

# Member Profile: A Pillar of Psychology

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In a few months, Janet Taylor Spence will be fully retired from the University of Texas-Austin, an institution at which she has taught, researched, published, and flourished for the past 30 years.

In moving on from a career spanning almost 50 years, Spence leaves behind a legacy in the field of psychology matched by few. Her research, her instrument development, her work with and support of students and colleagues, and her participation in the organizations that shape and frame the behavioral sciences have put her in a unique position.

“When you combine Janet’s impact on the science of psychology with her impact on the infrastructure of psychology, you are not going to find anyone who has been more important to our field,” said APS Executive Director Alan Kraut.

Widely respected for her research in gender, Spence has also received accolades for her work in anxiety—including the development of the Manifest Anxiety Scale—reinforcement and motivation, and achievement motivation. Her professional achievements include her extensive work with APS (where she was the first elected president), service on numerous committees and the presidency of the American Psychological Association, and, more recently, the editorship of the *Annual Review of Psychology*, the essential publication that provides comprehensive reviews of the latest developments in research across the entire spectrum of the field of psychology. Her curriculum vita includes more than 10 books, at least 17 book chapters, and well over 100 articles.

## On the Gender Bend

In April, leaders in the field of gender research will meet for three days in Texas to honor Spence with a Festschrift titled “Models of Gender and Gender Differences: Then and Now.”

“A Festschrift is something that honors someone’s work and their contributions to a field,” said APS Charter Fellow and Festschrift co-organizer Lucia Gilbert. “This is her last semester at the University of Texas-Austin and we wanted to do this because she has made such an incredible contribution to psychology in a number of areas but particularly in the area of gender and understanding the multiple aspects of the concept of gender. We really wanted to do a tribute to her and to all of the work she has spawned.”

The event will feature speakers, each celebrated individually in his or her own right, who will examine issues related to gender and gender roles from within the expansive theoretical framework that Spence has articulated over the last several decades. Robert Helmreich, with whom Spence collaborated for much of her early work in gender research, Susan Fiske, Jacquelynne Eccles, Brenda Major and APS President-elect Kay Deaux are just a few of the speakers who will participate in the homage to Spence.

“I think if you look, for example, at the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, citations to her work are enormous-not only in gender work, more recently, but going back as far as the Manifest Anxiety Scale,” said Deaux, who will give an overview of research on gender and gender roles at the Festschrift.

After earning her PhD in psychology from the University of Iowa in 1949, Spence joined the faculty of Northwestern University as an instructor, working her way through as an assistant professor before becoming an associate professor in 1956. After leaving Northwestern in 1960, Spence joined the Veterans Administration Hospital in Iowa City as a research psychologist until 1964 when she came to the University of Texas-Austin. Starting as a research associate at the University Research Institute, Spence also served as a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and the Department of Psychology, where she served as department chair from 1968-1972. Outside of a visiting research scholar position she held at Harvard University from 1974-1975 and then again in 1991, Spence has remained at the University of Texas-Austin, where she currently is the Alma Cowden Madden Professor of Liberal Arts and Ashbel Smith Professor of Psychology and Educational Psychology.

It was in the late 1960s, though that Spence, in facing an intellectual dead end, was looking for something new, and, by her own admission, stumbled into gender research.

“There was a good deal of change going on within psychology itself at the time-the beginning shift to the so-called cognitive revolution- and I decided that I would simply have to be patient and something would occur to me,” she said.

“I was waiting for an inspiration when almost on a whim, I decided to do a study with my colleague Robert Helmreich that ultimately came out as “Who likes competent women” (*Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1972). I initially thought that it was a diversion, but I became so enchanted by the subject that I just kept on going and never looked back.”

Spence added that the time was ripe for her shift towards gender research. “The time was right for me and the time was right in my career,” she said. “But also, gender was beginning to emerge as a topic under the pressure of the civil rights and women's movements.”

## **Going Beyond the Obvious**

For Gilbert, a former student and current friend and colleague of the Festschrift honoree, Spence's drive and tenacity in her work has provided a model for her own research.

“Just the instrument development alone is an incredible contribution. But the clarity of thinking that went along with it is just as important,” said Gilbert. “A lot of people got all of the gender related concepts mixed together and it was Janet who conceptually sat down and said, ‘Look, let's think about this systematically,’ and unmuddled the field.”

Deaux agreed and said that, in addition to the contributions of her research in terms of content, Spence's drive for thoroughness in her method is one of her greatest legacies to psychological science.

“I think that one of her greatest contributions at a really theoretical level has been forcing us to think deeply and systematically about just what these concepts [of gender] are,” said Deaux. “Janet is never

one for glib or easy solutions to problems and she has a tenacity and a patience to explore concepts that need to be explored. She really looks very thoroughly-like a good scientist-at concepts that can be very quickly popularized or very glibly treated.”

“Janet’s significance to psychology goes well beyond her research and teaching,” added Kraut. “Her participation in psychological organizations and groups-including APS- have restructured the field as a whole. She has had a hand in shaping the events that have made behavioral science what it is today. Just look at her work in forming APS, her editorship of *Annual Review*, her chairing the effort that created the Human Capital Initiative, her presidency of APA, her work in the Psychonomic Society [including stints as secretary-treasurer, as a member of the governing board, and as chair of the Publications Committee] and the countless other committees and panels that she has served on.”

### **APS: In the Beginning...**

According to Kraut, Spence’s influence in shaping APS began long before the organization was ever conceived. “She was a member of committees at APA that looked at resolving the chasm between practitioners and scientists, and the possibilities of restructuring the organization,” he said. “She was right there when APS’ s precursor (the Assembly of Scientific and Applied Psychologists) was developed; she served as the first elected president when APS became APS and she was an active board member. She is still the person [turn to when dealing with a particularly difficult issue for the Society.”

“I had spent a great deal of time involved in APA activities, including ad hoc and other groups, that tried to discuss possible reorganization plans that would give the various constituencies more autonomy,” said Spence. “Over that time we were hoping to work out reasonable structural changes but, for whatever reason, the clinical wing [of APA] decided that was not supportive of their interests.”

Spence described the launching of APS as an “instant success,” and that the principals of the burgeoning organization did what they knew best: putting on scientific programs and designing journals. Adds Spence: “It was a very heady and exciting time.”