Marilynn Brewer

April 26, 2013

Ohio State University (Professor Emerita)
University of New South Wales
William James Fellow Award

APS Past President Marilynn Brewer is internationally recognized for her contributions to research in social cognition, especially social identify and intergroup relations. Her work has focused on social identity, collective decision making, prejudice, and intergroup relations. Her exceptionally rich and rigorous career has spanned several decades and several continents.

Brewer is particularly recognized for her theory of optimal distinctiveness, based on the idea that the conflicting costs and benefits of sustaining an optimal group size would have shaped social motives at the individual level. The theory posited distinct, and opposing, drives for individual differentiation and group belonging. As needs for inclusion in a group were satisfied, needs for differentiation would become more salient, motivating social identification with distinctive groups that could simultaneously satisfy both needs. Optimal distinctiveness theory provided a framework supporting her increasingly sophisticated range of research studies with students and colleagues throughout the world on intergroup perception, stereotypes, priming effects, and self-concepts.

Brewer's early work was based on ethnographic interview and survey data from East Africa. From that experience she developed a career-long interest in ethnocentrism and ingroup bias, arguing that preference affect and treatment of ingroups is independent of prejudice or derogation of outgroups. Her work on "ingroup love vs outgroup hate" has had a profound influence on research and theories of intergroup relations and the nature of social identity. Brewer's work is not only highly regarded, but critically relevant to the issues of social life in our increasingly globalized world.