
Ulric Neisser (1928–2012)

Ulric Neisser changed the course of psychology. He moved a generation of psychologists in the direction of the field named by his first book, *Cognitive Psychology* (1967, Appleton-Century-Crofts). He then challenged that field with his later book *Cognition and Reality* (1976, W. H. Freeman). Finally, he explored cracks in the received wisdom within the fields of attention, memory, and intelligence through a distinguished array of edited volumes and provocative articles.

Ulrich Gustav Neisser was born December 8, 1928, but his family found the name “Ulrich” a bit overwhelming for a child, so he became “Der kleiner Dickie” (the chubby little kid). His father, Hans Neisser, was an economist at a think tank in Kiel, Germany, and was from a distinguished Silesian Jewish family. His mother Charlotte was Catholic, had a degree in sociology, and worked in the German women’s movement. With the rise of Hitler, Hans secured a position at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. The Neisser family came to America in 1933 and settled in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania; Ulrich became Ulric, and was known as Dick.

Dick enrolled at Harvard University in 1946 and spent the next two decades as a peripatetic, both intellectually and geographically. He dabbled in parapsychology before discovering more traditional psychology and quickly sided with the Gestaltists against the behaviorists. He also learned about psychology and language from his advisor, George Miller, although he was never enamored by information theory. After graduating from Harvard, he went to Swarthmore College to study with Wolfgang Köhler but worked instead with Köhler’s assistant, Hans Wallach; he received his master’s degree there in 1952. Neisser realized that the future was not in Gestaltism, so he moved to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with Miller. Very quickly, he moved back to Swarthmore for a one-year appointment as an instructor before returning to graduate school—this time back at Harvard. After receiving his doctoral degree in 1956, and spending another year as an instructor at Harvard, he took a position in the Department of Psychology at Brandeis University, where he felt deep sympathy for the idealistic humanism of its chair, Abraham Maslow. Nonetheless, it was Oliver Selfridge at MIT’s Lincoln Laboratories who captured his attention. Together they produced the pandemonium model of pattern recognition, which appeared in *Scientific American* in 1960 and forms the lasting centerpiece of all such models (Selfridge & Neisser, “Pattern Recognition by Machine,” 203, 60–68). Neisser then received multiple grants, worked in several research areas connected with thinking, and moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he wrote *Cognitive Psychology*.

Neisser came to Cornell University as a full professor just as his book appeared. It is hardly possible to overestimate its impact. But always a fan of the underdog and having then formed close ties with James and Eleanor Gibson, Neisser soon polemically revealed the lack of “ecological validity” of

mainstream cognitive psychology in his book *Cognition and Reality*. With his tongue planted firmly in cheek and with his sharpest pen in hand, he produced a box model that represented contemporary cognitive psychology. It had five separate stages of information processing: the retinal image, processing, more processing, still more processing, and consciousness, with a reservoir of storage connected to all of the processing boxes. Much more constructively, he proposed the perceptual cycle as the focus of cognition, which iteratively started with the perceived information, which then modified cognitive schemata, which then directed further perceptual exploration so that the perceived information could be updated, and so forth, cyclically onward.

Somewhat perplexed by the reaction to this second book, Neisser next focused his considerable talents and energies on what were then out-of-the-way nooks in attention—the ability to simultaneously read and take dictation; subjects’ not noticing a woman with an open umbrella as she passed through a basketball game—and some crannies of memory—the “episodic” contents of John Dean’s testimonies pitted against the transcripts of the White House tapes; subjects’ flash bulb memories of the Challenger disaster, and later of a California earthquake—and then on autobiographical memory and the self. Others have taken up these venues, most of which have become mainstream. In the middle of all of this work, Neisser left Cornell in 1983 for Emory University.

His most recent scholarly venue was intelligence. In the 1980s, he edited a volume on school achievement in minority children and was always uncomfortable with the findings of IQ differences across ethnic groups. He spearheaded a task force of the American Psychological Association (APA) on intelligence, and its report appeared in these pages in 1996 (Neisser et al., “Intelligence: Knowns and Unknowns,” *American Psychologist*, 51, 77–101). It remains the most highly cited work in the field. He also edited a volume on intelligence (*The Rising Curve*, 1998, APA) that helped popularize the work of James Flynn on the century-long worldwide gains in measured IQ.

Neisser retired from Emory in 1998 and returned to Ithaca as an esteemed colleague in the Cornell Department of Psychology. Throughout his life, he made a marriage between belief in discovered truth and complete skepticism by means of a passionate, serial monogamy of ideas. He died on February 17, 2012, at age 83 of complications from Parkinson’s disease. His many honors included election as a member of the National Academy of Sciences and as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is survived by his partner Sandra Condry; his children Mark, Philip, Tobias, Juliet, and Joseph Neisser and Jeneth Seidler; and his sister Marianne Selph.

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