

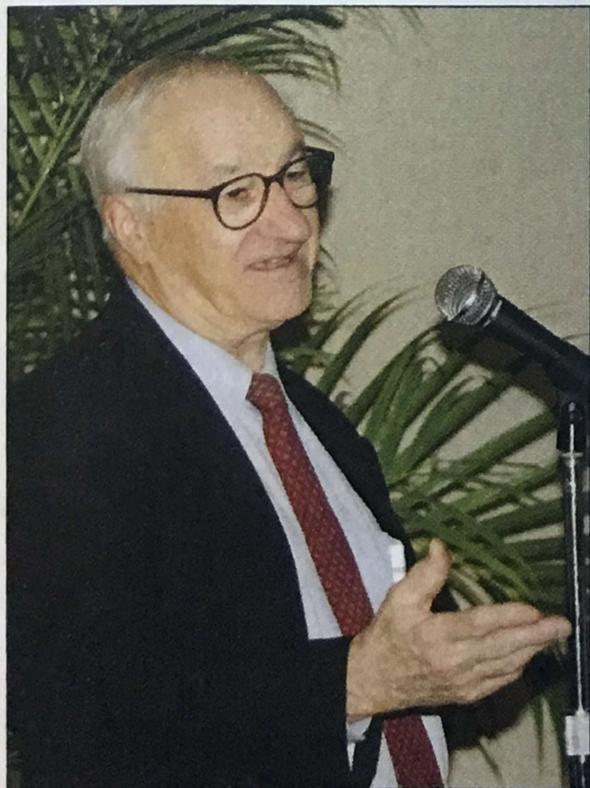
# Three decades at the top

**The Smithsonian Institution honored the Stanford University psychology department for its longstanding contributions.**

**BY KAREN KERSTING**  
*Monitor staff*

For three decades, Stanford University's psychology department has been ranked the top department in the country by *U.S. News & World Report* for its record of groundbreaking research and accomplished faculty—a fact recognized at a Smithsonian Associates continuing-education seminar on Nov. 15 in Washington, D.C.

The all-day sequence of lectures was part of the Smithsonian Resident Associate Program's "Campus on the Mall" series of community educational programs, through which the Smithsonian brings faculty from the nation's universities to Washington, D.C., to lecture on their research. Stanford's eminent and up-and-coming



**Dr. Albert Bandura spoke on the development of the social learning theory of psychology.**

psychology professors shared the stage to reflect on their historic research and future prospects for breakthroughs in psychology.

Among the renowned researchers who delivered lectures were Albert Bandura, PhD, Claude Steele, PhD, Eleanor Maccoby, PhD, John Gabrieli, PhD, and former APA President Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, who recently retired from the department after 35 years, during which he conducted, among many other projects, his famous Stanford Prison Experiment. Zimbardo lectured on evil and fear.

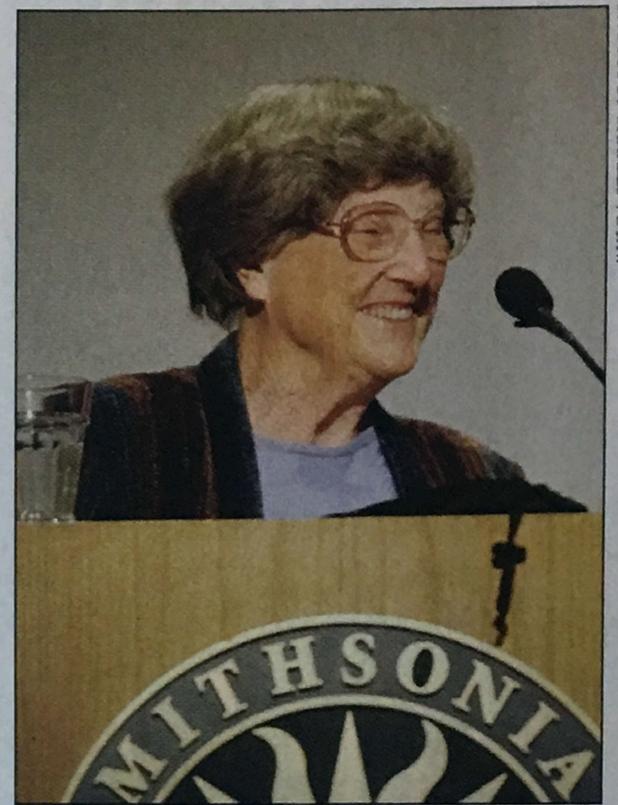
For many of the years Stanford has been the top department, the faculty ranks have been filled with some of the most eminent psychologists from the domains of cognitive, social, personality and child development psychology, according to Zimbardo.

"The Smithsonian program is important to our department in many ways, for the old timers to feel pride in their contributions to this honor, for the new faculty by setting a high standard to maintain with their innovative ideas, research and publications," he said. "It says to us, 'Job well done, time to do more and better.'"

## A rich research history

One of those who's set such a high standard is Albert Bandura, PhD, perhaps best known for his Bobo doll aggression research. Using the doll, he demonstrated how viewing aggression causes emulation of that behavior, rather than catharsis. Bandura discussed the evolution of social cognitive theory—the idea that people are producers of their own life circumstances, not just beholden to environmental factors.

Before he and other psychologists worked on this theory in the 1960s and 1970s, aggression and phobias were thought to be caused solely by internal factors and environmental cues, Bandura said. But through research demonstrating that aggressive behaviors in children were acquired through viewing films depicting aggression—not direct provocation—Bandura showed



**Dr. Eleanor Maccoby talked about her work in developing positive parenting models.**

that children had some control over their behavior.

Based on the social learning theory—bolstered by evidence such as the Bobo study—treatment of phobias began to include teaching patients to overcome their fear in addition to addressing the phobia's root causes.

"We found that people didn't need so much analysis, but [did need] ways to control behavior and enable healing and psychological success," Bandura said. "Ex-phobics, who had been taught this kind of guided mastery, were grateful to be rid of their phobia, but also said the experience allowed them more control over their lives."

## Landmark parenting research

Another longtime Stanford faculty member, psychologist Eleanor Maccoby, PhD, at Stanford since 1958, also discussed work done in the department that encouraged personal empowerment in individual and family lives—development of positive parenting models. Her work in developmental psychology demonstrated that parent-child relationships emerge from a long series of interactions between parent and child, as well as from the genetic endowments and prior experiences of each party, she said.

"If a relationship is established that is reciprocal and warm, the child may pay more attention to the parent,"



Former APA President Dr. Philip G. Zimbardo said the Smithsonian event was an honor.

Maccoby said. "Parenting isn't something you do to children or for children, it's something you do with children."

She has parlayed her research findings into empirically validated parenting interventions intended to improve relationships between parents and children and allow children to develop high levels of self-efficacy and positive relationship skills.

"We know now quite a lot about what types of interventions work, and we must think of policies that will support parenting that will allow children the kind of childhood that encourages them to socialize well," she said.

### Future directions

Following in the footsteps of prominent faculty such as Bandura and Maccoby, newer faculty highlighted some of their up-and-coming research on learning.

For example, psychologist Michael Ramscar, PhD, discussed how children learn language—an ability he called a defining human characteristic. His research shows that children have an innate ability to learn irregular grammar just by listening to other people speak. For example, a child who incorrectly uses "mouses" instead of the word "mice," can, when otherwise functional with language, learn to use the correct word by hearing it used correctly.

"We tend to forget how special language is, so understanding the complexity of learning language can help us to know how to help when that process goes wrong," he said. Though learning language is, as Ramscar described, a complex, but innate ability, learning to read is not something human brains are

biologically set up to do, psychologist John Gabrieli, PhD, said.

"Brains are not evolved to read. We have to hijack other parts of our brains to learn how to read; this isn't an easy thing," he explained.

Many children who have no problem with spoken language struggle to learn to read, Gabrieli said, because these two functions are carried out in very different mental processes. He said many factors, including impaired visual interpretation of written words, misunderstanding how words sound and dependence on environmental speech cues for contextual understanding can

hinder learning to read. But research in this area has led to specific solutions for underachieving readers, such as reading exercises that specifically connect language sounds to written words, he said.

"We think we can show what makes reading difficult, but also how we can improve reading in all children," Gabrieli said.

Psychologists Brian Knutson, PhD, Laura Carstensen, PhD, Hazel Rose Markus, PhD, and Jeanne Tsai, PhD, also lectured at the seminar.  $\Psi$

To learn more about the Smithsonian seminars, go to [www.residentassociates.org](http://www.residentassociates.org).

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