

The Mary C. Potter Award 2009

To honor the contributions of Mary C. Potter to cognitive psychology and in anticipation of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Psychonomic Society, Women in Cognitive Science (WICS) (<http://www.womencogsci.org/>) is delighted to announce the Mary C. Potter Award to recognize an outstanding junior scientist. The award, made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation, is open to any individual in cognitive psychology who has received the PhD and has not received tenure before the time of application. The award will cover travel expenses to Boston for the Psychonomic Society meeting. The award will go to the person who best exemplifies the three hallmarks of Potter's research: creativity of approach, experimental rigor, and a focus on basic questions in cognition.

Throughout her career, Mary C. Potter has used ingenious new methods to address fundamental questions about the first few fleeting moments of cognition. How quickly are representations accessed? How do people identify and categorize new stimuli? What is remembered and what is lost? How abstract are representations? How is information from long-term memory recruited to subserve the everyday miracles of perceptual cognition and categorization?

Potter's laboratory investigates questions about perception, attention, memory, and language processing, including the attentional blink, repetition blindness, the creative misperception of a nonword as influenced by semantic context, cross-modal (visual-auditory) processing of sentences, the abstract perception of pictures of objects, and the conceptual basis of "verbatim" recall of sentences. Through her peerless experiments, Potter has contributed to our understanding of how a stimulus such as a word, sentence, or picture generates an interpretation and a fleeting or stable memory. In Potter's research program, meaning does not come along slowly once other processes are complete, but guides even the earliest stages of perceptual experience. A key discovery is that comprehension of the meaning of a pictured scene or written word happens in a fraction of a second, much faster than the time required for stabilizing even a brief memory of that stimulus. The viewer may not even become conscious of the stimulus unless it fits in with the context.

Potter received her BA from Swarthmore College and her PhD from Harvard University. She has spent her career as a faculty member at MIT. She is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Psychological Association, and the Association for Psychological Science; she is also a member of the Society of Experimental Psychologists. Her research has been supported by NIH and NSF.

Potter's clear-sighted judgment is sought by her peers: she has served as chair of the faculty at MIT, as chair of the committee on women faculty in the School of Science at MIT, as member and chair of the governing board of the Psychonomic Society, and as member and chair of numerous site visit teams.

Application and award details

Individuals may self-nominate or be nominated by others. The deadline for applications is 8 September 09. Applications will be reviewed by the Potter Award Committee. The winner will be notified by 1 October 09.

Any area of cognitive psychology may be represented, but individuals should specifically describe the basic question their work addresses and the creativity and rigor of the methods they use. The award winner agrees to attend the meeting of Women in Cognitive Science on Thursday, 19 November 09, from 4-6 pm and give a 15-minute talk about his or her work at the end of that meeting, just before the WICS social hour.

Submit documents electronically to Virginia Valian, chair of the Potter Award Committee at PotterAward@gmail.com. Submit the following 3 items in one integrated PDF file in the order listed.

1. A cover sheet with: name, title, address, phone, email address, details of appointment, assurance of full-time untenured status, sub-area within cognitive psychology, and agreement to provide a 15-minute talk on one's work at the WICS meeting.
2. A description (maximum of 500 words) of one's research that includes the question(s) the research addresses and the methods used. Highlight what is significant about the research and what is novel about the methods.
3. An up-to-date CV.

Relevant dates

08 September 2009 – deadline for submission

01 October 2009 – notification of award

19 November 2009 – official recognition of award; 15-minute talk by winner on his or her research, presented at end of WICS meeting just prior to the WICS social hour

Chair of the Potter Award Committee

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Members of the Potter Award Committee

Marvin Chun, Department of Psychology, Yale University
Helene Intraub, Department of Psychology, University of Delaware
Nancy Kanwisher, Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT