

Heroes

SESP Award Talk notes, October 14, 2011

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Let me begin by thanking Todd Heatherton for that glowing introduction, and by noting what a great honor it is to be onstage here with Mark Snyder this year.

Normally I would begin a talk by saying how delighted I am to be here. But I'm not here. Well actually I am here but not there. Guess I'm delighted just to be. I hope you don't mind my absence, but my health has made it difficult for me to travel. It breaks my heart to miss SESP, my favorite conference, but the good thing is that on Skype, while I talk you can be wondering whether I'm wearing pants. What I'd like to do while you think about that is reflect on heroes in social psychology, and on the awards we give them.

Now, at one time in my life not too long ago, I had resigned myself to the fact that awards were things that other people got. I left an awards section completely off my vita because the lone award I had was just embarrassing. You shouldn't have an awards section with only one award. And worse, my one award was a *gag* award. At SESP in 1979 I got a cup for the Hidden Brain Damage Scale, a silly parody of the MMPI Robin Vallacher and I wrote that's still around on the web. It asked people to respond true or false to items like "People tell me one thing one day and out the other" and "No napkin is sanitary enough for me." I knew this was not really a vita entry.

So I made fun of awards. I envied friends who got the APA Early Career Award—Gilbert, Taylor, Bargh, Macrae, Dijksterhuis, Epley. My own early career was a total fizzle—so I kidded them that they had gotten the Junior Woodchuck Award. If I couldn't get the award, at least I could belittle it. But every year at SESP was the award that was most important—*this* one, the one given by my tribe, the whole darn career award, the one we fondly call the Old Fart Award. I have admired the recipients of this award my whole professional life.

It didn't start out that way. My first SESP award ceremony was 1977—I crashed as a guest and didn't know a soul—Leonard Doob was the old fart winner—I didn't know who he was at the time, still don't know. The conference was in Austin, TX where marijuana was legal then. Several people wandered off and missed the whole darn meeting. But I was there, absorbed in name tag peeping like we all do when we first come here. I do recall that Ned Jones and Hal Kelley, who were the most gigantic social psych heroes at that time, were on a riverboat cocktail party when I suddenly found myself standing between them. Knowing neither of these famous guys, neither of whom knew me, it somehow seemed right to introduce them to each other. Ned, meet Hal; Hal, meet Ned. That didn't go well. They looked at each other and then at me like I had just set off a stink bomb, and later that evening I spent weeping in my room.

I have seen wonderful old fart talks by the greats in our field. Hal Kelley delighted us by doing magic tricks to demonstrate errors of causal attribution. He pulled a rabbit out of a hat and left us all enchanted by the magic of our field. I remember Festinger's talk, which wasn't about dissonance—some kind of anthropological thing that alerted me to the fact that you can wander too far from your fan base in the desire to be creative. But it was an inspiration to see him, and I do recall standing next to him in an elevator, starstruck and grinning like an idiot, this time fortunately speechless.

I saw the first women ever to win this award—Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Hatfield in 1993. They described how difficult it had been growing up in a totally sexist academic world. It sounded really bad, in a way like they were wearing burkas. We see many more women in our field now, and I'm hoping the worst is over, but I still don't think enough survive the career gauntlet to become old farts. I look forward to the time when the current increase in younger women translates into more equal representation across generations. But I was here for Berscheid and Hatfield, and it was a great day.

I remember Ned Jones' talk. He was Mr. Social Psychology at the time. Everybody wanted to be his student, everybody wanted to have his baby. I didn't personally want to have his baby, but I did want to be his student. OK, maybe just one baby.

Bob Zajonc's talk was one I especially enjoyed. I had modeled my career on his, every half dozen years or so doing something totally new, reinventing himself repeatedly like a Madonna or Lady Gaga. He created wave after wave, and he even did it with his old fart talk. He invented a field of facial efference of emotion, just as the rest of us were starting to understand the brilliance of mere exposure, social facilitation, affective primacy, cognitive tuning, the confluence model, and all the other lines of inquiry he created. I feel proud each time I teach social psychology and explain to people how to pronounce his name.

I was curious about the award winners, so one day recently I made a spreadsheet of all 46 of them, from today all the way back to pre- 1977, when the organization's records don't even show when it was that the first awards were given to Ted Newcomb and Fritz Heider. I've seen all the winners in person but those two, so I thought I would try to characterize them as a group. I put them in categories: There were the winners I thought were popular—those who had probably been jocks and cheerleaders in high school (6 of those), there were the nerds (8 of those), the obsequious losers (7 of those), the total dicks (there were 11, not all men), and the dried up old coots (a total of 21, which means the modal old fart is also a coot). I gave each one a rating on Wegner's Greatness Index—my personal opinion of their greatness as a social psychologist. By my ratings, which *as you know* are a key measure of scientific eminence, several variables were correlated with greatness. Women were slightly more likely than men to be great in my book. Greatness was more likely if you were popular, was not impacted one way or another if you were a dick or, thank God, if you were a nerd, and greatness was less likely if you were an obsequious

loser or an old coot. Of all the predictors, greatness was most strongly correlated with whether I knew you personally. The take-home rule here is simple: YOU SHOULD KNOW ME.

Another question I ask myself is, where do I fit in? I'm no Festinger, or Zajonc or Jones or Berscheid or Nisbett—I'm lucky even to join the obsequious losers—so how did I get to be an old fart in this group? One thing I did was try to be like these people. I wanted to model them, to be like my heroes. I tried to be like Festinger and like Zajonc, changing courses every little while to re-excite myself with the thrill of discovery. I slowed down a perfectly good line of research on thought suppression to take up instead writing the *Illusion of Conscious Will*—to fight the feeling I might be staying with one topic too long.

I tried to be like Berscheid and Hatfield, specifically seeking out topics everyone else was not only ignoring but sometimes even disparaging. That's what I did with transactive memory—taking up the weird old idea of the group mind and trying to use it even when everybody else was into individual social cognition. Sometimes it's good to be the underdog.

And where did the white bear come from? My work on thought suppression was inspired by reading Dostoyevsky, who said you can't stop thinking of a white bear. I think our ideas and inspiration can come from emulating thinkers outside our field—the giants of literature, art, and science who all teach us what it is like to be human. It's good to think beyond the walls of JPSP. There's probably not enough such breadth in our field today.

Some of our best old farts were extending the work of prior old farts. Aronson picked up on Festinger's dissonance theory and made a career of it, and Jones and Kelley followed up Heider's attribution theory—using someone else's idea and getting so excited about it they could make it their own. In the same tradition, Vallacher and I picked up the notion of action identification from Kruglanski and Newton and made a new version of it so that eventually yet others could do it again—wrap up the same basic idea in new names and call it their own. Nobody really owns the discoveries we make, you know—we simply hold on to them for a while with our names attached, and then the names come off and the ideas move back into the great flow of human discovery. The only way I know of to keep your name on your ideas more permanently is to write so much, like Freud or like Baumeister, that people can't even tell that there's anything you *didn't* write.

I think the old fart awards are a celebration of what we all do more than an honor of any one person. Our science moves forward by a process of consensual validation—no one is finding truth alone in a room, and all of us are looking to each other as guides to what we should be thinking about and exploring. I've always liked the metaphor of a school of fish to understand how groups move together. The old fart award we give in any year is passed not to the greatest among us or the most skillful finder of truth, or even as in my case to the most sexually attractive—but to the one who happens to be most connected to the others at a time when the group sets its course. So I'm a social psychologist—I subscribe more to the great situation

theory than to the great person theory. I like to think that this is what the SESP award is all about, and that I'm just lucky to be linked with you all in this way—as one of this day's representatives of what we're all doing here—making a great social situation for each other. Thank you for this honor and for this marvelous moment.