

Edward Silberman (NIMH 1977-1982)

This is an interview with Dr. Edward Silberman, Co-Director of the Acute Inpatient Psychiatric Unit at the Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia and former member of the Laboratory of Psychology and Psychopathology of the NIMH Intramural Program. The interview is being held over speakerphone on November 22nd, 2002, in Bethesda, Maryland. The interviewer is Dr. Ingrid Farreras of the NIH History Office.

Farreras: I'd like to start by thanking you for agreeing to share your experiences and recollections of the lab with me. Before we jump to the late '70s, when you arrived at NIMH, I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about your background. You have very interesting training, a B.A. in physics from Yale...

Silberman: Right.

Farreras: What led you to become interested in physics?

Silberman: Well, I grew up in the Sputnik era, when there was a tremendous amount of interest in catching up in science, and physics was a very glittery area. I went to a science-oriented high school and that pushed me even farther in that direction, until that seemed like a very good thing to do. I was interested in it. But I got to a certain point where it became clear to me what I hadn't realized as an undergraduate, which is that in order to be any good as a physicist, you really need to have physical intuition. I think many people who start in physics and don't get very far, say that the math got to be too much. In my case it was exactly the opposite. The math pulled me along to a certain point; I was actually better in

the math courses than I was in the physics courses. But at some point I realized I just didn't have the basic physical intuition. It didn't make much sense. And so I took a break and gave myself some time to decide what better I should do with myself. And so I came to the conclusion that although I had the kind of analytic frame of mind that goes with being in physics, that it made more sense to apply that to something that I had some intuitive ability, and that was psychiatry, people, human behavior.

Farreras: Was that an obvious choice for you?

Silberman: It wasn't obvious to me for a long time, but it was a choice I made essentially by introspection. I felt fortunate when I got far enough along in my training in medical school actually to have some experience in psychiatry, and it turned out to be a good choice. I actually did enjoy it when I got far enough along to have some real exposure to it.

Farreras: And after med school you were a resident at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center?

Silberman: Right, and simultaneously a research fellow at the DuPont Warren, at the Harvard Medical School. That research fellowship was some kind of an endowed fund to support residents who were interested in research, so what that did was pay 50 percent of my salary in the last year of my residency. I worked with Allan Hobson, who is interested in the physiology of sleep.

Farreras: Was he one of the people who influenced your decision to join the Biological Psychiatry Branch [at NIMH]?

Silberman: That is an interesting question. Yes. Perhaps not that branch specifically, but

there was a long tradition of people from Massachusetts Mental Health Center going to NIMH, and there was at least, in the class ahead of me at Mass. Mental Health, for example, Rex Cowdry, who is still at NIMH. And so it was just one of the things in the air that one would think about, and I think, partly because I had this physics background and I continued to think of my career in terms of research as a part of it, that that would be an interesting thing to do. It fit well with my personal life because my wife was interested at that time in getting a Master's degree in hospital administration, and there was a good program in that at George Washington [University]. So we both had a reason to be in Washington. And, at least in those days, you didn't apply to a lab. You applied to the Clinical Associates Program and then you went around interviewing in various labs, and there was some sort of an informal matching assessed, and you wound up where you wound up.

Farreras: Did you interview with any other branches or labs?

Silberman: I didn't interview with the Laboratory of Psychology at all; that's not where I started. I started out with Bob Post.

Farreras: In Bunny's branch?

Silberman: Yes, in Bunny's. At that time it wasn't even called the Biological Psychiatry Branch; it was called the Adult Psychiatry Branch. The name changed shortly after I got there.

Farreras: Yes, I know it as the original Adult Psychiatry Branch under David Hamburg.

Silberman: I guess I was in Bob's section for about two years...

Farreras: Yes, your vitae says from '77-'79...

Silberman: Yes, right, and Bob was collaborating, among others, with Herb Weingartner, who collaborated with a lot of people in the other branches. So Herb was really the person who got me connected with the Psychology and Psychopathology Lab.

Farreras: Yes, I noticed many of your publications are with Dr. Weingartner.

Silberman: Yes. Well, where I was coming from, I always had a very strong interest in clinical psychiatry, and one of the things that I did when I was in Washington was to start psychoanalytic training. I was never interested in wet-lab research. I was a little bit dismayed, actually, to find that one of the cultural currents there was that the more “fundamental” the research, the more it was valued. I remember noticing that even when I interviewed. From my own point of view, they didn’t have any very special credentials. I was a resident at a prominent residency program that had sent a lot of people to NIMH, but I didn’t have a big research background. But I had done – as an undergraduate medical student – some animal research with Hobson and I remember that a lot of the people I interviewed with seemed to be vastly impressed by this, and I’m sure that contributed to them offering me a spot. But then once I got to NIMH I was a little bit dismayed at how the culture was that the most valued thing seemed to be throw away your clinical training and go learn an assay and start measuring things with some biological assay. And that wasn’t where I was.

So I was attracted to the kind of stuff Herb did because it seemed to me to be a very nice bridge between brain mechanisms and behavior; that the cognitive stuff was a very nice, quantifiable way to look at behavior, and one that could

conceivably be subject to manipulation in various experimental conditions. And so that was something that attracted me.

The other thing I would have to say about my background – having gone to medical school in Boston – is that Boston was, and I think still is, one of the national centers of interest in higher cortical neurology. I spent months as a medical student on the neuro unit at the Boston VA Hospital, where they had all of these luminaries in aphasia and higher cortical neurology, and it was an extraordinary experience. Norman Geschwin [sp.] was at Harvard at the time and he gave a lecture series at night which I attended. And Wally Nowder [sp.] was at MIT and he gave a lecture series at night as well. So many people wanted to go see these people. It was a great neuropsychiatric community. So that also influenced me. My head was there more than in receptors, you know? So that was my background.

Farreras: So you were within Post's section of the Biological Psychiatry Branch...?

Silberman: Correct.

Farreras: What was Weingartner's affiliation at this time?

Silberman: Head of the Psychology Laboratory.

Farreras: He was already Acting Chief by then?

Silberman: He was not yet the Acting Chief at that point, I don't think. Dave Rosenthal was still there and was starting to be overtaken by Alzheimer's. So I would say that when I arrived it was just beginning to be apparent that he was not able to function as he had before and Weingartner began to take over as Acting Chief.

Farreras: I see. Do you remember who else was in the lab at the time? I have the sense

that by that time the lab was vastly reduced, the original sections were gone and maybe only a handful of the original members remained...

Silberman: Let me try to remember. I was not the first psychiatrist to have a spot there; I took over from Ron Reeder [sp.]. And it's kind of funny because Ron went on to be a residency director and I'm a residency director – that's actually my main job here at Jefferson. So I took over Ron's spot, and Ron had been pursuing his studies in childhood antecedents of schizophrenia and had also been doing some brain-imaging studies. He was just starting to get interested in the possibility of doing some kind of computerized – not the imaging, which of course was already computerized – assessment of ventricular size, so you didn't have to sit down with a planimeter [sp.] and figure it out by hand. So he left, and in the lab at the time when I arrived was Dave Rosenthal, Ted Zahn...

Farreras: Yes, he's still here.

Silberman: Amazingly. Ted Zahn was still there doing his psychophysiology, galvanic skin response...

Farreras: Was Ben Carlson still around?

Silberman: Yes, oh, my goodness, Ben Carlson was still around. And I have to confess, I don't even remember what Ben did anymore.

Farreras: He was in the original Perception and Learning Section.

Silberman: I haven't even thought of that name in probably 20 years. He was there, Herb was there. Connie Duncan Johnson was there, now Connie Duncan Mirsky.

Farreras: I thought she arrived after Allan Mirsky came?

Silberman: She probably did. I don't remember who else was there before Allan got there...

Richard Nakamura came with Allan. One of the major ideas that Allan had when Richard came was to try to develop primate models of the attentional processes that Allan was interested in studying. So they wanted to develop a bunch of paradigms that could be performed by both human beings and primates, so that you could have monkeys and people performing the same tasks. You could, of course, study the monkeys' brains more invasively than you could study people's brains, the idea being that that you'd get some insight into how it all worked with people. And as I recall, Richard was the monkey person.

Oh, the other person who was there was – oh, gosh, I'm trying to remember his name – his background was in engineering, I think electrical engineering. And he did some kind of psychophysiology studies, too, and I'm blocking on his name.

Farreras: Monty Buchsbaum?

Silberman: No, I don't know that Monty was ever in that lab. Monty had his own section, I believe. Rich Coppola.

Farreras: Yes, of course, I'm actually going to be interviewing him in a few weeks.

Silberman: Where is he now?

Farreras: He's here.

Silberman: He is?

Farreras: Yes, he's the EMR chief here.

Silberman: Okay. So he was, I think, in the lab. I think he was pre-Mirsky, but I wouldn't swear to it.

Farreras: Okay. What type of research was the lab focused on before Mirsky arrived?

Silberman: Well, I think that it was the end of an era because the whole David Rosenthal

effort and the various people that he had been associated with, had wound down. So my recollection is that there was Ted Zahn doing what Ted had always done, and there was Herb. And I think Herb was, in many ways, the most active person in the lab at the time, and he was collaborating with everybody.

Farreras: Within NIMH or outside of NIMH?

Silberman: Well, certainly within NIMH. He was collaborating with people who worked in Bob Post's branch; he was collaborating with people who worked in Dennis Murphy's branch; he collaborated with Phil Gold, who was at that time working under Goodwin. He collaborated with everybody.

Farreras: Do you think this contributed to his becoming acting chair of the lab?

Silberman: I would think so.

Farreras: Was that Bob Cohen's decision or did someone else have to approve who would be the new...

Silberman: I don't know. I guess Cohen, and then there was somebody else, an administrator who . . .

Farreras: John Eberhart?

Silberman: Eberhart. It was Eberhart. People would speak of Cohen and Eberhart.

Farreras: Okay, the Basic and Clinical Directors then. Did they not want Weingartner to be a permanent Lab Chief?

Silberman: I don't think that's true. I think they actually offered it to him, but he didn't want to take it. And I cannot explain to you why he didn't.

Farreras: I'm trying to recall a past oral history with someone, and I can't remember who right now, who quoted him as saying, "Oh, they would never make me permanent

chief,” but the person didn’t expand on that comment so I don’t know more about it.

Silberman: Well, I can’t swear that I’m right, but this is my recollection, that he wasn’t interested in it. And, you know, I could really swear to you that I had conversations with Herb at that time where more than once he would say, “Well, so-and-so is trying to talk me into running the lab,” whether it was Cohen or whether it became Fred Goodwin at one point...

Farreras: But he didn’t want to...

Silberman: My recollection is that he could have run the lab, and I know I always thought that. He didn’t want to. As far as I knew, Herb had a secure position there, he was very active, and I don’t think that anybody had any particular will not to make him the lab chief.

Farreras: Do you know why he didn’t want to be the permanent lab chief?

Silberman: No, his answer didn’t make a lot of sense to me even at the time, so I really can’t remember it too well now.

Farreras: Was he involved in the search for a permanent lab chief?

Silberman: I really don’t know how the structure of that worked.

Farreras: When I interviewed Bob Cohen he mentioned that at that point, because they weren’t “up” on the field, they did a national search to see who would be a good person to take over the lab. I think they interviewed Marty Seligman...

Silberman: That’s funny. I didn’t remember that.

Farreras: And Posner as well...

Silberman: Michael Posner? That would have been interesting.

Farreras: So when Al Mirsky was brought in, how much, if at all, did the lab change in terms of the research that was conducted?

Silberman: It changed a lot because Al had his entire attention and concentration _____, so that was a big focus. And he had some other things...

Farreras: So that's something that he had already been working on at Boston University?

Silberman: That's right. And he brought a bunch of people with him. He brought Connie in. He brought Richard Nakamura in. He had a Ph.D.-level, sort of a technical-level person who had been working with him for years at BU; he brought her in. He brought someone else in. Oh, the other person who was there at that time was Betsy Parker. And she was not brought in by Mirsky. She had one of those funny hybrid positions. She was doing substance abuse-related work but also, I think, from a very cognitive point of view, and she was working with -- what was his name, Ralph somebody.

Farreras: That name doesn't ring a bell...

Silberman: Different branch. But I'm quite sure Betsy was there when I joined the lab. Anyway, but, yes, Mirsky brought in a lot of those people. And the other person whom he eventually brought in -- actually, to replace me, who is now at Pittsburgh -- is Walter Kay. Walter Kay had training in neurology, and Al had something, some work that he wanted to do -- I can't remember the nature of it anymore -- with neurological patients. I don't know whether it was Huntingtons patients...some kinds of patients. So when Al came, in terms of me, personally, he and I sat down and he let me know that he really didn't have any particular plan for the lab that would include a psychiatrist, but he was trying to finish up

this big Israeli study that David Rosenthal had started and but had never come to completion because everybody got utterly bogged down in how to do the statistical analyses. And so what Allan offered me was that if I was interested in working on this project and trying to finish it up, that he would support me for another year in the lab, which I did. And then after that, he really wanted to bring in Walter Kay because that was the kind of physician that he wanted for the studies that he wanted to do, so I found a position at the Uniformed Services University and retained an office in the lab as a guest _____ to finish up a bunch of things that I was doing. Al was perfectly happy to have me around if it didn't cost him a position, so...

Farreras: So there was no possibility of keeping the people and the research that was being done and just adding research and people that he was interested in?

Silberman: I can't answer that because I wasn't on the administrative end of it. Certainly, the way he put it was that his resources were fixed. In my naivete at the time, I kind of expected that since Herb was still there and going to be there and was the previous lab chief, that an incoming person would have perhaps extended himself to keep on people that Herb would have wanted to keep on and continue to work with, but I think that actually was very naïve because I don't believe that's actually the way it works anywhere.

Farreras: Did Weingartner leave? Did Mirsky not keep Weingartner?

Silberman: No. Herb left voluntarily. Herb had a permanent position there.

Farreras: That's what I thought.

Silberman: Once again, you see, it comes up against this strange business as to why Herb

didn't take over the lab, because I think that after Al took over the lab, at a certain point Herb began to have some feelings about the direction of the lab, where it was going, the allocation of resources in the lab, how things were working in the lab, and he felt less comfortable there. And he really has to speak for himself, but I remember at the time wondering to myself, "Well, gee, if he wanted to make sure that the lab continued in a direction that he was comfortable with, why didn't he just accept the position of permanent chief?" and it was puzzling to me at the time, and it's still puzzling to me. But Herb left voluntarily. I think Herb was feeling in some way less comfortable with the direction things had taken in the lab and was looking for someplace else to be. But he had a permanent position.

Farreras: That's interesting that you mention this because I had heard that he had such an active research program and was collaborating with so many people that he was very much focused on his research and might not have paid as much attention to the direction of the lab when he was acting chair as he could have, in terms of looking toward the future and success of the lab.

Silberman: Well, that's it. I think that may be part of why Herb didn't feel like taking on being permanent chief, because he was focused on his research. The best as I could understand it at that point was that he wasn't ready to switch into a major administrative role. He did what he had to do to keep the wheels going around while he was acting chief, but I think that probably is as accurate a statement as any as to what happened with Herb, that he really was very into what he was doing, and I don't think that he was interested in building an empire at that point.

Farreras: Okay, I see.

And aside from the attention research, was there anything else Al Mirsky wanted to work on?

Silberman: I don't remember what the project that involved the neurological patients was. And there was the Israeli project, and Al put together a third assessment of all of the subjects in that study while I was there, and I was very involved with that. That seemed to have an interesting result at the time. I don't think it's really held up in the final evaluation, but it was a very interesting result at the time. So he continued to be interested in that, and he brought in another guy who was looking at that with him. Ingraham?

Farreras: Yes. Loring. I'll be interviewing him in a couple of weeks.

Silberman: Loring Ingraham, yes. Where's he now?

Farreras: He's down in the Psy.D. program at George Washington University.

Silberman: Oh, so he's still in the area. I remember Loring took over a lot of what I had been doing and did further analyses of the same data with Al and then was involved in the fourth and final evaluation of that cohort in Israel.

Farreras: Okay, so he arrived somewhat later then.

Silberman: Yes. I don't know how limited Al's researchers were. I imagine he had a finite number of spots, like everybody else, and he had his priorities for them. I don't know that he had that many spots to play with. I don't really know. But he did bring in a bunch of people, so...

Farreras: The only other people I have whom I'm also going to interview are Bruno Anthony...

Silberman: I don't even know that name.

Farreras: Oh, really? He's in Child Psychology at the University of Maryland, I think.

Silberman: Okay, not a name I even know.

Farreras: And Eva Pragay?

Silberman: Yes. Eva was sort of like an old family retainer. She was a refugee from Hungary, I think, and Al, I think, had really helped her, quite a bit, to get established in this country. And she had worked with him at BU and came with him to Washington. I don't know exactly what she did. It was never my impression that she was one of these people who would be writing scientific protocols. I think that she was more on the technical end of it. She was a Ph.D.-level person.

Farreras: I have her as having been in the lab from 1981-1985...

Silberman: Yes, she finally retired.

Farreras: Okay.

And then I just have Brant, Walter Reed, and Graffman [sp.]?

Silberman: Oh, Jordan Graffman [sp.]. Yes. Jordan was also a neuropsychologist who...did he actually have a position in the lab?

Farreras: Well, I have NINDS...

Silberman: Yeah, so he wasn't actually in the lab. When I left Washington, his office, I believe, was at Walter Reed someplace, and he was involved in a big head-injury project.

Farreras: I see. Well, those are the only other names I have from this time period when you were here. Was there any overlap or contact between former sections of the LPP and these new labs [Neuropsychology and Developmental Psychology] as they

emerged? Do you know?

Silberman: You know, I don't know. I mean, Rosvold was somebody that Mirsky would refer to. There were names that were mentioned and that I heard, but I don't know how much cross-fertilization there still was.

Farreras: I see.

So when you arrived in Post's section, you worked with Post and also collaborated with Weingartner, and then, once Mirsky took over, worked on the Israeli study...

Silberman: And did some other things with Herb. I had a number of projects with Herb. There was a laterality study, there were a couple of studies of learning and Memory in people with depression. We did a review of hemispheric influences on processing of emotions...and then the Israeli stuff.

Farreras: Yes, I can get a sense of those studies from your vitae.

Okay, am I missing anything that you think was important from those times that I should know about?

Silberman: No. I mean, I think the most interesting issue is one that I'm not an expert on, and that is how the work of the lab and the sort of culture of the lab blended or didn't blend with the evolving scientific orientation of NIMH. I think that's the most interesting thing.

I remember that while I was there, the lab had a review, and there was this bizarre culture at the time where the lab chiefs wouldn't get any very direct feedback about these reviews. It was very, very strange. The chiefs – like, I guess by that time, Fred Goodwin or _____ and whoever else were making decisions at

the higher levels about allocation of resources – would ponder the review of the scientific counselors and make some decisions, and from what the lab chiefs said, not communicate anything back to them very directly. It was an extraordinarily peculiar process. And I remember hearing some vague things about some degree of discomfort about the thrust of the lab at that time, and some things that gave me the impression that once AI got in place, the institution might not have been terribly supportive of the program that he had in mind when he came. I may, at one point, have known what sort of program they seemed to have preferred, but I can't remember that anymore.

Farreras: He wouldn't have told anybody when he was interviewing, though?

Silberman: Well, I remember having some feelings about it at the time. I remember thinking this is nutty, this is not right. To bring the guy here and then tell him, "Oh, we don't like the direction you're going in," that doesn't make any sense and it's not right. And, again, I don't know what Allan would tell you about it, and Herb would probably have more of a recollection of it than I do just because I've been away from it so long, but that was an issue. I know that was an issue, and I think it's an interesting issue. And this is, of course, just my own bias, but...

Farreras: Well, several people have mentioned that social sciences, like psychology and socioenvironmental studies, went downhill with and since Goodwin...

Silberman: Exactly. And I think, you know, one of the things about the lab – I'm going to have to get off in a minute – which I think was very interesting to me was that this was still a place where people thought very carefully about behavior, and I saw that diminishing in many of the other branches. And I also thought that there was

a bit of a clash of cultures, or maybe not a clash, but at least a disparity of cultures between the Ph.D. culture and the M.D. culture.

Farreras: Oh, yes, I've heard a bit about this, particularly with respect to access to patients and salaries, very hierarchical.

Silberman: The Ph.D. culture was a much more academic culture, as you might expect, and a more scholarly culture. I was a little bit taken aback when I arrived at NIMH to find...

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Silberman: ...and I think that this doesn't apply to everybody. In fact, Bob Post was an example of quite the opposite. Bob Post was as scientifically interested and scholarly and open a person as ever existed. As far as I could tell, Bob was heavily driven by his fascination with everything. That was part of his problem. He just didn't fit the mold of a very narrow focus on very technical things. So I want to be clear. I'm in no way speaking about Bob. But I think that a lot of those people wanted to latch onto something sellable. They wanted to find something to measure that would produce some results and data and _____ papers. And, of course, that worked much better if you didn't _____.

Farreras: Was this disparity already in place when you arrived, or did you notice that changing after you arrived?

Silberman: Well, I think it was largely there by the time I arrived. Bob certainly resisted it in many ways. I think Fred Goodwin, to some extent, was in many ways of the older school. But I think that there was some clash there and that the people who were thinking in terms of these complex aspects of behavior were thinking

certainly in broader social terms. It just wasn't where it was happening. It was happening at receptors and it was happening at a much more concrete level of neuroimaging stuff and...

Farreras: And that's what it's all about now...

Silberman: Yeah, sure it is. But I think neuroimaging has the potential to go in the other direction, too, because the whole deal is to correlate it with cognitive performance in various ways, and so I think that is, in many ways, a saving grace that's much, much more than receptor chemistry. I think in some ways that tradition has probably moved over to Danny Weinberger's lab as much as any place in NIMH.

Farreras: Well, I'd like to hear much more about this topic, but I know that you have to go...

Silberman: I'm afraid I do.

Farreras: When I get the transcript back I'll edit it and then send it to you and perhaps then you'll have a chance to add some more of your thoughts on this topic, because I am very interested in this broader context that was surrounding the research that was being done.

Silberman: Yeah, I would be very interested to see what comes out of it and how it looks to you after you've talked to everybody.

Farreras: It does seem that biochemistry ended up dominating.

Silberman: Oh, yeah. There are all kinds of complex things. There are some issues that are probably personality related, there are some issues of policy and scientific objectives...just all kinds of stuff. But I think the large trend unquestionably has to do with what we're talking about, and the Laboratory of Psychology was

an interesting waif in that enterprise.

Farreras: Yes. Well, I want to thank you very much for your time.

Silberman: Oh, you're quite welcome.

Farreras: I hope we will be able to follow up on this.

Silberman: Okay.

Farreras: Thanks again.

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