

A Preliminary Statement on Denialism
Prompted by Harvey's Article in the National Psychologist
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It was disappointing to see the Hoffman Report denialist campaign come to the pages of the *National Psychologist*, a publication that had previously covered the torture scandal inside the APA fairly. Rather than correcting the substance of her remarks, I shall draw the reader's attention to the ways in which Harvey misrepresents her attempts to censor colleagues, how she attempts to intimidate a whistleblower, and her repeated violations of scholarly norms. In brief, I would like to discuss the pattern of denialism that is revealed in Harvey's writing.

Denialists, be they global warming denialists or those who deny that smoking causes cancer, have a few characteristics in common: they exploit gaps in knowledge, they construct themselves as victims (even when they are backed by powerful forces) and they make mountains of insignificant details, usually details outside of the expertise of the intended audience. [1] Denialists do the same work as scholars but there is a key difference: A scholarly critic may not be sympathetic to the object of his or her criticism, but she is intolerant of ignorance. Scholars seek the truth. Denialists, on the other hand, seek ignorance. They are Merchants of Doubt who aim to jaundice our clear vision. The goal for a denialist is to leave the reader with the impression that "there's a lot of disagreement about that issue" -- be that issue global warming, the theory of evolution, the HIV-AIDS connection, or the Hoffman report.

The Hoffman denialists know that few readers will read the 563 page Hoffman report, fewer will follow up on the voluminous references and still fewer will review the 7,664 pages of supplemental materials Hoffman included with the report. Ironically, the weight of evidence against the deniers serves their interests because the complexity of the issue opens the door to simple narratives. Psychologists are busy seeing clients, busy conducting research, and busy teaching and, when faced with a mountain of evidence, it's natural to look for a tunnel through that mountain instead of attempting to scale it. This is where the denialist takes advantage and cue the patriotic psychologist with the simple explanation in hand. Harvey believes that if she can smear her opposition, cast the Pentagon's psychologists as the victim, reduce the mountains of evidence to a molehill of memos, and suggest that there is some evidence out there somewhere that refutes Hoffman's findings, she can convince the reader to believe that the "Hoffman report is flawed." Which is not say to that report is flawless -- I have my critique of Hoffman. But I don't want to see the report censored, nor am I urging my colleagues to file ethics complaints or launch lawsuits as Harvey is doing.

This leaves the reader with the question: whom do I believe? Do I trust the patriotic psychologist or the human rights advocates? Is there any way to know whose argument is best supported by the available evidence without reading 500 to 10,000 pages of text? While there is no substitute for research, there is a shortcut – readers can scan both the Hoffman report and the work of the denialists and take note of their use of references. Who is actually doing the hard work of a scholar? Which authors backs up their assertions with references and which repeatedly substitute evidence with claims that there are one or two documents out there somewhere that back up their position? Or, alternatively, one could reread Harvey’s article, mentally remove the personal smears and innuendo and ask how much of the time she actually spent writing about Hoffman. If we remove the sentences devoted to disparaging her opponents what remains? Does this article, putatively about the Hoffman report, contain more than three full sentences about the report itself? Of course the question answers itself. If we remove the personal attacks, we aren’t left with much and if we also remove the bold assertions *sans* evidence, we are left with nothing at all.

As I write this, Harvey’s allies are trying – once again – to remove the Hoffman report from the APA website.

[1] See Kahn-Harris’ succinct summary of denialist theories:
<https://www.nottinghilleditions.com/product/denial-the-unspeakable-truth/>