

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Department of Psychology 1997

Professor Stephen Fox Retires

Professor Stephen S. Fox has elected to retire from the Department after a multifaceted and rich career of 32 years. Fox received a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 and continued through with a Ph.D. in Physiological Psychology at the University of Michigan, in 1960. During the next five years, he conducted research at the Ypsilanti State Hospital, Ypsilanti, and the Mental Health Research Institute, University of Michigan and was also an assistant professor there. He came to Iowa in 1965 as Associate Professor and shortly thereafter, was appointed Professor.

During the first three years at the U of I, he was Director of Training in Physiological Psychology and also designed, implemented and was the Director of a United States Public Health Service interdisciplinary program called "Neurobehavioral Studies Program," which cooperatively promoted graduate study in a dozen departments, Fox said. He says his involvement in neurophysiology might never have happened if it hadn't been for his experience at the Brain Research Institute at UCLA from 1957- '59 where he conducted research in the Department of Anatomy, partly for his dissertation on the neurophysiology of sensory deprivation. It was this work that gave rise to his later participation the U.S. space program, in which he collected brain activity data from animals on the earliest space flights.

"The Brain Research Institute was an intensely creative environment where I had the good fortune to work for, and with probably the greatest neurophysiologists active at that time in the world," Fox said. "They came from everywhere to share their common interests in the brain and in the central nervous system control of behavior."

Fox's laboratory for the program at the UI supported about a dozen graduate students and post-docs and may have been the first on-line, real-time, computerized psychology

laboratory at the UI, he said. The appearance of smaller computers gave researchers the ability to track minute, extra-cellular and intra-cellular signals from the brain and were able to simultaneously process them mathematically and utilize them for feedback, which previously hadn't existed.

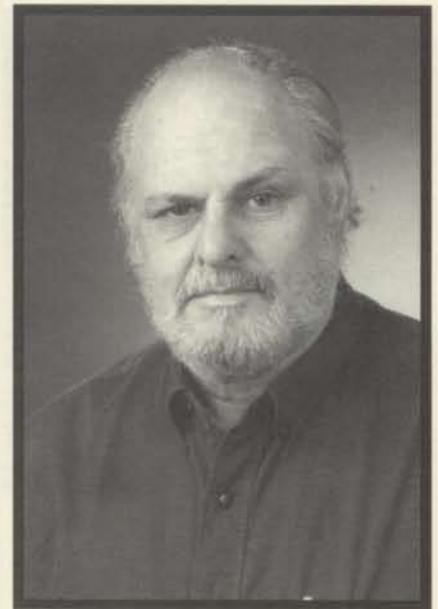
"It was probably the first stand-up computer set-up outside of perhaps Physics and Weeg itself, which was down the hall in Seashore Hall at that time," Fox said. "In a sense, it set a precedent for real-time, computer-controlled research."

At first, only summary data could be punched out slowly on paper tape and later, raw data could be recorded on magnetic tape, Fox said, and the first magnetic tape, without which they could not have done their work, was given to them by Jim Van Allen.

"I met with him one day and I presented our problem," Fox said. "I asked him, 'what do you do with nervous system data with thousands and thousands of individual cell-firing intervals and waves?' Van Allen offered, 'I have this old antiquated tape deck from NASA. You can have it.' So we interfaced it with our PDP 8 and were able for the first time, to collect data which could be processed on-line and off-line at Weeg." The lab collected data 24-hours a day, Fox says, and amazingly, his students enthusiastically worked those shifts that kept it running.

"I'm endlessly grateful to them for the effort," he said. "I believe graduate teaching is a two-way arrangement. Your own progress in science and your recognition in science are essentially due to the students that make that effort with you. And their progress and their ability to create a good initial effort, to mature, and to formulate a good dissertation, is due to the extent to

which you are willing to share with them. I tried to be generous with them and they were incredibly generous with me.... I think it was an amazingly successful mutual effort and I was pleased to have the opportunity to give them a chance to be on what I feel was the cutting edge of that field at that time."



Stephen Fox

Over the years, Fox supervised ten M.A. theses, 19 Ph.D. theses, and seven postdoctoral fellows. He was recognized with an Excellence in Teaching award in 1969. Ratings of his courses were high, he said, and enrollment for them was at the upper end of the distribution for non-required courses. He says a person can take considerable satisfaction from international recognition for one's scientific research, but the teaching award was, to him, a more important validation, an affirmation and appreciation of the value of putting effort into teaching and though it was difficult, it was, in many ways, far more gratifying.

"Good teaching is an art," Fox said. "It's not something you can work at or train for. It's a gift... and in a sense I feel my life has been gifted... and I found myself to be a natural teacher, so I can't actually take much credit, it just turned out that way."

Another thing that "just turned out that way" was in the 1970s when a major change of direction took place in Fox's career. He said the research came to an end and the laboratory was closed. But it was perhaps time to stop and it felt OK to stop, he said,

and it provided a unique opportunity to move on. So he went on to what he thought would be the next most interesting and challenging thing to do. He re-educated himself

in comparative and cross cultural personality theory.

"Mine was not an approach which was offered elsewhere in the Department," Fox said. "Existential personality theory I felt, was an important area of study which I thought should be offered in the Department, along with psychoanalytic theory and Humanistic Psychology, which also were not emphasized extensively."

His study and research revolved around how in different cultures, Eastern and Western, a concept of self is formulated and the implications of how individuals handle the vicissitudes of everyday life, such as stress, loss, love, freedom, death, and pain. It has not been about differences, Fox says, but about the similarities of human beings across cultures in which he is most interested.

"We like to make a lot of the differences," he said, "but the similarities in human suffering and concerns are overwhelming and most striking wherever you go in the world."

Since retirement, Fox has finished a book, the result of the time that his interest was focused on comparative personality theory. He explains that in contrast to his previous work, it's a book without references and without data, of his perspective on different ways to view the self and coming to terms with the universal and existential dilemma of self. The dilemma of meaning and understanding and the seemingly arbitrary choices people make.

Regarding his recent book, Fox said, "I never thought I had the training or the background to write such a thing, but I was pleased and surprised that I was able to depart from what I was trained to do...summarizing data...making minimum projections...which is what science is all about. This effort was considerably more speculative, but it felt quite comfortable to do; probably a maturation process." Fox has finished this book and has started another one. He says he will probably go on with writing.

Another area that occupies Fox's retirement hours is his continuity of interest in Eastern thought. For more than twenty-five years he has been a practicing Zen Buddhist and for the last nine years, Fox has been a student of the somewhat 'obscure' and ancient Japanese tea ceremony, *Chanoyu*. Fox travels to Chicago two days a month to study with his instructor and he also teaches *Chanoyu* four days a week in a traditional tearoom built in his house.

Since 1975, Fox also has been active with *Communia Corporation*, a small non-profit corporation that maintains *Deep Mountain Retreat Center* on 300 acres in Northeast Iowa. At present, considerable time is spent

with his son, Soren, facilitating baseball, tennis and boy scouts and all the other things that 12-year-olds do. Although, Fox says, a serious challenge right now is teaching himself to bake bread, and to do it as well as he did neurophysiology. Additionally, other interests include gardening/landscaping, poetry, watercolors, sailing on Lake Superior and snow skiing. Fox and his wife, Cathy, reside in Iowa City, as do Soren's older brother, Ethan and older sister, Gillian. Another older brother, Adam, resides in Provo, Utah.

Regarding retirement, Fox said, "I have no complaints. My life has been richly rewarding, and with my students, eminently successful. I know we did exemplary science and I know we did it well. Now, my life is very simple, really. If I can just bake some good bread, write another book and hang-out with my kid, it'll be delightful."

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