

# DIVISION NEWSLETTER

# 7



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Division 7

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## President's Message



## Racism in Developmental Research

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The first issue of the Division Newsletter following the APA meeting in August traditionally includes the division "presidential address." This year, I am breaking with that tradition since a large part of my address will appear in the book: *The Transition from Infancy to Language: Acquiring the Power of Expression* (Cambridge University Press, in press). Instead, I am using the opportunity to summarize the symposium I organized for this year's division program: "Racism in Developmental Research." Few members of the division attended the symposium because APA, in its wisdom, scheduled virtually all events having to do with "ethnic and minority affairs" at the one hotel, of the four convention hotels, that was clear across town - and it was raining. So it goes. My "ethnic and minority" colleagues tell me they are used to it; I now know a little of what it feels like to be a member of a minority group.

I have led a sheltered life. I spent more than 20 years analyzing a longitudinal dataset from a study in which, to take some license with the title of Sandra Graham's article in the May, 1992 issue of *American Psychologist*: "All of the Subjects were White and Middle Class." People paid attention to this research; I was invited to the right conferences; the resulting papers were published in the right journals.

Ten years ago, I began a second longitudinal study and, more sensitive this time around, I included children of different ethnicity among my sample of one-year-olds. The very first time I presented the early results from this study, to a prestigious conference, at a major research university, I was told that I had a "serious confound" in the data. Our finding was that children who tended to talk later, and learned words more slowly, were children who expressed affect more frequently; they were developing

In This Issue	
President's Message .....	1
From the President. ....	3
Article of Interest .....	4
Announcements .....	6
Elections and Awards .....	7
Officer and Award Nominations .....	8

quite normally in all respects; expressing more affect was something they evidently did instead of learning words early. A respected colleague, from another major research institution, informed me that the "confound" in our data came from including the children of color. "Everyone knows that black children learn language later and express more affect." Well, I know there are data purporting to show that poor children tend to learn language later; I don't know that is true of black children in general. And I know of no data to support the notion that young black children express more affect. My colleague replied, "But everyone knows it."

The fact is that a subgroup of one-year-olds in our study showed the same variation as the group of children as a whole; the children of color were distributed throughout the population. When we repeated the analysis with only the white children in the sample, the result held. But the fact is almost beside the point.

Cornel West, in an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, August 2, 1992 (pg 24), cited W.E.B. DuBois who wrote about the "unasked question" in conversations with whites: "How does it feel to be a problem?" West commented: "Nearly a century later [after the original remarks by DuBois] we confine discussions about race in America to the 'problems' black people pose for whites rather than considering what this view of black people reveals about us as a nation." The key word is 'problems.' I was told that I had a 'problem' in my data and the problem was that I had included children of color among my subjects. It was as

*President's Message (cont.)*

though I had been hit in the head with a brick; the APA Division 7 symposium was the result of my discussions and soul-searchings with a host of people, of all different colors, since then.

The symposium participants were: A. Wade Boykin (Howard), "Beyond Deficits and Differences: Psychological Integrity in Developmental Research"; Sandra Graham (UCLA), "Have APA Journals Become 'Negative Socializing Agents'"; Lee C. Lee (Cornell), "The Search for Universals: Whatever Happened to Race and Culture," and Amado Padilla (Stanford), "What Do We Know about Culturally Diverse Children?"; John W. Hagen (Executive Officer, S.R.C.D.) and I were the discussants.

"Racism" is a volatile word and its definition depends on who asks the question "What is racism?" It's a political word and it is a profoundly personal word because it has affected very many people, every day of their lives. We didn't get hung up on issues of definition in the symposium because more pressing issues concerned us. Instead, we succeeded in raising the issues and at least began what is sure to be a long slow process in addressing them. As a consequence, we addressed racism as the real problem and, to paraphrase Cornel West, what racism reveals about us as a scientific discipline.

A number of themes were raised in the symposium papers and I can hardly do them justice here. The first, and most serious, was that a very large segment of children in this country has been discounted. We have discounted who they are and how they develop because we have treated them as a "variation" from "the norm." The norm, as defined from only one perspective for too long now, has been the telos of theory and research in developmental psychology. Lee Lee and Wade Boykin reminded us that, in our search for the "norms" and "universals" of development, we have made some very strong assumptions about who it is that falls outside of 'the norm' - with serious consequences for educational, social, and political practice and policy. The development

of non-mainstream children is seen as "variation," "a confound," "noise" - in short, what DuBois called "a problem" - in the data because we have looked for the so-called "norms" of development only among those infants, children, and adolescents who swim in the mainstream.

The second theme was that a growing segment of the intellectual community concerned with research and theory in developmental psychology has been discounted. They have been excluded from research teams, from conferences, from journals, from reviewing boards. The giants of developmental theory and, indeed psychological and linguistic theory more generally, make up what I call "the great white fathers." I have asked many times to friends who will listen, "Where are the women among theorists?" In this symposium we asked, "Where are the minority scholars among theorists?" The answers to both questions are complicated: psychologically, sociologically, and pedagogically. But the answers also have to do with a certain arrogance about who is worth listening to, cited, and invited - and why.

The third theme was that because we have discounted the children, and discounted those who can best interpret the experiences of the children, a very large amount of variation has been discounted. By so doing, we have undervalued a fundamental fact of the human condition. Amado Padilla and the others made clear that variation is not a simple matter - things are not just black and white. Different cultural groups, including Asian and Hispanic as well as African American groups, socialize their children in diverse ways and the richness of the cultural fabric in today's society is one result of that. And, just as seriously, we have also discounted the variation within racial and ethnic groups that contributes to the development of individuals and their larger social contexts.

In short, we have much to talk about, like Who we study... How we study them... and By whom the concepts and interpretations in our

research are forged. We also have to think about what counts as "different" and what one or another difference means: whether they are differences that make a difference.

One final theme, mentioned in all the papers in one way or another, was mentoring - from undergraduate nurturing to the journal submission process. However, the mentoring that gets talked about most often is one-sided since it has to do with the students and scholars from different cultural backgrounds. We also need a program of mentoring for those in charge of the status quo. My former student, Ira Blake, suggested an apt analogy to me. She said the mainstream establishment is like a black box: first, you have to find a way to get into it; then, you have to find your way around, with the terms and conditions already established in the box. "We'll let you in, but then you have to learn to be one of us." That has to change. It can't be "business as usual" in the box; the way we do business in the box has to change because the box is changing.

The mentoring we need, as a community of scholars in developmental psychology, is mutual mentoring in both directions. We all have much to learn in sharing our expertise to show how variation can be regarded seriously and valued for the study of human development. Individual scholarship as well as developmental psychology as a whole can only benefit in the process. One result of mutual mentoring is already evident in the *Child Development* journal; John Hagen reported how recent changes in editorial policy and practice have begun to make a difference in the diversity of the children who are appearing among its pages.

To conclude, the database in developmental psychology is, most simply, incomplete. And, that means that our theories are also, necessarily, incomplete. With an incomplete database, developmental theory is, in Wade Boykin's terms, lacking in integrity. And to use familiar terms from the developmental rhetoric: with an incomplete database, developmental theory is neither ecologically nor intellectually valid.

