

Short Personal Essay for The Psychologist (BPS) Student Page

Forever A Student of Psychology

I was pleased to be invited to contribute a “tiny essay” to The Student Page because I still think of myself as a psychology student – even though I am nearing retirement from my beloved Stanford University next spring when I turn 70. Here are a few reflections on events that made a significant difference in my life as a student of psychology.

- Growing up in the South Bronx ghetto of New York City was a formidable training ground to become a social psychologist because it was a crucible of human behavior bubbling over all the time in the streets. As a skinny, sickly kid, I had to be observant to understand the sources of power, when to conform to group pressures and when to resist, when to follow norms and when to deviate, when to ingratiate myself to tough kids, and what made some kids become leaders and others always followers. I eventually became leader of the pack.
- When I got to Brooklyn College, my enthusiasm for psychology was dimmed by the C grade I received in the introductory course. Being a situationist even then -- which all poor people must be to succeed by blaming environmental circumstances and not making dispositional attributions – I blamed poor teaching, poor text, and awful tests. However, after majoring in Sociology and Anthropology, I returned to Psychology in my senior year after being turned on by the excitement of discovery in an experimental psychology course.
- April 15, 1954 was the day of going to my first psychology convention, immediately after being invited to be a graduate student research assistant at Yale University. I was stunned by the brilliance of the presentation by Neal Miller summarizing his research on motivation and reward in learning, during which he gave credit to all his students. I thought that I would like to be able to do that someday. The next year I was his student, and we co-published an experiment that I had designed in his course, with me as senior author.
- Our faculty modeled the importance of hard work and publishing; as a good conformist, I published half dozen articles as a graduate student, even one in Science as first author with another graduate student, Herbert Barry. I also was inspired by my roommate, Gordon Bower, who knew so much and was so dedicated to research (I became his best man at his marriage and we have been colleagues at Stanford for the past 30 years). Incidentally, in high school in the Bronx, I had another classmate who became a famous psychologist, little Stanley Milgram.
- I thought of Yale as my personal candy store, filled with goodies there for the asking and so I exploited its richness by doing research with many different faculty members, some of whom you may know: Carl Hovland, Frank Beach, Seymour Sarason, Irving Sarnoff, Jack Brehm, Bob Cohen, Kay Montgomery, George Mahl, in addition to Neal Miller.
- Finally, I loved teaching and insisted upon being allowed to teach the “Yale Man” when I was only a lowly graduate student. Circumstances enabled me to do so in 1957, and that started me on my life-long love affair of teaching Introductory

Psychology, and thus being its student forever, since I still teach it six decades later.

- I have since gone on to make up for my terrible first psychology course by writing a number of really good textbooks, among them “Psychology and Life” (now in its 16th Edition), and “Psychology: A European Text,” with your Mark McDermott of East London University.
- Both psychology and life have been good to me; I have managed to move up to be current leader of a new pack as President of the American Psychological Association, and happily married to a wonderful psychologist, Christina Maslach, with three lovely children. I hope my crucible continues bubbling over for a while longer since I have much more to give to the current generation of students around the globe. Long live psychology students!