

Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology

The American Psychological Foundation (APF) Gold Medal Awards recognize distinguished and enduring records of accomplishment in four areas of psychology. The 2015 recipient of Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology is Brian A. Iwata.

Dorothy W. Cantor, president of the APF, will present the APF Gold Medal Awards at the 123rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association on August 7, 2015, at 4:00 p.m. Members of the 2015 APF Board of Trustees are: Dorothy W. Cantor, president; David H. Barlow, vice president/secretary; Gerald P. Koocher, treasurer; Elisabeth R. Straus, executive vice president/executive director; Norman B. Anderson; Camilla Benbow; Charles Brewer; Connie S. Chan; Anthony Jackson; Terence M. Keane; Ronald F. Levant; Richard McCarty; Archie L. Turner; Melba J. T. Vasquez; and Louise Douce and Bonnie Markham, APA Board of Directors liaisons.

Brian A. Iwata

Citation

“Brian A. Iwata’s development of experimental approaches to assessment changed forever the way we design interventions for a wide range of behavior disorders. The ‘functional analysis’ methods he pioneered offer an empirical approach not only for eliminating problem behavior but also for systematically studying its environmental determinants. The flexibility and practical utility of these innovative methods have had a singular impact on clinical research, practice, training, and even public policy. Moreover, he has used his research program as a vehicle for training scores of junior colleagues and graduate students, who have emerged as the new generation of leading scholars.”

Biography

Brian A. Iwata was born in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, in 1948, the middle of three children of Harry and Margaret Iwata. Harry was a chemical engineer who initially synthesized organic (environmentally friendly) pesticides and later developed emergency response systems for chemical manufacturing accidents. Margaret, a piano major in college, was a homemaker until the children entered high school, at which time she began working for Alphonse Chapanis, one of the founders of human factors engineering, first at Johns Hopkins and later with his consulting firm. In 1953 the family moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where Iwata attended elementary school and high school

and later was a varsity swimmer and lacrosse player at Loyola College. As an undergraduate, he found Faith Gilroy’s course in experimental psychology highly influential because it emphasized a quantitative approach to the study of behavior as an observable dependent variable. Psychology also served him well on a personal level—he met his future wife Peg while taking an elective at Mt. Saint Agnes, a neighboring women’s college.

Iwata received an NIMH fellowship to attend graduate school at Florida State University in 1970, where he was a dual major in clinical and school psychology. His advisor, however, came from neither tradition. Jon Bailey, a freshly minted PhD from the University of Kansas, a leading program in the emerging field of behavior analysis, introduced Iwata to that specialty during their shared first term at FSU. Jon’s “shaping plan” was successful—Iwata quickly saw the similarity between the methods of behavior analysis and the brand of experimental psychology he favored as an undergraduate. After completing his thesis on token reinforcement principles and his dissertation on incentive schedules applied to staff performance, Iwata joined the psychology department at Western Michigan University in 1974. WMU was unique not only for having an applied behavior analysis program but also for having a behavioral influence across all of its other specialties—clinical, experimental, industrial, and school. The faculty included several pioneers of the field, most notably Jack Michael, one of Jon Bailey’s mentors. Jack’s theoretical work on establishing operations and negative reinforcement figured prominently in Iwata’s later research. Iwata described his experience at WMU as that of a highly paid post doc because he was exposed to the basic, applied, and theoretical aspects of the field while developing his own interests.

Initial research conducted by Iwata and his students focused on complex skill acquisition in individuals with learning disabilities. While doing that work, he encountered a neglected population—individuals with severe self-injurious behavior, a dramatic disorder that seemed to defy all attempts at treatment. His lab initiated several studies on self-injury, and in 1978 he returned to Baltimore to examine the problem more systematically at the John F. Kennedy Institute and the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. With the excellent medical services available at Kennedy-Hopkins, Iwata and his colleagues established a clinical research program on pediatric behavior disorders with grant support from NIH and the Pew Memorial Trust. Unlike long-term residential programs and schools, their unit was designed as a short-term, intensive program, so they needed to develop efficient intervention strategies. At that time, there were no empirical decision-making models

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for selecting from a number of available treatment procedures, and Iwata's group rose to the challenge. Based on the assumption that problem behavior was mostly a learned phenomenon, they isolated and identified its environmental determinants by exposing individuals to a series of brief test and control conditions that mimicked arrangements previously demonstrated to maintain behavior. Although the results they observed were highly variable across children, a given child typically showed higher rates of problem behavior in a particular test condition, and they used the data to design individualized interventions that neutralized specific environmental influences. This experimental model of assessment and treatment, which Iwata described as a "functional analysis" approach, has been replicated and extended across behavior disorders and clinical populations in over 1,000 subsequent studies. It is now considered the standard in the field and has been mandated in federal law governing educational practice for students with special needs.

Iwata returned to Florida in 1986 to develop an applied complement to the well-established basic program in behavior analysis at the University of Florida. Since then, his lab has continued to study disorders of learning behavior with emphasis in four general areas: refinement of assessment methods, development of interventions derived from fundamental learning principles, clinical extension of basic research through translational studies, and examination of behavioral characteristics of specific diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder, Prader-Willi syndrome, and Rett syndrome. Along the way, he has received awards from many professional organizations and has held a number of leadership positions in the field. Some examples: He is a fellow in four societies, including APA (Divisions 25 and 33), he served as president of five societies, including

Division 33 of APA, he chaired study sections for both NIH and NIMH, and he served as chief editor of the major journal in his field, the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*. In recognition of his long record of excellence, Iwata was elevated to the rank of distinguished professor in 2014, the first person in the history of the psychology department to receive that distinction.

When asked to name his most significant accomplishment, Iwata quickly mentions the doctoral students he has mentored, many of whom have gone on to distinguished careers. For example, nine of the 21 recipients of the B. F. Skinner early career award in applied behavior analysis from APA Division 25 have been his former doctoral students.

Still a sports enthusiast, Iwata enjoys playing tennis and cycling with his wife Peg—they've twice ridden the single-day, cross-Florida race on a tandem. Peg also is a psychologist and served as an executive with Habitat for Humanity prior to her recent retirement. They have two children: Christina, who teaches physics in New Castle, Delaware, and Mary Allyson, an artist in Irvine, California. Both daughters are married to university faculty and have two children of their own.

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