Bruce P. Halpern

August 18, 1933 – January 31, 1922

Bruce Peter Halpern was a tireless fighter for the advancement of chemosensory science, for the promotion of his department, and in support of his family. His strict opinions on the conduct of science, his resolute fairness in the allocation of resources, and his pugnacious advocacy for the psychology department made him sometimes difficult for the university to interpret. Academics happy with clever political moves, shifting loyalties, and unstated goals would find no friend in Bruce. But any report of his staunchness does injustice to his delightfully eccentric sense of humor. And the psychology department, which he chaired for a full twelve years, was routinely regarded as a marvel by outside reviewers for its collegial air, active collaborations, functional faculty meetings, and general spirit of fun. On the day he retired from his second stint as chair, the department celebrated “Bruce Day.” Students, faculty, and staff all donned his professional uniform of choice—a white lab coat over shorts, black shoes and socks—to present him with accolades he had earned, many in limerick form.

Bruce Halpern lived through, and then presided over, the formation of several areas in the neuroscience of perception. After receiving
his B.A. at Rutgers University in 1955, he did his doctoral work with Carl Pfaffman at Brown, who first developed the methods for studying the response properties of taste receptors in mammals. Pfaffman discovered that receptor sensitivities were a very inexact map to the basic taste “properties” of salt, sweet, bitter, and sour. This observation set up the fundamental problem of the nature of neural coding in taste and chemosensation. Bruce pursued this problem throughout his scientific life, beginning with his Ph.D. in 1959. At that time, he also began his lifetime partnership with Pauline. They married in 1956, and she worked with him in building a laboratory and in building the rest of his life.

Bruce next worked as a postdoctoral associate in the Veterinary School at Cornell, blending that into an Assistant Professorship at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Two of his enduring research lines were established—the first on how the psychophysics of taste interacted with the machinery and timing of ingestion, and the second on how taste was integrated into the perceptual needs and motor systems of various birds and animals. He moved back to Cornell as Associate Professor in 1966, with appointments in both Psychology and Biology. He ascended academic ranks and retired as the Susan Linn Sage Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Professor Emeritus of Neurobiology and Behavior.

With students and collaborators, Bruce’s major contributions were to show how taste must be understood in the context of its functional anatomy and neuroanatomy—in particular, the oscillations of licks, the residence times of sips, and the downstream effects of motivational states. Naturally-occurring taste modifiers proved important windows into taste coding, showing how some plants amplified it and some disrupted it. The normal bidirectional flow of fluids in the mouth led to research on the same phenomenon in olfaction, the orthonasal (outside air to nasal cavity) and retronasal (back of the mouth up to the nasal cavity) perceptions of odorants. While these concepts elaborated into established research areas, new institutions and societies began to advance and showcase them. AChemS, the Association for Chemoreception Sciences, had its first meeting in 1979, and Bruce Halpern was its president in 1982-83.
From 1987-1990 he was Chair of the Gordon Research Conference of Chemical Senses. Multiple new institutions, national and international, employed him as consultant.

Bruce embraced the computerization of every facet of professional and personal life. At Cornell, he became a member of virtually every committee, advisory board, and strategic planning group with digital focus (e.g., “Blue Ribbon Commission on Acquisition of Computing and Communication Equipment”). In the department, some balkiness notwithstanding, he guided the establishment of e-mail, websites, and on-line subject recruitment sites. Bruce became the co-director of the “Cognitive Studies in Context” program, the forerunner of the present Cognitive Science program and major. Some debate remains whether the initial massive bequest of computers to the department was less important to its eventual success than the philosophical debates in Cognitive Studies at the time.

Bruce’s role as Chairperson (1974-1980) and then Chair (1990-1996) of Psychology was transformative, especially considering that the typical term was three years. He was an advocate for the department, and for its individual members, in every way. Every faculty line, piece of real estate, general-purpose laboratory equipment, channel of course support, and allocated teaching load was on the line, and he gave no quarter. He was meticulous in the fair distribution of resources across the department, and in multiple years refused to make salary-raise distinctions between faculty. He survived several contentious and litigious debates that erupted in the early years of affirmative action, and actively enforced the procedures that evolved from those debates.

Students often rated Bruce’s classes as the best in the Psychology Department. Just as it was impossible to know, when he was Chair, of Bruce’s personal opinions on any issue debated in a faculty meeting, it was impossible for students to know what he “wanted” for answers in a seminar. A devout teacher in the Socratic method, he posed questions in answers to students’ queries to lead them to deeper understanding. At first profoundly perplexed, his students
then fully embraced this style of learning.

His children, Michael and Stacey, were a central focus of his life, and few informal conversations with him omitted mention of their progress. Pauline Halpern had left the laboratory to become a beloved mathematics teacher in the Ithaca Public Schools. Bruce and Pauline both retired to Kendall, where they continued public works and volunteerism, celebrating their 65th anniversary in 2022.

Written by Barbara L. Finlay and James E. Cutting