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Joseph E. McGrath (1927-2007)

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Joseph E. McGrath (1927-2007)

Joseph E. McGrath, who died on April 1, 2007, often described himself as a “conceptual carpenter.” It was an apt description: Joe conceived and built the frameworks within which a remarkable number of students and colleagues designed their studies, chose their methods, and developed their theories. He was not one to promote the flashy new concept, to generate the gasp-provoking empirical demonstration, or to concoct the unheard of new measure or manipulation. Instead, Joe created elegant conceptual and methodological platforms on which he, along with his many students and colleagues around the world, productively explored an extraordinarily diverse set of scientific and social problems.

Joe was born in Dubois, Pennsylvania, on July 17, 1927. He married Marion Freitag in 1952, and the couple raised three sons and a daughter: Robert, William, James, and Janet. (Marion McGrath passed away in June, 2008.) After service in the U.S. Army at the end of World War II, Joe enrolled at the University of Maryland, where he earned his bachelor’s degree and, in 1951, a M.A. in psychology. He did his doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, where he worked with Theodore Newcomb, receiving a Ph.D. in social psychology in 1955. For the next few years, Joe worked as a research scientist in the Washington, DC area, first with Psychological Research Associates and then with Human Sciences Research. In 1960, Joe and Marion moved to Urbana, where he began his life-long academic career at the University of Illinois.

Joe’s first appointment at Illinois was as associate director of Fred Fiedler’s Group Effectiveness Research Laboratory. After two years in that role, he joined the faculty as an assistant professor of psychology—and, just four years later, in 1966, he was promoted to a full professorship. Joe served as head of the department from 1971 to 1976 and, later in his career, accepted an additional appointment in the university’s Women’s Studies program. He retired from regular faculty duties at Illinois in 1997 but remained active and productive as a scholar until his death.

When Joe sensed that conventional wisdom about some social, psychological, or methodological issue was incomplete, misleading, or just plain wrong he rarely could resist digging in. And, more often than not, he would come up with a fresh way of framing the troublesome issue that was more elegant, and more inviting of productive scholarship, than what had been available before. That happened in a wide diversity of domains: research methodology, small group behavior and performance, social and psychological factors in stress, the social psychology of time, gender issues in social psychological theories and methods, the impact of technology on workgroup behavior, and more. In all, Joe authored or edited thirteen books, was editor of several special issues of academic journals, and published over 100 empirical articles and conceptual reviews.

Joe’s work was driven by strong and deeply considered values—about academic matters, to be sure, but also about broader social concerns. His explorations of feminist perspectives on psychological theory and method, for example, reflected a set of values

about gender issues in science with which he was personally and professionally occupied throughout his career. He also was an active and constructive member of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). Joe edited the society's *Journal of Social Issues* for six years, served as SPSSI president in 1985-1986, and in 1997 received the society's Distinguished Contribution Award, one of many honors that were bestowed upon him in recognition of his professional and scholarly accomplishments.

Joe was by nature and preference a collaborator—with distinguished peers (Irv Altman on group behavior and Phil Runkel on research methods, for example), but especially with doctoral students and junior colleagues. Many of his collaborative projects took shape at the Baldwin Research Institute, which happened to be co-located with the McGrath family vacation cottage in Baldwin, Michigan. Joe and Marion welcomed a steady stream of young colleagues to Baldwin for work, conversation, and relaxation.

To collaborate with Joe required that one be prepared to push the upper limits of one's capabilities and the outer limits of the possibilities one was willing to consider. Once Joe took the chalk and headed for the blackboard, you knew it was going to be a very fast ride and that you needed to crank your brain up to full power if you were to have any chance of keeping up. And if he relinquished the chalk in favor of a pencil and a lined yellow pad, you knew you had to pay extremely close attention in real time, because whatever Joe scratched out in his inimitable handwriting was probably going to be impossible to decipher after the fact.

In working with students and colleagues, Joe managed to combine a tough insistence on the highest-possible standards with an extraordinary level of empathy. You would give him a paper to read with equal measures of anticipation (knowing that he would focus intently on what you had produced) and anxiety (knowing also that he would hone in on precisely those issues for which you had done a little hand-waving in lieu of thinking things all the way through). There never was a dull moment with Joe, never a time when one did not learn something new, and always full measures of caring and great good fun. Joe provided all who were privileged to work with him a model of the highest to which we can aspire in our own careers of teaching, research, and service.

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