

THE FOUNDING OF THE SOCIETY FOR DESCRIPTIVE PSYCHOLOGY: AN INSIDE STORY

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The Society for Descriptive Psychology originated in a conversation around Carolyn and Paul Zeiger's dining-room table in November of 1978. The participants were Keith Davis, Carolyn Zeiger, and me.

How did we come together? To choose arbitrarily a starting point: In 1961, Keith joined the faculty of the University of Colorado in Boulder, and there met Peter Ossorio, although, quoting Keith, "He and I did not talk much until 1963-1964 when I was working on a paper on the perception of intent."

About that time, 1963 or 1964, Carolyn—an undergraduate economics major—became intrigued with the work of the Austrian economists

Advances in Descriptive Psychology, Volume 6, pages 3-7.
Editors: Mary Kathleen Roberts and Raymond M. Bergner.
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ISBN: 0-9625661-1-X.

Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbart, and spoke of them to Keith. To take up the tale in her own words:

Keith encouraged me to take a course with Peter Ossorio, who—he felt—would speak to my interest in the question “What are the essential characteristics of human behavior?”

Consequently, I had the interesting historical distinction of having been in class the day Pete made up the paradigm for Intentional Action. Straining to see the blackboard from the back of the room, I decided to take a seat in the front row so that I could figure out whether this guy was a genius or a nutcase. Having concluded that he was probably pretty smart, I continued to study with him throughout my stay at CU.

After receiving my B.A. magna cum laude in psychology, I was Dr. Ossorio’s “Lady Friday” research assistant/secretary until I decided I might as well get a Ph.D. myself instead of working for graduate students like Tom Mitchell and Dick Comtois for the rest of my life. Pete was my doctoral dissertation advisor, and post-graduate supervisor for my licensure as a psychologist. I was the first self-described Descriptive Psychologist licensed in Colorado.

To take up my own story, in 1973, my then-husband and I went to Peter for marital counseling. After a couple of months or so, Peter began introducing me to Descriptive Psychology via the behavior formula. Enthralled by its possibilities, I started to study it seriously, reading first an early version of *“What Actually Happens”*, then other of Peter’s works. I took notes on them as I sat in the hall outside his office, waiting for my appointments. One day, Wynn Schwartz came out of his office to talk with me, and discovering what I was about, offered me the use of a desk in the office that he shared with Lane Lasater. It was Wynn who persuaded me to overcome Peter’s objections to my auditing some of his courses. (Peter said that I already knew everything that would be presented there, which was emphatically not the case.) Thus I was introduced to that graduate group, and they generously took me in.

As those students began to graduate, I became aware that after they left, they seemed to have little contact with what others were researching and how they were applying Descriptive Psychology in their various fields. That concerned me to the point where as opportunity arose, I kept dropping the suggestion that there ought to be something along the line of a newsletter to keep Peter’s former students in touch with one another. In the fall of 1978, I mentioned the idea to Carolyn, who responded—tinder to my hitherto ineffectual spark—that Keith had had a similar idea. She proposed that since he would be in the area within a few weeks, we should get together to discuss the possibilities.

So we did, gathering around her dining-room table one November morning. The first item on our informal agenda was the newsletter. The second, urged by Keith, was a collection of papers to be published annually. Third came the question who should sponsor these undertakings. The notion that we should send out a newsletter under our own names did not appeal to any of us. The obvious answer seemed to be the formation of a society, beginning with former colleagues and students of Peter's, many of whom Keith and Carolyn already knew from their long association with Peter.

During the next days, they called a number of their friends, and learned that several of those who lived in Boulder would be at home during the Christmas holidays, and others from out of town were planning to be here. All were interested in the formation of a society. Meanwhile, Carolyn and I conferred with a business manager about the legal and business formalities involved in organizing a non-profit society. Among us, we set the date, time, and place for founding the Society for Descriptive Psychology, a name preferred over the original "Society of Descriptive Psychologists" because some of us were not psychologists at all.

Three weeks or so after that first meeting of Carolyn, Keith, and me, and with the groundwork firmly laid, we told Peter what we were doing. Thus far we had refrained, remembering all too well that some scholars have established professional societies to further their own work and status. We wanted to make utterly clear for all time that this project had been initiated and was being carried out not by Peter himself but by students of Descriptive Psychology. Moreover, low be it spoken, rightly or wrongly we thought that we could be more efficient than Peter in coping with the spadework of organization.

Keith took on the journal project. I agreed to edit the newsletter for a year, with Carolyn as the managing editor.

On December 27, 1978, sixteen people met in my living room at High Haven, and formally established the Society for Descriptive Psychology. They were—in reverse alphabetical order:

Paul Zeiger	Peter Ossorio
Carolyn Zeiger	Kate Marshall
Walter Torres	George Kelling
Mary McDermott Shideler	John Forward
Cory Sapin	Jerry Felknor
Mary Kathleen Roberts	Catherine Felknor
Lisa Putman	Keith Davis
Anthony Putman	Earlene Busch

Six others, who could not be present, had signified their commitment to the enterprise:

Dan Popov
Tom Mitchell
Jane Littmann

Lane Lasater
Sonja Holt
Lawrence Aylesworth

Unanimously, Peter was elected permanent Honorary President, and for one-year terms, as President Keith Davis, as President-Elect Tom Mitchell, and as Vice President George Kelling. Carolyn Zeiger was elected Executive Secretary and Paul Zeiger, Treasurer, both for three-year terms. Carolyn, Earlene Busch, and I were delegated to confer with lawyers on articles of incorporation as a non-profit organization, and on bylaws. We set the dates, August 20-24, 1979, and the place, Boulder, for the first of what we hoped would become annual conferences.

That conference was reported in the first issue of the *Descriptive Psychology Bulletin*, but no notice was taken there of a fact that, looking back, was symbolic of our outreach beyond our immediate circle. Among the participants was a person who, never having heard of Peter or Descriptive Psychology, came out of mere curiosity in response to the notice that Carolyn had written and that we had distributed to unlikely as well as likely prospects. Since then we have had other members and visitors from beyond our initial group, an indication of the widening influence of Descriptive Psychology. But the first was Jan Vanderburgh, who became a member of the Society and worked closely with Peter until her death.

Meanwhile, as Keith has written me:

In May of 1979, I discovered that a fraternity brother of mine from Duke, Herbert Johnson, was the publisher of a series of *Advances in* —, annual or biannual volumes in sociology, business/economics, and psychology. He owned the JAI Press, and was eager to add another series to his small line-up of psychology volumes, and so *Advances in Descriptive Psychology* was born.

The second issue of the *Bulletin* came out in the fall of 1979. In mid-December, less than a year from our founding, Keith, Tom, Carolyn and Paul, Peter, Jan Vanderburgh, and I, and perhaps another person or two, met—again at High Haven—for two or three days of work editing the papers that had been submitted for inclusion in the first volume of *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*. Again quoting Keith:

The first volume of *Advances* was published in July, 1981. I promptly became appreciative of the need for editorial help for the development of our own editorial policies and practices to supplement the APA Manual. Tom Mitchell was an indispensable co-editor of the series and of Volumes 2 and 4. His help with the style

sheet and his bibliographic work for the series allowed us to achieve a consistency of style and reference that would not have been possible without his effort.

Since then we have gone through tribulations and triumphs, with—God willing—more triumphs to come, and doubtless more tribulations. I look back with amazement upon how simply and almost casually our Society was born, and how far it has come.