



Mary C. Potter

GRFP Recipient: 1956

Undergraduate Institution:
B.A. 1952, Swarthmore College

Graduate Institution:
Ph.D. 1961, Harvard University

Graduate Field of Study:
Psychology

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Current Position:
Professor of Psychology,
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology

RESEARCH INTERESTS //

Mary C. Potter studies human perception of words, sentences and pictures and how we derive meaning from such input. One of her key findings is that people can understand the meaning of a phrase, word or picture in a fraction of a second--faster than they can form a memory of a word or a picture. Potter is particularly interested in processes that occur in the first second or two after a stimulus has been presented, a time when conceptual short term memory permits high-level comprehension. Together with her students, her work using rapid serial visual presentation (RSVP) has explored the temporal limits of comprehension and attention, including the phenomena of repetition blindness and the attentional blink. In earlier studies comparing the processing of pictures and words, she showed that conceptual understanding of pictures is somewhat faster than that of written words, although words are read aloud faster than pictures can be named: This pattern suggests that meaning is not dependent on language.

For a fuller account of Potter's research, see her home page:
<http://mollylab-1.mit.edu/lab/>

A FOND MEMORY OF MY EXPERIENCE AS A FELLOW //

Like many women of my generation, I followed my husband David's career after we graduated from college together and married, in 1952. Thus, I became a graduate student at Harvard, after he decided to go there. In 1956 I was lucky to get an NSF research fellowship that allowed me to complete my thesis research on a signal detection account of human perception at University College,

London, when David went there as a postdoc. I remember the endless cups of tea with my fellow expats (from Canada and Israel) and the excitement of being in London. We left after two years with a new baby. My thesis was completed in 1961 after two more moves (Baltimore and Boston) and a second child; there were two more children thereafter. I had the good fortune to have a part-time postdoctoral and research position with my thesis advisor, Jerry Bruner, at the Center for Cognitive Studies from 1960-1967, when I began my work using RSVP to understand how much we see and remember from a simulated fixation. In 1967 I accepted my first full-time position, at M.I.T., teaching environmental psychology in the Urban Studies Department. I later moved to the Psychology Department (now the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences). My greatest pleasure, professionally, has been in my graduate and postdoctoral students, many of them women. When I came to M.I.T. there were very few women faculty, but that began to change; I participated in the effort to recruit and appoint women, and to increase the number of undergraduate women. At NSF, also, there was interest in this issue. For many years my research was supported by NSF, but the NSF support that had the greatest effect on my career was my fellowship in 1956 that allowed me to continue my graduate work in London.

AWARDS/ HONORS //

- Fellow, American Psychological Association
- Fellow, Association for Psychological Science
- Fellow, Cognitive Science Society
- Member, Society of Experimental Psychologists
- Keynote Speaker, Psychonomic Society, 2006

POSITION PROFILE //

1961-67 - Research Fellow, Center for Cognitive Studies, Harvard University

1967-70 - Lecturer, 1970-1975, Associate Professor, Department of Urban Studies & Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1975-82 - Associate Professor, 1982-present, Professor, Department of Psychology (since 1985, Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences), Massachusetts Institute of Technology

