



## Ulric “Dick” Neisser

December 8, 1928 – February 17, 2012

Ulric Neisser, the Susan Linn Sage Professor emeritus of Psychology, died at age 83 of complications from Parkinson’s disease. A member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he received honorary degrees worldwide – from the Università di Roma (La Sapienza), the Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Aarhus University (Denmark), the New School for Social Research, and Swarthmore College.

Neisser changed the course of psychology. He moved a generation of psychologists in the direction of a field named by his first book, *Cognitive Psychology* (1967). He then goaded that field as it settled into comfortable paradigmatic research with *Cognition and Reality* (1976), and later targeted the received wisdom about attention, memory, and intelligence in a distinguished array of edited volumes and provocative articles.

He was born Ulrich Gustav Neisser in Kiel, Germany, but his family realized that “Ulrich” was a bit overwhelming for a small child and he became “Der kleiner Dickie.” With the rise of Hitler, his father, an economist at a German research center, secured a position at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. The Neisser family came to America in 1933 and settled in Swarthmore. Ulrich became Ulric, but was known as Dick.

Dick became a freshman at Harvard in 1946 and spent the next two decades as a peripatetic, both intellectually and geographically. He dabbled in parapsychology, but once within psychology he quickly sided with the Gestaltists against the Behaviorists. He learned about psychology and language from his advisor, George Miller, but was never enamored of information theory. After finishing at Harvard, he went to Swarthmore to be near Wolfgang Köhler but worked instead under his assistant Hans Wallach and received his Masters degree in 1952. Dick realized that the future was not in Gestaltism, so he moved to MIT with Miller, but quickly moved back to Swarthmore for a one-year appointment as an instructor before returning to graduate school –

but this time back at Harvard. After his Ph.D. in 1956 on a “neural quantum” theory of auditory thresholds, and another year as an instructor at Harvard, he took a faculty position in psychology at Brandeis University and felt deep sympathy for the idealistic humanism of its chair, Abraham Maslow. Nonetheless, it was Oliver Selfridge at MIT’s Lincoln Laboratories who most piqued his curiosity. Together they produced the pandemonium model of pattern recognition. In that model all neural feature detectors, called “demons,” shout at a volume commensurate to the degree a stimulus pattern fits with what each demon had responded to in the past. A decision demon then listens to the cacophony and has final sway. The model and its description appeared in *Scientific American* in 1962 and forms a lasting centerpiece of recognition models. Dick then moved to the University of Pennsylvania where he wrote *Cognitive Psychology*.

Dick came to Cornell as a full professor just as that book appeared. It is not possible to overestimate its impact. As Dick himself noted wryly in his autobiography that “Many psychologists found themselves in a position like that of Moliere’s Monsieur Jourdain, who suddenly discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life!” Suddenly, it was as if cognitive psychology had always been there, but it was also a new term, uttered to impress at nearly every occasion.

Always a fan of the underdog and wary of the success his first book wrought, Dick then wrote his polemic *Cognition and Reality*, turning against the field he created. At Cornell, he had formed close ties with James and Eleanor Gibson, founders of the “ecological” approach to visual perception. Sketching out what the mind must face in the real world, Dick criticized the lack of “ecological validity” of research in the newly emerged mainstream of cognitive psychology. The main thesis of this book was the “perceptual cycle,” a then novel but now entrenched idea that places an active, information-seeking individual at the core of perception and cognition. Nonetheless, the field saw the book as an apostasy.

Somewhat perplexed by the reaction to this second book, Dick next focused his talents and energies on what then appeared to be idiosyncratic directions. Subjects in his experiments learned to simultaneously read and take dictation, and failed to notice a woman with an umbrella walking through a basketball game while counting passes among the players. He also investigated the slightly skewed contents of John Dean’s testimonies as pitted against the transcripts of the White House tapes, and the inaccuracies despite convictions of truthfulness in people’s “flashbulb” memories of the Challenger disaster and later a California earthquake. Current descendants of these ideas -- “change blindness,” the constructive nature of autobiographical memory, and the concept of the self -- are now mainstream research areas. In the middle of all of this he left Cornell in 1983 for Emory University where he became the Robert Wood Johnson Professor of Psychology.

His most recent scholarly interest was intelligence. In the 1980s he had edited a volume on school achievement in minority children and was always uncomfortable with the findings of IQ differences across ethnic groups. In the 1990s he spearheaded an American Psychological Association Task Force on intelligence and its report became the most highly cited work in its field. His last book was an edited a volume on intelligence, *The Rising Curve: Long-term Gains in IQ and Related Measures* (1998), which helped popularize the work of James Flynn on the century-long, worldwide gains in measured intelligence.

Neisser retired from Emory in 1998 and returned to Ithaca and to Cornell to teach for five more years. Throughout his life, he made a marriage out of a firm belief in discovered truth and a lurking skepticism by means of a serial, passionate monogamy of ideas. He taught his many students an independence of mind and they have made their marks in widely flung research domains. And he loved his dogs, at least one of which could find its way from home, to Uris Hall, up an elevator or stairwell, and to his office. His partner Sandra Condry and his children -- Mark, Philip, Tobias, Juliet, and Joseph Neisser, and Jenneth Seidler -- survive him.

*James Cutting, Chairperson; Barbara Finlay, Carol Krumhansl*