



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

June 22, 2005

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association, a scientific and professional society with 150,000 scientists, academics, practitioners and students worldwide, I am writing to urge your continued support for scientific integrity during the upcoming House debate on the FY 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations bill. I urge you to vote against any amendment that would eliminate funding for specific research grants supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This legislative means of attacking specific grants that have already been judged important to the public health gravely undermines scientific confidence in NIH. The NIH merit review process is rigorous and exacting, resulting in the funding of approximately one grant out of four received. NIH must support a broad array of basic, pre-clinical research and applied, disease-specific research in order to make steady progress on multiple fronts against numerous conditions and diseases. For Congress to defund any grants in violation of NIH's fair and exacting process is a blow to science, to scientists, and ultimately, to public health.

We understand that at least two specific NIH grants may be targeted in an amendment to the House Appropriation bill to fund the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education. One of the grants supports the work of Dr. Edward Wasserman at the University of Iowa. His research focuses on increasing understanding of vision and perception using pigeons as models. Dr. Wasserman has worked for years to compare the basic processes of perception, learning, memory and cognition across a variety of species. This cross-species comparison helps illuminate how various mental and behavioral abilities are related and how the human brain is organized. Research carried out with animals can lead to new techniques for enhancing perception, cognition, and behavior across the lifespan in both normal and disordered human populations. Dr. Wasserman's recent work has particular relevance for the development of cognitive/behavioral therapies for people with mental and developmental disorders and for the eventual development of prostheses and assistive devices for people with visual impairments.

The targeted project investigates the abilities of pigeons to visually perceive complex objects, remember them, and categorize them into abstract categories. By demonstrating the ways in which these abilities in pigeons are similar to or different from those of humans, the research will inform us about the brain mechanisms that underlie human perception and cognition. Pigeons have much smaller brains than humans and more invasive research can be performed with them. Thus they serve as a useful model for studies of mechanisms that are common to both birds and humans.

Some earlier researchers suggested that advanced language or symbolic capacities are required for memory and abstract categorization. But if pigeons are shown to perform in ways that parallel humans, then it is clear that such capacities are not in fact required. Indeed, the results now emerging from this project indicate that pigeons are quite similar to humans and that the brain mechanisms for perception, memory, and categorization do not depend on sophisticated symbolic capacities. The results further indicate that the ways in which pigeon brains divide up and code visual stimuli are similar to the ways in which human brains operate.

The second targeted project is funded at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where Dr. Sandra Murray is investigating factors that contribute to successful marriages and how personal feelings of self-esteem influence the capacity to sustain satisfying close relationships. Successful relationships contribute to better health outcomes for both children and adults. In particular, for those suffering from depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia, poor relationship quality may exacerbate their mental disorders and impact the success of their treatment. Data have also shown that successful marriages provide those couples with many health and social protections, including longer life and improved health outcomes, particularly for men. Better understanding the factors that lead to successful marriages could therefore have important public health benefits. It would be ironic indeed if the defenders of marriage in Congress cite this project as an example of science unrelated to NIH's mission.

Congress has many means at its disposal to help NIH set research priorities and respond to changing circumstances. Targeting specific grants after they have been funded is the means most destructive to the scientific process and most harmful to NIH's reputation as the leading scientific institution in the world. On behalf of APA, I urge you to abandon this destructive effort. NIH is flexible and responsive to national concerns and cannot carry out its mission in the face of capricious attacks on its procedures and its supported scientists.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'NBA', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Norman B. Anderson, PhD
Chief Executive Officer
American Psychological Association