

## Remembering Walter Mischel (1930-2018)

April 30, 2019



A decade ago, then-APS President Walter Mischel called on psychological scientists to get over the “toothbrush problem.” That was the term he used to describe researchers’ general resistance to using any theories but their own and their reluctance to build on someone else’s work.

Thanks in large part to Mischel’s wisdom and leadership, scientists are now collaborating across disciplines and geographic boundaries, as exemplified in the biennial International Convention of Psychological Science (ICPS) that he helped create.

Mischel, who passed away in September 2018, co-chaired the Initiative for Integrative Psychological Science with APS Past Board Member Gün R. Semin. The initiative, a collaboration of APS and pan-European scientific groups, spawned the first ICPS in 2015 in Amsterdam. That event, repeated in 2017 in Vienna and 2019 in Paris, showcases the fresh, sophisticated methods and techniques that integrate psychological science with neuroscience, genetics, anthropology, and a host of other fields of research. Science owes a huge debt of gratitude to Mischel for his role in the creation of this celebration of scientific collaboration.

With his own empirical work, Mischel laid the foundation for decades’ worth of research on self-control and life outcomes across the lifespan. He is widely known for the marshmallow test — the name tied to

the experiments he designed in the 1960s to measure young children's willpower in the face of temptation. Those experiments led to a larger course of study on the links between childhood self-control and later achievement and well-being.

Mischel was the Robert Johnston Niven Professor of Human Letters in the psychology department at Columbia University, which he joined in 1983 after holding faculty positions at Harvard University and Stanford University. An APS William James Fellow, he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2004, and [received the University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Psychology in 2011](#).

His work earned him and his collaborators, APS Fellow Yuichi Shoda and Philip Peake, the Golden Goose Award — an honor given annually to highlight US-government-backed studies that have led to major scientific discoveries and benefits to society. And his 2017 interview for APS's [Inside the Psychologist's Studio](#) is one of the most widely viewed in a series that features some of the world's most influential psychological scientists.

In the following collection of reminiscences and tributes, Mischel's colleagues and former students — all distinguished scientists themselves — celebrate not only his vast scientific contributions, but his immense curiosity, energy, and warmth.

## **Ozlem Ayduk**

*University of California, Berkeley*

I met Walter Mischel for the first time on a hot, hazy August day in 1993 in his Columbia office at Schermerhorn Hall. I had arrived in the US from Turkey earlier that summer to start my PhD studies in his lab, not quite grasping at the time how important a figure he was in the history of psychology. During the following many years, I got to know him not only as a mentor, but also as a friend. The list of graduate students he mentored may not be particularly long, but the relationships he developed with many of them, including myself, ran deep.

As a mentor, one of the most important things Walter taught me was the meticulous front-end work that needs to go into setting up experiments, from the general atmosphere of the physical setting to the punctuation in written instructions. He believed we needed to ensure participants experienced as “real” a situation as possible, not only because he wanted the study to “work” but also because he wanted the findings to have a shot in predicting behavior outside of the lab.

During many of the impromptu lunches we had around the small coffee table in his lab, he would recount history, from his family's escape from Nazi Austria, to his early years as a psychologist in the Caribbean, to the most intellectually challenging moments of his academic career. Personal history and the history of psychology entwined seamlessly in most of his stories, leaving us, his students, equally in awe of the man and the scholar, humbled by the realization that maybe, just maybe, in some small way, we were also becoming part of that history.

Walter had a way of turning setbacks into triumphs throughout his life. Even though he could not sleep for more than 4 or 5 hours a night, he welcomed his insomnia, using the wee hours of the morning to work so he could “play” in the afternoon. In his 40s, he was diagnosed with celiac disease. I did not hear

him complain even once. Instead, he used his illness as an opportunity to explore new culinary favorites, including the lab's go-to dessert, David Glass's flourless chocolate cake. In his 70s, Walter was diagnosed with extreme osteoporosis. His response was to go to the gym regularly to lift weights, which eventually helped — literally — reverse his diagnosis. Whenever I face a setback in my own life, I role-play being Walter, exercising the art of mentally transforming every disappointment as a new beginning.

Walter loved being an academic. In joking around in the lab, he recounted many times the moment in graduate school when he realized that he was going to get paid for doing what he loved the most, research! He carried that enthusiasm for discovering the mysteries of human behavior until the very end. I miss him dearly.

## **Mahzarin R. Banaji**

*Harvard University*

A mark of great teachers is that they practice their craft everywhere and all the time. They ask in a way nobody else has before: Look! What is this thing? Where did it come from? How is the same X so different here than it is over there? Can both be true?

Walter Mischel was so intensely curious about the world, and had such an infinity of views about it, that hanging out with him was like being in a garden full of butterflies, with him chasing one and then another and yet another. You would rejoice in the adventure even as you fell exhausted from the dizzying fun.

Walter Mischel was never, in any formal sense, my teacher; we never spent time at the same institution; we never collaborated on research. We saw each other occasionally at conferences, as visitors to each other's departments, and when we served on the APS Board. And yet he has been a part of me, my education, and my world view. That we were friends in spite of so many differences is among the great joys of a profession where it is nothing except ideas and a commitment to particular ways of knowing that connect people to each other. Over the 30 or so years I knew him, he became an increasingly important touchstone. If I tried out an idea or conclusion on him and he nodded, it meant something to me. If he frowned, I took it seriously.

There was nothing bland about Walter Mischel. In life and in science, he was fast, trenchant, and funny. If you had any sense, you knew immediately that you were in the presence of an unusual and superior mind; somebody both humble about the larger enterprise of understanding the mind and intensely confident about the role that psychology had to play. If you were willing, you could have the greatest intellectual ride of your life with him. Sometimes, literally, a ride. He once rented a red convertible at the Society for Experimental Social Psychology (SESP) meeting in Santa Barbara and took three of us on a high-spirited ride through that laid-back town, saying to any police officer with a raised eyebrow, "I'm just from New York!"

No matter what he studied, the two concepts of the situation and the person, the outside and the inside, were ones he engaged with. He was fascinated by the adaptation of people in dramatically changed environments. When we talked prior to my interview with him in Vienna (for the APS series *Inside the Psychologist's Studio*), I was struck by many observations he offered about why he came to be interested

in the problems he worked on, but none more than his memory of the change in his parents' personality. In Vienna, before they had to flee, Walter's father was a proud man of respectable standing, a chemist, if I recall. His mother, he said, was neurotic, stayed at home, and could easily have been granted admission to Freud's circle of patients in that very city. After they were eventually in NYC, and Walter was in his early teens, he said he couldn't help but notice a rather extreme reversal of personality. His father, who had to take a job as a clerk in a five-and-dime, was a cowed down man with little confidence. His mother, realizing that money was needed, became a waitress, and the emotional backbone of the family. How is the same X so different here than it is over there?

That ability to introspect about matters of the mind and the world that didn't make easy sense, to pursue them rigorously by translating them into scientific questions, and to teach us about surprising aspects of ourselves, orthodoxy be damned — that was Walter Mischel's great talent and his gift to us to observe and learn. Beyond this, there was so much more: his research on consciousness, control, and self-regulation; his constant striving to hang out with younger scientists and join in new learning; his support of the collective. For all these reasons, he will remain in my heart and in my mind, in unique ways in each situation, of course.

## **Albert Bandura**

*Stanford University*

Walter joined the Stanford faculty when the field of personality and psychotherapy was undergoing a transformative paradigm change. At the time, human behavior was attributed to global traits and unconscious complexes. In illuminating field studies, Walter demonstrated that human behavior is contextually variable and conditionally manifested. This causal conception sparked a fiery trait war. Someone once remarked that Walter's *Personality and Assessment* was the most widely cited *nonread* book in personality! Weary of trait warfare, Walter shifted his program of research to self-regulation via delay of gratification. Walter longed for the excitement of New York City. He found the pacific life amidst the balmy palms too tranquil. He left for Columbia where he continued his illustrious career.

## **Frances Champagne**

*Columbia University*

Walter Mischel was a dear friend and colleague. When I joined the faculty at Columbia University in 2006, Walter's enthusiasm for epigenetics came as a surprise — though I would soon come to appreciate his rationale. The ability of genes to predict behavior is context-dependent, being shaped by their "epigenetic state" — this resonated with Walter's views on personality. Epigenetics was to the genome-behavior relationship what situational context was to the personality-behavior relationship. Walter was so dedicated to gaining a better understanding of epigenetics — I recall him sitting diligently through a 10-hour marathon of lectures I put together on this topic. A lifelong learner, Walter had a passion for integrative science that pushed us all out of the dogmas and habits that come so easily within a field of study.

Walter's legacy within my own field of study comes from his work on the importance of self-control for

development across the life course. Risk and resilience in childhood and beyond are such fundamental constructs in developmental science. Walter's demonstration of the trajectories associated with capacity for self-control have generated novel targets for educational and policy approaches that foster resilience. Even Sesame Street has realized the powerful message of Walter's work. Cookie Monster's attempts to resist the urge to eat the cookie are an inspiration for us all — thanks, Walter.

Walter was generous and always moving forward toward the next challenge. I will miss our lunches at Le Monde in Morningside Heights — not quite Paris, but a great place to philosophize about the past and present.

## **Tory Higgins**

*Columbia University*

A bright star in our sky has blinked out, never to be replaced. Walter is irreplaceable because, like all very special people, he was multidimensional. He was a *Parent* who nurtured, advised, and mentored his students *and* his colleagues. He was a *Scientist* who explored, pondered, and discovered who we are as persons. He was an *Artist* who captured, revealed, and expressed otherwise hidden meanings in the world around us. In all of these ways, Walter was a truth seeker and a truth teller.

Walter was that special scientist who was a great observer of contextualized human behavior. He recognized that what was different among people was not how they generally behaved across situations but what they chose to do in different specific situations, with the stable pattern of their different choices in different situations defining their personality. Not since Freud has anyone made such a significant contribution to understanding personality. He also recognized that the importance of what people choose to do is not the same for all situations. Some situations reveal more about a person's ways of dealing with the world than others. And, famously, he identified a situation that revealed a person's strategies for self-control — the “marshmallow test” of resistance to temptation.

Walter was the best kid to join in the sandbox. Whatever ideas he had, he shared them with enthusiasm. If you had a new idea to share, he was equally enthusiastic. This was the secret to his special charm: *sharing enthusiasms*. I loved his “instant replay”: You say something he likes — he laughs, then instantly repeats what you said, then laughs again. He lets you enjoy what you said in such a way that, together, you share the moment. Now that's a kid worth joining in the sandbox.

## **Ethan Kross**

*University of Michigan*

Walter's sharpness, creativity, and ability to see the big picture was like no other I have encountered. He was a brilliant, forward-thinking scientist who was a continual source of intellectual inspiration. Walter will long be remembered as one of the great psychologists of all time.

Having barely escaped extermination during the Holocaust, Walter felt grateful to spend his life asking questions about human nature. As a result, he took his job seriously. And he demanded that his students do the same. So seriously in fact, that it was not uncommon for him to call me at 6 in the morning when

I was in graduate school to share his latest feedback on manuscripts I had sent him before going to bed just a few hours earlier. What was a little sleep when there was important science waiting to be performed?

Fortunately for Walter, he didn't require much sleep to operate at full capacity — just 3 or 4 hours a night and he was raring to go. That left him with ample time to “play,” which he took full advantage of, frequenting museums and movie houses several times a week during breaks from work. One of my fondest graduate school memories was a private weekday tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that Walter took me and a few others on. After ushering us through a secret members-only entrance to the museum, Walter proceeded to point out with enthusiasm his favorite artwork. In doing so, he demonstrated that his passions extended well beyond the lab (he was a great fan of music and traveling, too, though not sports, which I learned early on in our relationship when my attempt to engage him in conversation about the Yankees was met with an uncomfortable blank stare). Although Walter dedicated his life to studying the mind, he was far from unidimensional in his interests. He was a true renaissance man.

What I will remember most about Walter, however, is his warmth. The relationship between an advisor and advisee is often a special one. But I always thought about my relationship with Walter as more than that. For close to 20 years, Walter was one of my closest friends, someone I could turn to for advice not just about work, but life more generally. Indeed, that was one of Walter's greatest gifts — the ability to create meaningful relationships with his students that transcended psychology, relationships that science shows are the basis of so much of the joy we human beings experience.

There are many things I miss about Walter — his mind, penchant for joking, undeniable charm, and contagious zest for life. But what I miss the most are the frequent conversations I no longer have with one of my dear friends.

**Gün R. Semin**

*ISPA – Instituto Universitário, Portugal and Utrecht University, The Netherlands*

If my memory serves me well, I first met Walter in 1993 at the SESP meeting in Santa Barbara and remember talking about diverse things while walking with him, and I was taken aback that he knew about the work that I was doing then on language and social cognition and that he showed some interest. I was taken aback because there was not much interest in this topic and yet there was this person, who had made major contributions with the cognitive-affective system theory of personality and with his delay of gratification work, talking about language and social cognition. At the time, I had not fully realized how much of an intellectual commitment Walter had to an integrative science and the situated nature of psychological processes.

It was, therefore, not a coincidence that we got together again in the 2000s, with the support, help, and commitment of Alan Kraut and Sarah Brookhart at APS, contributing, together with a number of scholars, to what became the International Convention of Psychological Science — an “unconventional” convention that aspired toward an integrative science, inviting neighboring disciplines to inspire psychology and be inspired by psychological science. During the diverse meetings that shaped ICPS, Walter, the gentle giant, was an incredible source of inspiration. He was a product of his journeys across

cultures, his passion for both the arts and sciences, his receptive intellect, as well as being a source of kindness and light. He never lost his infectious and youthful joy or his unbridled enthusiasm for science and the arts. And all these were the natural forces propelling this generous and creative mind.

Like so many others who knew him as a colleague, a mentor, and, above all, a friend, we shall remember him by his historic body of achievements and miss him by his giving heart.

### **Yaacov Trope**

*New York University*

Since I joined NYU, some 30 years ago, Walter and I regularly met for lunch either on the Upper West Side or in Greenwich Village. On the Upper West Side, it was mostly in his apartment, where he was eager to show me his latest paintings. In Greenwich Village, we met at the historic Reggio Café, where Walter would reminisce about his NYU college years in the early 1950s, how he spent hours in that café drawing portraits and hoping that his bohemian artist look would have a romantic appeal. But wherever and whenever we met, our conversations would always turn to psychology. Walter would become impassioned and enthusiastically connect current trends in psychology to its early days at the turn of the last century, and to his vision about the future of psychology and its contribution to human betterment. He was so excited about new advances in psychological science that he kept saying he wished he could have another life to see where it was all leading, and actually take part in it.

This was coming from a scientist whose 60-plus years of seminal scholarship helped capture, measure, and understand “willpower” in scientific terms, a scientist whose inventive methodology opened a window into the self-control processes crucial for adaptive human functioning — beginning in early childhood, influencing adolescent development, and continuing over the life course. Most important, it was coming from a scientist who tackled the big question of stability and flexibility in human behavior, framed and reframed it in light of new developments in psychology, and, in the process, inspired generation after generation of young scientists.

These accomplishments, and many more, were not enough for Walter; they only fed his passion for science, the arts, and his zeal for life. I was sitting at Walter’s bed on the last day before he slipped away, when he pulled me closer to him and whispered, “Yaacov, sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk about ideas today.” There was a gleam in his eye when he said that.

### **Barbara Tversky**

*Teachers College, Columbia University and Stanford University*

I will let others speak on marshmallows and trait X situation, and I on Walter’s taste in the arts. When Amos and I joined the department at Stanford in 1977, Walter took it upon himself to educate us, newly arrived from the battles of the Middle East, in contemporary American culture. His view. Not *Star Wars*, but Sam Shepard’s startling plays at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco. It was an excellent arrangement; he picked us up and dropped off one of his lovely daughters to babysit. Walter was even-tempered, gentle, and contemplative, yet he was drawn to the erratic, conflicted, violent characters that Shepard let loose on the stage. True, those characters had fleeting moments of affection, even love,

family attachments too strong and compelling to break. Walter was drawn to Albee. Like Shepard, Albee made theater that was alternately brutal and sweet. Like Shepard, he put the multiple personae dwelling within us out on the stage, to fight it out. Though no fan of psychoanalysis, Walter took from Freud the struggle at our core: attachment versus independence. We must have both.

An even greater passion was art. Walter was a gifted and eclectic painter, using Jello powder when he couldn't afford oil, painting on any surface, even kitchen cabinets and doors. His paintings ran the gamut: scenes, people, abstractions; they could be reflective, exuberant, somber, funny, playful. His last stunning paintings were on X-ray films, souls emanating from the bones and disappearing into the confetti of star dust. What he collected and hung in his apartment took your breath away: the evocative curve of a back, black on white, minimalist and elegant. What he was drawn to see, quite the opposite: the contorted beauty of ugliness. He dashed through galleries at marathon speed but didn't miss a thing. Guston, baring his shame joyfully in ironic reds and pinks; Dubuffet, exposing his childish gloppy blobs and clumpy shapes and jarring eyes; Giacometti, shrinking into creases and wrinkles. This was a mind that saw the nuances and complexities and contradictions, the art from the turmoil deep inside.