Bartley Gore Hoebel (1935–2011)

Bartley (Bart) Gore Hoebel was born on May 29, 1935, and spent much of his childhood in Pleasantville, New York, and Salt Lake City, Utah. His father was an academic anthropologist who studied legal customs among various Native American tribes, and thus Bart spent several summers on reservations. Bart was an avid Cub and Boy Scout and earned the top rank of Eagle Scout. He loved tinkering and building, which proved invaluable for his career as an experimental scientist.

Bart received his bachelor’s degree in psychology at Harvard University, where he worked under the direction of Philip Teitelbaum on the role of brain mechanisms in the control of eating and satiety. This subject became his major research interest for the rest of his life. After a few years as a graduate student at the Rockefeller Institute (now University), he moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he completed his doctoral degree in 1962, again under the guidance of Philip Teitelbaum. He became an assistant professor in Princeton’s Psychology Department in 1963, an associate professor in 1967, and a professor in 1970. He had no intention of retiring and was looking forward to moving into the new Princeton Neuroscience Institute building when he developed an ultimately fatal cancer. Bart’s wife Cindy, a musician active in the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Princeton, predeceased him. They have two daughters (Valerie and Cary), a son (Brett), and two grandchildren.

Bart’s early research was on the role of the ventromedial and lateral regions of the hypothalamus in the control of eating and satiety. Later he expanded this research to consider other types of motivated behavior, including addiction. He and his colleagues showed that drugs of abuse share a common withdrawal mechanism. In the nucleus accumbens, during withdrawal from nicotine, morphine, diazepam, alcohol, and even sugar, acetylcholine levels are relatively high compared with dopamine levels. This suggests an aversive neurochemical state that animals will work to avoid. Therefore, Bart thought it might be one cause of self-medication leading to drug relapse or breaking one’s diet.

Bart pioneered in the measurement of neurochemical release in local brain sites of freely moving animals. For example, he showed that dopamine is released by feeding, self-stimulation, drugs of abuse—including nicotine and alcohol—and by repeated binging on a sugar solution. In the last decade, he showed that rats allowed to binge on sugar showed characteristics suggesting that they had become addicted to sugar.

Bart’s scientific achievements were recognized by his being elected president of Division 6 (Behavioral Neuroscience and Comparative Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, president of the Eastern Psychological Association, and president of the Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior. He received an honorary doctorate from the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium.

Bart was a superb and successful teacher of undergraduates and graduate students. In the laboratory, he gave his students wide freedom to explore on their own but was always available to help them. In large lecture classes he was a bit of a showman. Once he came in with a human brain in his gloved hands. To the horror of the class, he took a big bite out of the brain, which turned out to be made of gray jello.

An old friend described Bart as “a man without guile.” He was never known to utter an unkind or demeaning word about another person. He was committed to his family, his students, and his community, which stretched from Princeton right around the world. He founded the Princeton Peace Center and ran it for its life from 1969 to 1973, devoting one of his sabbatical leaves to it. The center was an important focus of anti-Vietnam War activity and information. He was active in social issues in the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Princeton. His concern for environmental issues was reflected in his turning over of his Christmas tree farm to the New Jersey Greenways program.

Bart had some extraordinary hobbies. He was a commercially licensed hot air balloonist. He built a fire-truck-mounted steam calliope, which his wife played on various occasions such as alumni reunions. His last major extracurricular project was to restore the stern-wheeler Splash, which traveled between New Hope, Pennsylvania, and Lambertville, New Jersey, and was used to teach clean-water ecology, physics and U.S. history to students and adults.

Because of his rapid decline and impending demise, a planned Festschrift was moved up so he could enjoy the fellowship and appreciation of his colleagues and former students. Throughout this celebration of his life and work he remained cheerful. When the people around him began to tear up, Bart grinned a big grin and said, “Hey, cut it out. I’m not dead yet.”

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