

Remembering Janet Taylor Spence

August 31, 2015

Janet Taylor Spence, a transformative scientist, consummate professional leader, and committed member of all the communities to which she belonged, died on Cape Cod at the age of 91. Just 6 weeks before, she had returned from a cruise that began in Santiago, Chile, and ended in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a vacation that turned out to be the last adventure in a life filled with travel, friends, and intense involvement with life.

I knew Janet for nearly 50 of her 91-plus years. We met at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), and although I was never a student of hers, over the years we became collaborators and friends. Especially in the early years, she also mentored me in more ways than I will ever know, an often-invisible hand that made the academic path easier for me as it did for so many others, especially young women.

Janet's early career was marked by sharp shifts between playing second fiddle and being "the first woman to." At Northwestern University in 1949, Janet was the first woman to hold a faculty position in the psychology department. With her marriage to Kenneth Spence 10 years later, nepotism policies led to the "second fiddle" role, first in Iowa where she was relegated to a research job at the VA Hospital and then in Austin, Texas, where she initially worked as a research associate at the Austin State School, a center for adults with developmental disabilities. After Kenneth's premature death in 1967, Janet's career swung back into "first woman" mode, when she became a professor at UT Austin and shortly thereafter chair of the psychology department there. In 1979, she was named the Ashbel Smith Professor of Psychology and Educational Psychology, the first person in the department to be so honored.



Although Janet entered numerous academic realms as the token woman, she inevitably became an indispensable team member and respected leader. She was smart and clear thinking, someone who was able to quickly separate out the chaff and focus on the essential problem to be solved or task to be done.

This clarity of thought and progressive vision was characteristic of her scientific work as well. First in the area of anxiety and later in gender, Janet Spence made what were indeed transformative contributions to the field. Her dissertation work on anxiety included the development of the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale, a method for relating dispositional levels of anxiety to performance. Although the scale was initially conceptualized within the framework of classical conditioning, its utility as a measure of individual anxiety levels proved over decades to be far broader. In the 1970s, Janet became interested in gender-related research, a topic that would continue to engage her long past her retirement from the University of Texas in 1997. Though she was undoubtedly inspired both by the political events of the decade as well as her own experience in academia, for Janet it was always the science that drove her work. In a highly productive collaboration with the late Robert Helmreich, Janet developed several indices for measuring gender-related characteristics and attitudes, including the “Attitudes Toward Women Scale” and the “Personal Attributes Questionnaire,” both of which continue to be used by contemporary investigators. Further conceptual analysis by Janet led to a comprehensive theory of gender identity and gender-related phenomena.

Janet’s commitment to science was evident in her professional service activities as well. As president of the American Psychological Association (APA), she worked hard to create a strong and secure place for science. Failing to accomplish what she sought there, she then devoted her energy to creating in APS the kind of science-based organization that she believed in. As its first elected president and a continuing presence, she epitomized the goals of APS.

Janet’s concern for good science was matched by a commitment to good writing. Throughout her career, she was an editor par excellence, as exemplified in her editorships of *Contemporary Psychology* and the *Annual Review of Psychology*. In 1993, she received the National Academy of Sciences Award for Scientific Reviewing. As generations of students and colleagues can attest, she generously offered her editorial skills and critical feedback to all who ventured to share their manuscripts with her. I continued to take advantage of this resource throughout her life. Even at the end, she had a manuscript that I had sent her just before her South American cruise — on which, 3 days before she died, she apologetically told me she wouldn’t be able to give any feedback!

Cape Cod was a special place for Janet throughout her life — a vacation destination with her parents and grandparents when she was a child, the way she convinced Kenneth Spence that vacations were desirable, and finally the place where she would build a house to live in her postretirement years, connected to a large and strong family network. On the Cape she was also fully immersed in the community at large, often using the skills she had acquired in academia to further the goals of the nonpsychology organizations that she had joined. Janet was always a doer, and she was always a giver. Her life was long and rich, and all of us who knew her are fortunate to have shared part of that life.

-Kay Deaux

CUNY Graduate Center and New York University

A symposium at the [2016 APS Annual Convention](#), May 26–29 in Chicago, will focus on the legacy of Janet Taylor Spence and her work.

Alan Kraut

Association for Psychological Science

As the first elected president of the brand-spanking-new APS, Janet set the tone for all that followed. That tone was to recognize that our collective job was to promote psychological science — period. It was our version of “eyes on the prize.” Many others who help start APS as a breakaway were concerned with attacks and counterattacks on the group we had just left — calls for retribution, settling old scores. But Janet insisted that we follow our own plan, and not react to battles that had already been fought or to unfair criticisms that we were still seeing from the old group. The result of Janet’s vision — now 27 years later — is an organization that has set the scientific standard for psychology as a field in journals, conventions, and policy. Turns out that Janet, as she was in so many things, was exactly right!

Camille Buckner

Marymount University

Janet Spence was larger than life, with a reputation and personality that preceded her. If you had to put money on the smartest person in any room, Janet was a safe bet. When I arrived at The University of Texas at Austin in 1992 as Janet’s last graduate student, the current students had taken bets on how long I would last before leaving the program. Janet had a reputation for being tough on students, but we were a good fit. She had very high standards, but I understood why. To come of age in academia in the 1950s and 1960s, Janet had to be tough, and I respected that. She had so much to teach me, and I was eager for it. She would call me into her office for hours, usually on Friday afternoons, and talk about all things gender psychology. Did I realize what it meant that masculine traits and feminine traits were orthogonal constructs? Did I understand that gender identity was based on much more than traits, a point that escaped many gender researchers? Janet took great care in the development of my intellect and modeled a strong enthusiasm for learning throughout her life. It was an honor to know her. I always enjoy making Janet come to life when I teach Psychology of Gender, and now I will relish this task even more.

Stephen L. Chew

Samford University

I took both psych statistics and senior research under Janet Taylor Spence as an undergrad at the University of Texas. She was a brilliant and demanding teacher. I remember in senior research she said she was going to be hard on us to prepare us for graduate school. No one in grad school was ever as hard on me as she was. I recall lamenting to Bob Helmreich at a department social how she had destroyed a draft of my intro. He just laughed and said she did the same thing to his drafts. She had a stern countenance, perhaps because of all the unfair obstacles she had to overcome as a female psychologist, but she was also very supportive, helpful, and reassuring.

Faye Crosby

University of California, Santa Cruz

Some years ago Janet was giving a speech at Smith College, where I was then teaching, and the proximity to Northfield led her to reminisce about her childhood and her high school days. It was then that she told me that her family's nickname for her was "Muley." She then stubbornly persisted in thinking that this was funny. So did I.

Alice Eagly

Northwestern University

Janet Spence exuded confidence in an era when women were rare in the ranks of psychology faculty at research universities. Many of us were more tentative than Janet, given the mixed reception that we sometimes received. Janet stood up very straight and spoke with clarity and sound logic. Therefore, in her manner as well in as the content of her research, she was an inspiration, especially to many younger women. Janet retained that confidence into old age. When I spoke to her at a conference some years after her retirement, I acknowledged her contribution to the issues discussed at a session we both attended. I was concerned because the presenters had neglected to link their work to her relevant earlier research. She merely said, "Yes, Alice, I did it all."

Donald J. Foss

University of Houston

Janet Spence — along with her great good friend, Gardner Lindzey — was an important mentor to me for years. She got things done, and somehow both guided me and expected me to learn how to do those things, too. So when she became Editor of *Contemporary Psychology*, I got to be her Associate Editor; and ditto (along with John Darley) when she was Editor of the *Annual Review of Psychology*. She did these jobs with almost invisible effort but with splendid results. I'm pretty sure she took quiet pride in those accomplishments, though she never said so to me.

I'm also sure that she hated being chair of the UT Austin Psychology department — of course, the first woman to do so. She did a fine job as chair during an economic downturn, but dealing with — how to put it — a haughty dean went against her image of how colleagues in the academy should work together. So she continued in her faculty role, publishing influential work in each of 5 decades and being entrusted with leadership positions that made her the face of psychology. Will anyone else ever be president of both APS and APA as she was? Will anyone else change the landscape of gender studies (among other topics) while rising high above glass ceilings as she did? She accomplished these things and more, all the while teaching and mentoring, and giving great parties in her home high above Town Lake. I hate it that she is gone.

Lucia Albino Gilbert

Santa Clara University

Janet uniquely combined intellectual brilliance and tough-mindedness with a personal genuineness and trustworthiness. Yes, she could be intimidating and scary at times, but she always could be counted on for wise counsel and honest feedback. Impatient with muddleheadedness and invariably direct, she would signal one's misguided thinking by saying, "Now look." And one would. This was her gift.

Judith Langlois

The University of Texas at Austin

I first met Janet Spence in the early spring of 1973 during my job interview at The University of Texas at Austin. Even then, Janet was famous, and I assumed she must be quite advanced in years to be so famous. Thus, I expected to meet a white-haired, matronly, rather frail elderly woman in the hotel lobby. So much for stereotypes. Instead, it became obvious that the only other person in the lobby — a slim, young (not yet 50), dark-haired, vibrant woman with a commanding presence — was THE Janet Spence.

After a friendly introduction, Janet took me on a tour of Austin in her baby-blue Buick Riviera. She drove like a bat out of hell. The hills and curves of the Central Texas hill country flashed by; a few times my own life seemed to flash by. By the time we arrived on campus, I was a dark shade of green and quite unsteady on my feet. Despite that ride, the interview seemed to go well, and Janet and I began a friendship that lasted 42 years.

The last time I saw Janet, she had retired to her beloved Cape Cod. She took me on a tour of the Cape in her baby-blue Subaru. She drove like a bat out of hell. Much happened in between those two tours that I will never forget. Except for the driving tours, I enjoyed every minute.

Brenda Major

University of California, Santa Barbara

Janet was a tireless advocate for young women in science. Although I never worked with her, she wrote numerous letters of recommendation for me for jobs, awards, tenure, and promotions. I am grateful for the many ways in which she nurtured my career.

Martha Mednick

When I first met Janet at Northwestern, I was not tuned in to the status of any women issues, so to me she was just a member of the faculty, albeit a very young one. I do recall her visiting us one evening and telling us that it was her 30th birthday. She seemed to be upset about turning 30, so we had a toast and that was that.

It was much later in our lives that we developed more of a real friendship. I visited her in Austin several times when my older daughter, a musician, was living there. Janet took her under her wing in a very nice way. She really loved young people and vice versa. Later in our lives we spent time together on Cape Cod. Janet led a very busy life there in her postretirement years, serving on the Dennis Library Board

and in many other organizations.

I am very sad about this loss of such an important person in my life but very grateful to have had Janet as teacher and friend.

Lynn Carol Miller

University of Southern California

Janet wasn't afraid of "the good fight." When a bully in the department mistreated students, she went figuratively "toe-to-toe" and mitigated the harm, even when she wasn't the student's advisor. Certainly, when she didn't yet know me well, she came to my aid, in a big way, at a critical point — and I know many others she similarly helped — simply because, for Janet, it was the right thing to do. Shortly thereafter, I discovered what a beguiling and unconventional teaching style she had: Once, she began to "strip" in class. Fortunately, after she had our attention her T-shirt announced, "It's traits, not roles, goddamn it." Another day, when one student quipped that there was no "history of psychology" course, she rattled off said history, marking a timeline from one end of the blackboard to the other, with personal anecdotes of interactions she had had with many of the key players.

She certainly made psychology and science come alive! Paired with this personality was exceptional scientific rigor. I remember the first day she handed me back a paper with "extensive feedback" (that is, more red than black on the pages): She looked surprised and relieved when I smiled and thanked her for caring. We knew then it was a good match.

Joy Stapp

Houston, Texas

I loved to listen to Janet — as a student, as a colleague, or as a friend swapping stories. No matter the topic or venue, what she had to say was always interesting, thoughtful, and perceptive, and at times very funny. But there was probably never a better listener than Janet Taylor Spence. She gave her full attention as the muscles in her face, especially around her eyes and mouth, danced. It wasn't just a physical manifestation of the wheels turning; instead, what you saw were the sparks given off from a brilliant mind. Whenever I think of Janet, I smile.

Paul Thayer

North Carolina State University (Emeritus)

Although I knew Janet through her many journal articles, I didn't know her personally until I was on the APA Council of Representatives when she was President of APA. I was impressed by her firm control over an ever-restless Council. Janet was a model of integrity and strength. I especially recall a Council of Representatives session when one member was worrying over some trivia and was pushing Janet to rule in favor of an absurd request. Janet paused and said, "Be careful what you wish for." There was a

long silence, and the Council moved on to more serious business.

As time went on, I got to know her better, especially when she was on the APS Board and was President. Those were difficult times, as a young organization struggled to get on its feet. Talk about quick study! She listened carefully to arguments on all sides. Then, in a concise manner only she could provide, she would sum up the arguments and ask for a decision. Those meetings were unusual in their efficiency and effectiveness. She was an exceptional executive who could also keep things moving along with humor and grace.

Having interacted with executives in hundreds of companies and governmental agencies, I know an effective executive when I see one. On top of all that, she was kind, funny, and considerate. Janet made extraordinary contributions to the science of psychology with her sensible behavior. Psychology and humankind benefited from her wisdom.