obscured officials' unethical conduct. Finally, I understood how everyone could review the APA's failure in this dispute and decide against the truth. Previously, that was a mystery: How Dr. Blank could say in print that my idea

²As I pointed out a number of times to a number of people, asking Dr. Blank to supply a reference would create a problem for him only if he could not do it (in which case a correction would be entirely in order), but this was one thing the APA absolutely would not do. Bear in mind that at this point, I was not asking the APA to endure the experience of setting the record straight: I was simply asking that someone in the organization validate a statement published in one of its journals. A fair statement of its position might be: 'We have made an error, and we stand by our error'

³The nearest they came was Cosmides & Tooby (1987), who stated: 'Evolutionary theorists ought not to be surprised when evolutionarily unprecedented environmental inputs yield maladaptive behavior.' There simply is nothing in this statement to indicate the maladaptive behavior referred to is normal. A reader might conclude the authors meant such behavior was normal, and maybe they did, but that would just be an imputation by the reader. We cannot judge what the authors meant—only what they wrote—and they simply did not stipulate anything about said maladaptive behavior being normal, abnormal, vestigial or just plain fluky

could be found elsewhere, no one could say where, no one at the APA would ask him nor explain why no one would ask, and yet everyone who read the file concluded nothing was wrong? The answer is that the reviewers were not evaluating my case. Presumably to the satisfaction of the APA administrators if the detriment of psychology, my actual, specific case was lost on the reviewers, who were assessing a fabricated, straw-man case specially doctored up by the APA to be moot and without merit but which was not mine. Indeed, one could read the entire file and come away not knowing even what my complaint was.

Although the APA complicated matters in order to rationalize doing nothing, my case was actually remarkably simple, unidimensional and just—yet no one would touch it. First, let me say what it was not: It was not about the general issue of originality (i.e. uniqueness). Dr. Blank had earlier made generic, subjective comments about my alleged lack of originality, and I had let them slide by unchallenged as too grand, vague and amorphous to be documentable.

However, his final statement was different in nature from those earlier comments, in that it averred that a particular idea of mine could be found somewhere other than in my book. Its specificity lent it to the intellectual standard of verification, and as a skeptical author, I had quite properly called upon him and later his supporters at the APA to document it. The problem was (and remains) that no one could. This—my actual case about the invalidity of Dr. Blank's specific allegation—clearly was misrepresented in the file. By misattribution and falsification, APA officials fabricated and then threw out a case about originality created just for that purpose. They then claimed they had dismissed my case when they had not even dealt with it.⁴ Throughout this imbroglio, I had been victimized by misattribution, but with this, they took betrayal to the level of an intellectual crime, the scientific equivalent of falsifying a charge if not actually tampering with evidence.

To put this another way, the APA's position would have been perfectly valid and appropriate had Dr. Blank's final comment been just another generic, diffuse, subjective swipe at my alleged general lack of

⁴This is not a case of 2 parties having different sides of the same story but of 2 different stories. The APA deals with the issue of originality in general which was raised in the body of the review and to which I could have responded in the P/C-point exchange had I chosen to—but I did not. On the other hand, my complaint was that in Dr. Blank's final statement in the P/C-point exchange, he made an invalid allegation that a particular idea of mine could be found somewhere other than in my book. These are 2 different matters entirely, and the waste of time and energy when its personnel failed to deal with my complaint because of this deliberate mix-up is, clearly, totally the responsibility of the APA

originality. However, it was not. His allegation was clearly and simply a challenge to the uniqueness of but one of my specific ideas, but for its own ulterior motive—i.e. to justify its predetermined policy of not holding an errant colleague accountable by publishing a correction—the APA feigned otherwise. This was thoroughly unconscionable and shatters the myths that the APA is a respectable, professional organization laboring on behalf of psychology and truth, and that science is ipso facto a self-correcting institution.

The failure of the APA to supply documentation and its falsification of my complaint convinced me that its officials were not only unable, but also unwilling to resolve this matter in a professional manner. Indeed, if there was one constant in their conduct in this regrettable affair, it was that no one abided by, much less actually enforced, the organization's 'Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct', the preamble of which calls upon psychologists to be fair, promote integrity, aspire to the highest possible standards of conduct, be concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues' conduct, and work to develop a valid and reliable body of scientific knowledge. Of course, it mattered to none of the staff that they made an absolute mockery of these aspirational goals⁵ so nobly set forth in the idealized if impotent, superego-stylized 'Ethics Code'.

CONCLUSION

It appears there is a taboo at the APA about published errors—they should not be corrected. Not only did all attempts to document Dr. Blank's erroneous claim fail, but my complaint was deliberately falsified to the point of deceit. I have never known a case in which so many well-educated people have distinguished between right and wrong and deliberately chosen to be wrong.

LITERATURE CITED

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⁵I regard the stated principles not aspiration goals but basic standards of ethical conduct for anyone in academia or science committed to the truth. An expanded version of this article entitled 'Taboo vs. Ethics' is available online at www.stupidity.com