

Leo Meltzer

March 1, 1927 — June 4, 1994

Our respected and longtime colleague, Leo Meltzer, died of a heart attack on June 4, 1994, after an evening devoted to one of his favorite activities, serious bridge. He had been with us for twenty-six years since he arrived in 1958 from his post as Study Director for the University of Michigan Survey Research Center. He was a natural appointment for our fledgling Social Psychology program which, in those expansive and open days, was explicitly not only interdisciplinary but also interdepartmental. He came having worked with Abraham Maslow, one of the most effective undergraduate teachers of his time, and the very different but very important mentor, Floyd Allport, under whom Leo had received an M.A. degree at Syracuse University. He became the major architect of our Lambert Laboratory of Social Psychology.

Leo came to Cornell imbued with a sense of the need for a dual approach to the field—an approach that was embodied in his recent Ph.D. thesis at Michigan, entitled “Consequences of the joint consideration of individual and aggregate data in social research” (U. of Michigan, 1958). This dual approach was certainly one of the desired outcomes of the interdepartmental graduate program at Michigan, which was headed in Leo’s case by Theodore Newcomb and Guy Swanson. The “individual” aspects led Leo to welcome responsibilities in Cornell’s Psychology Department where he attended all meetings and planning sessions, served as Graduate Field Representative for Psychology and had two terms as Assistant Chairman of the Psychology Department. But the “aggregate” side of Leo’s interests led him to also attend all Sociology meetings, maintain membership in the American Sociological Association (in which he was a Fellow), review papers for sociological journals and, when the time came, to become a very energetic Executive Officer of the Eastern Sociological Society, helping to expand its scope and membership.

Leo was happier, however, when he was working in both Psychology and Sociology. He helped hold together an interdepartmental program at both the graduate and the undergraduate levels, despite growing threats from other perspectives, from other administrative plans, and from the general decline in University money for ambitious social science programs. During the expansive years of 1968 to 1978, he was particularly active in the administration of large and very successfully utilized grants for graduate training in Social Psychology, funded by the National Institute of General Medical Science; he served as the local Director in the later years of the grant. This role called for fierce dedication and concentrated joint planning during some turbulent years. He also spent two years during this period as the vigorous early Chairman of the interdepartmental faculty committee to plan a Social Science building, which is now called Uris Hall.

Leo was a pioneer in the use of scientific apparatus and computers in social psychology and had a major part in establishing the high-technical laboratory facilities which we still have in Social Psychology. Using this laboratory in its early form, he (with William Morris) found, with multiple regression analyses, that one could predict which person continues to talk after an episode of dual speaking by focussing on the behavior of the person whose speech had been interrupted. Continuation or willingness to relinquish the floor involves raising or sustaining voice level during interruptions. He used computer controlled manipulations of speaker's sound pressure to test this conclusion. Using op-amps and real-time computer control, he manipulated speakers' voice levels as they spoke and listened to one another through headphones. By comparing control and experimental passages, he could predict the outcomes of these dual speech episodes from these data, without reference to content, establishing that some mechanisms which control the stream of interaction are nonverbal.

In his published papers, Lee made several other original contributions. One was a new contribution to cognitive balance theories; indeed, he maintained an active interest in balance theories throughout his career, discussing new ideas only the week before his death. Another focussed on the role of information and its distribution among group members in shaping the evolving structure of groups. Another interest was in personality. In one experiment, Lee recruited six sets of best-friends triads. These students met five times, once with the best friends, four times with persons who were total strangers. Their speech was logged on digital tape and analyzed by special software he had devised. This design assessed the stability of each student's behavior in the presence of a changing set of others. There was great similarity in behavior while interacting with the different sets of strangers, but profound differences in how the students acted with their best friends—a finding that emphasized the eliciting nature of relationships.

Lee was well known in Europe for this kind of approach to social interaction. He enjoyed sabbaticals in England, and he served as a NATO visiting lecturer, speaking at twelve universities in Holland, Italy, and West Germany.

Over the years, Lee became increasingly effective and dedicated to undergraduate teaching. His course on social relationships (similar to work done at Harvard by Freed Bales) was popular: some students waited years to get into it. Aside from extensive readings, students kept personal logs and interacted with uncommon frankness. In keeping with his respect for research and his affection for undergraduates, a memorial fund has been established to reward the best Cornell undergraduate social psychology research paper, each year. Contributions to the "Meltzer Memorial Fund" should be sent to the Department of Sociology.

Leo grew up in Brooklyn and was a graduate of the Townsend Harris Special High School there. He received his A.B. degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 1949 (where he worked with Abraham Maslow) and an M.A. degree from Syracuse University in 1951. He loved opera, and over the years came to know much about it, particularly the work of Wagner.

He is survived by his ex-wife, Nancy of Ithaca; his wife, Anne, also of Ithaca; his five children, Jonathan, Joel, Sarah, Walter, and Elizabeth; and a brother, Ezra of White Plains.

Leo asked that no memorial service be held. Instead, we now express how much we will miss our busy, creative and wise colleague, with his talent and taste for administration, his dedication to good teaching and research and his warm, lively and supportive manner.

William W. Lambert, Robin Williams, Jr., Donald Hayes