Our country could use a good psychologist.

Americans have lost their feeling of pre-eminence; they are nervous, unsure of themselves, attracted to violence as a solution, yet they are fearful of its consequences in practice. Ours is a country that has lost its way.

One of America's leading psychologists, Prof. Albert Bandura of Stanford, former president of the American Psychological Association, believes that this is no time for the nation to be shunning psychologists or to be cutting back in its support of psychological research that could address the human condition.

Yet that is what is happening. The 50,000 psychologists of the United States find themselves overlooked when they are badly needed, says Bandura.

"Psychologists have to fight continuously with federal authorities to maintain some budget for the social sciences," he says. "Our governmental support is being eroded all the time, and each year we have to enlist congresssional support to restore some of the proposed funding slashes.

"The social sciences have taken the main brunt of the cuts in research funds that have been imposed."

Asked whether this was holding back a possible improvement in the nation's psychological state, Bandura replied: "As a profession, we are trying to exert some influence, to have a voice in public policies.

"There are not many precedents for psychologists to be represented in this sort of situation. We have the reputation of being on the liberal side of issues, so in the present social and political climate, we become distrusted.

"Psychologists are sometimes called the secular priests, but we have great difficulty in finding a church or a pulpit!"

Another reason why psychologists receive a cool reception in many government circles, Bandura believes, is that psychologists are often the messengers who bring bad news.

"We identify the adverse human effects of detrimental social practices and policies, so we (psychologists) often find ourselves in the 'nag the messenger' predicament.

"Many segments of the general public view psychologists as threats. This situation has precedents. If you look at the history of science, the public has usually shown a strong negative reaction to the development of knowledge that challenges cherished beliefs."
"The early physicists got roughed up for stating that the Earth was not the center of the universe. Early medical science had to rely on bootlegged physiological analyses. Social scientists experience this much more severely than other scientists because we probe into the issues of the psyche, the essence of people. These are not matters about which people are dispassionate. "Jerry Falwell, for example, tells his large following that we are dangerous secular humanists who are brainwashing children in the schools.

"Social pressures are mounted from time to time to restrict the applications of psychology in the schools. There is a bill in the U.S. Senate that would prohibit use of psychological procedures in schools, including role-playing. "Phyllis Schlafly has drawn up a list of 48 psychological procedures that she wants banned in the school systems."

Bandura says that psychologists have a tremendous problem in trying to educate legislators about what they do and who they are. He says he became acutely aware of this several years ago while testifying before a congressional committee on the role that psychology might play in a national health program.

"People suffer physical impairments and die prematurely of preventable detrimental habits. I presented evidence that large health benefits derive from changing health habits, about which psychology has a lot to say.

"A Los Angeles congressman registered surprise to learn that psychology addresses such matters. He went on to explain that his image of psychology was esoteric meditation and nude encounters."

How psychology could help nation

"Psychologists should play a more active role in bringing their knowledge to public policy. When I was president of the American Psychological Association, we established an advocacy organization in Washington to discharge our broader social responsibilities.

"We do our best to try to influence legislation that affects children, families, and methods of dealing with crime, drugs and violence.

"These efforts have had some effect. We monitor bills that come up, we testify, we supply congressional staffs with a great deal of information. We have gained much respect from congressional staffs for our ability to marshal facts on matters of legislative concern.

"Each year the American Psychological Association appoints two psychologists to (federal) secretarial staffs. This service is an additional vehicle for achieving psychologically informed legislation that affects the general public.

"We also exert influence on the international scene. For example, we have tried to mobilize psychologists of member nations in the International Union of Psychology to devise a mechanism to monitor political abuse of psychiatry by authoritarian regimes to silence critics.

"We try to bring social pressure to bear when such instances are identified."

Bandura does not agree with the common belief that there has been a marked increase in violent crime in the United States. "The statistics show that major crimes of violence have not gone up, except rape is on the increase," he says.

"Public fears of an explosion of violence are based largely on the tremendous overreporting in the media of violent acts. American newcasts carry about twice as many reports of violence for about twice the length of time as do Canadian newcasts, for example."

"Which comes first? Bandura was asked: Americans' demand for news of violence or decisions by the media that this is what attracts audiences.

"Our images of reality are based largely on the media," he replied. "The amount of direct experience with our physical and social environment is extremely limited."

"Each of us usually moves in the same small circle, sees more or less the same set of friends and associates, and visits a restricted number of places. Our perceptions of social reality are based largely on what we see, hear, and read."

The major challenge

"When the media are heavily loaded with scenes of violence, then people develop an image of society that makes them fearful that they may themselves becomes victims of violence.

"In a way this creates a vicious cycle. A major challenge is not only to reduce crime but to reduce the fear of crime. Nowadays more and more people are staying off the streets at night, they live behind locked doors, and more and more they are arming themselves with lethal weapons."

The constant repetition of violent scenes in the media affects societal conduct, says Bandura.

"The tube and the newspapers continually model new strategies of aggression," he says. "Imitative acts of antisocial behavior occur in almost every field. There is the placing of poison in capsules in supermarkets, putting razor blades in Girl Scout cookies, planting bombs where they will kill innocent bystanders."

"This process disinhibits antisocial behavior. The sight of superheroes on the screen, killing indiscriminately and with great satisfaction, provides sanction for others to model such actions. Our images of reality are warped."

Bandura regards Libyan leader Gaddafii as a minor character in the world trend to mindless violence. Terrorism is a threat in most developed societies today, he says. Such is the power of the media that a few isolated acts can transform the life of societies.

"One or two people planting bombs in public places can alter the quality of life of a nation," he says. "A frightened public is willing to buy protection against perceived threats by accepting costly security measures and reduction of personal liberties. After some terrorist acts in Germany, the police were given the right to search homes without a warrant."
Such a reaction is often sought by terrorists. They hope to provoke the creation of police states, so causing great public discontent and a readiness for a revolutionary atmosphere.

The irony is that much of the violence which shocks society, particularly in the more advanced societies, is committed by otherwise humane, caring people.

"Very often it is considerate, intelligent people who plant bombs to support what they feel are compassionate objectives, whether it is animal rights, abortion, or any of many other issues."

Bandura has been working on a conceptual model that investigates at what levels of internal control people can disengage their morality from destructive acts on their part.

Moral justification is a powerful disengagement mechanism, he says. Destructive conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral ends.

"This is why most appeals against violent means usually fall on deaf ears," says Bandura. "Each side in a dispute can usually point to what are regarded as outrageous acts by opponents.

"Babies we bombed in Libya are justified by babies blown out of an airplane by our enemies.

"People do not engage in violent conduct until they have convinced themselves of the morality of their cause, whereupon they act with a sense of moral imperative."

"You don't have to change a person's basic codes or transform their personality, all you have to do is to create conditions for disengagement of moral control."

He gave as an example the case of Sgt. York, a highly religious Tennessee soldier who was a conscientious objector.

\begin{quote}
People do not engage in violent conduct until they have convinced themselves of the morality of their cause, whereupon they act with a sense of moral imperative
\end{quote}

until an officer cited him chapter and verse in the Bible to convince him that it was his Christian duty to fight and kill. York went on to become the World War I sharpshooter with the highest number of kills.

On the other hand, Bandura points out, if people are not convinced of the moral justification of what they are urged to do, they will resist: "The divided national attitude to the Vietnam War illustrates this point."

Many of Bandura's psychological studies have been into the ways in which people adopt codes that serve as regulators of their moral conduct.

One of these ways is to use euphemistic language to change the appearance of what we do: "We do not say we kill people. Rather, we 'waste' them or 'terminate with extreme prejudice.' That helps to make reprehensible conduct acceptable.

"Our moral controls are not engaged if we do not have a sense of agency. We obscure the link between the action and its detrimental effects. This is sometimes done by the displacing of responsibility, so that one is following the dictates of authority."

\begin{quote}
Example of the snowflake

Another form of moral disengagement is through the diffusion of responsibility. Under conditions of group decision-making, division of labor and collective action, no one feels accountable.

At one of his seminars on aggression a student gave him a plaque that captured the diffusion process. The wording was "A snowflake does not feel responsible in an avalanche."

Asked what role psychologists could play, Bandura said: "Given the variety of self-justifying devices, a society cannot rely solely on control by conscience to ensure moral and ethical conduct. Though personal control ordinarily serves as a self-directive force, it can be neutralized by social sanctions for destructiveness.

"Indoctrination and social justifications give meaning to events and create anticipations that determine one's actions. Control through information, which is rooted in cognitive processes, is more pervasive and powerful than conditioning through contiguity of events.

"Cultivation of humaneness therefore requires, in addition to benevolent personal codes, safeguards built into social systems that counteract detrimental sanctioning practices and uphold compassionate behavior.

"That is where psychologists could help to lay some groundwork."

The overarching problem for humankind, Bandura thinks, is for individuals to grasp the reality that the survival of the race itself depends on whether the peoples of the earth can think beyond their own ends.

He warns grimly that we must look beyond self-gain if the race is to survive.

"We have to contend with more than our inhumanities toward each other. When the aversive consequences of otherwise rewarding lifestyles are delayed and imperceptibly cumulative, people become willful agents of their own self-destruction.

"If enough people benefit from activities that progressively degrade their environment, then, barring countervailing influences, they will eventually destroy their environment.

"Although individuals contribute differentially to the problem, the harmful consequences are borne by all.

"With growing populations and spread of lavish lifestyles taxing finite resources, people will have to learn to cope with the new realities of existence.

"We now possess the power to create technologies that can have pervasive effects not only on current life but on that of future generations. Many technological innovations that provide current benefits also entail hazards that can take a heavy future toll on human beings and the ecosystem.

"People are not much moved by abstract notions of distant consequences when patterns of living bring current satisfactions.

"Psychologists must devise better mechanisms for bringing projected consequences to bear on current behavior, to counteract the perils of the foreshortened perspective."
\end{quote}

June 11, 1986