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Varieties of Fame in Psychology

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Abstract
Fame in psychology, as in all arenas, is a local phenomenon. Psychologists (and probably academics in all fields) often first become well known for studying a subfield of an area (say, the study of attention in cognitive psychology, or even certain tasks used to study attention). Later, the researcher may become famous within cognitive psychology. In a few cases, researchers break out of a discipline to become famous across psychology and (more rarely still) even outside the confines of academe. The progression is slow and uneven. Fame is also temporally constricted. The most famous psychologists today will be forgotten in less than a century, just as the greats from the era of World War I are rarely read or remembered today. Freud and a few others represent exceptions to the rule, but generally fame is fleeting and each generation seems to dispense with the lessons learned by previous ones to claim their place in the sun.

Keywords
fame in psychology, scientific eminence, history of psychology, forgetting

First, please take a quiz. Below is a list of eight names. Please look at each name and answer the following three questions: (a) Do you recognize this name as belonging to a famous psychologist? (b) If so, what area of study does the person represent (e.g., animal learning, child development)? (c) If you got the second question correct, could you write a page, or even a coherent paragraph, summarizing the person's contribution to psychology? Do this task carefully before reading on.

1. Ernest G. Wever
2. Charles W. Bray
3. Karl Lashley
4. Elmer A. Culler
5. Carlyle Jacobsen
6. Ernest R. Hilgard
7. Clarence H. Graham
8. B. F. Skinner

My informal sampling of graduate students and faculty in psychology shows that this is a hard test. Yes, most everyone can answer the three questions about B. F. Skinner. We all know he is famous now and was during his lifetime. Back when newsmagazines were a big deal, he appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1971. But what about the other names? A few people recognize one or two other names; Lashley and Hilgard were next, with my informants somewhat sketchy on what they had done. (Hilgard's, 1987, history text was better known than his scientific work that propelled him to eminence.) Perhaps some of you recognized another name or two without much knowing why or what they did.

So what are the right answers? Which ones were famous psychologists in their time? What were they famous for? The answer to the first question is that they all were famous. They all won the Howard Crosby Warren Medal from the Society of Experimental Psychology between 1936 and 1942. Wever and Bray won jointly in 1936 for their volley theory of neural transmission in the auditory system, which is why there is one extra name in the list.

The Warren Medal represents the first award established in psychology, created by a donation by Warren to the Society of Experimental Psychology, the elite group founded by Edward Bradford Titchener in 1904. Baker and Mahoney (2005) wrote an article about the creation and history of the award, and they proclaimed that "The Howard Crosby Warren Medal remains among the most prestigious awards in American psychology" (2005, p. 459).

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Let me hazard the guess that no reader could answer all three questions listed above about the eight men listed there (and I certainly include myself—I completely whiffed on Culler and Jacobsen). They were the most famous experimental psychologists of their generation, yet 80 years later we cannot even recognize their names, much less their discoveries during what was doubtless a scientific lifetime of discoveries. If you complain that the Warren Medal is awarded to too restrictive a group, try the same exercise with the winners of the APA Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award or even the APS William James Fellow Award. If you teach introductory psychology, you might do pretty well, but many of us would have a hard time writing a few paragraphs about the contributions of Nancy Bayley or Edwin Ghiselli or Paul Young (not the people in their specific fields of study, of course). I will return to this theme later, but first let me try to live up to the title of my article by discussing varieties of fame.

The Editor of this journal has charged writers with answering the question "how do we determine the quality and impact of an individual and her/his research in psychological science?" I will (sort of) answer this later, but use the progression of fame (as I see it) to indicate how the system works. The stages below are descriptive and gradually merge from one to another. There are no sharp boundaries. We can think of the varieties of fame as concentric circles growing ever wider, with fame or respect or eminence seeping, as if by osmosis, into an ever-expanding area. Or not.

The Beginning

Most everyone reading this article has, or is on the way to, a Ph.D. in psychology. Getting a Ph.D. is usually 4 to 6 years of hard work, so obtaining one is an accomplishment to be proud of. But of course it does not make you famous. I wish I knew how many of the thousands of Ph.D.s awarded in psychology every decade result in journal articles, book chapters, or books. After all, the Ph.D. is awarded for extensive, original research in one's chosen field that advances knowledge—or that's the idea, in theory—so the results should be published. My guess is that fewer than 10% of psychology dissertations are published in any form, but I cannot find data on the subject. However, researchers who go on to fame have taken this first step and probably published other papers as graduate students. In fact, the accelerated pace of graduate student publications is one of the most startling changes in academia during my lifetime. The vitae of successful job candidates today look sometimes like those of people getting tenure at research universities 40 years ago.

Local Fame in One's Area

Once a researcher has succeeded in graduate school and obtained a job in academia, industry, or a research institute, it is time to get on with one's research career. That usually means studying one or two phenomena and establishing a local reputation as an expert. If you are a cognitive psychologist, maybe you study a few phenomena in the area of attention and/or perception. You publish excellent work—mostly empirical articles that are carefully crafted and report compelling data—and you are relatively quickly noticed by your peers in that subarea of cognitive psychology. You keep at it, and you become famous in a local sort of way. I recall that in the mid-1970s, I was introduced at a talk as being "a leading researcher in the study of retrieval inhibition and part-list cuing." That was the nicest thing someone could say about me at the time. Local fame.

Expanding Fame

To gain fame throughout your area, you need to expand your horizons. You need to write integrative review pieces, theoretical articles, book chapters that are actually read. Besides attracting notice, your work needs to be cited, so you need to write well and report interesting findings. If you are doing well, you are asked to serve on editorial boards and grant panels. In addition, you attract good graduate students if you are in a research-intensive university (and you probably are, if you are becoming famous). So, you are productive, your work is becoming more cited, you are being asked to serve in various ways, and you are getting grants. Suddenly you discover that you are being introduced to others as a psychologist who is a leader in the field. Perhaps you are asked to be associate editor or editor of a journal in your field, a high mark of respect in the discipline of psychology. You have arrived as a particular type of psychologist—social or developmental or some other variety.

Fame in the Field of Psychological Science

How does one get known outside of one's primary field? How does one become "a famous psychologist"? This is a trickier proposition. Of course, the main criterion here is to discover important truths about human behavior and tell the story in an interesting and accessible way. Stanley Milgram, both in his day and now, was known not only as a famous social psychologist but a famous psychologist. Everyone knew (and knows today) to some degree about his studies of obedience and what he found.

One feature I have noticed in famous psychologists (not all, but many) is that they are great speakers and writers. They are invited to give keynote addresses at the major meetings, their dance card for colloquium visits is full, and they may be interviewed on TV or radio. They have a distinctive style.

Another skill is writing for a wide audience—writing articles that are accessible and can be assigned and taught in courses. Some famous psychologists are gifted in not only writing for a technical audience, but for the whole field and for the general public. Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011) comes to mind, as it spent many weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list and garnered numerous awards. The technical arguments about two forms of attentional processing and the experimental criteria used to establish them (e.g., Neely, 1977; Posner & Snyder, 1975) can become quite complex. It requires a remarkable talent to take a great idea, strip away the complexities while staying true to the substance, and make a great tale out of the research.

Psychology-wide fame is usually noted by a number of criteria: High publication rates are a given, so the more defining criteria are high citation rates, having a few papers with remarkably high citations rates, and receipt of psychology-wide awards, and these qualities are highly correlated (Ruscio, 2016, this issue). How does one achieve these criteria? Strong, exciting publications that are widely cited lead to awards, and both of those lead to fame in the field.

Fame Outside Psychology

A few years ago, in the issue of the APS *Observer* that reported on the annual convention, an overheard conversation was mentioned in passing. One person pointed and said "That's someone famous!" The friend said "Do you mean famous-famous or psychology-famous?" I report this interchange from memory so should not use quotes (I plead poetic license). Very few psychologists achieve the state of being widely known outside psychology, either by the general public or even the highly educated public (say, readers of the *New Yorker* or other pointy-headed magazines). Even those who win the National Medal of Science, a highly public award, are probably rarely known by the educated public. Still, some are. B. F. Skinner in his time was widely noted for his research and his writings. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1972) landed him on the cover of *Time*, and *Walden II* (1948) was read by generations of students in psychology and philosophy (on courses about utopias).

Probably the main criterion for achieving this level of fame is writing a book that is read by many people outside the field of psychology—one that might even make best seller lists. I would attempt a list of contemporary individuals meeting this criterion, but I would be in danger of leaving off deserving individuals. Suffice it to say that I am not sure anyone has the modern day equivalent of the "cover of *Time*" sort of fame of 50 years ago. Back then, many people received information from relatively few media outlets, so more general fame for an academic could be possible. Nowadays, we have hundreds of forms of information barreling at us every day, whereas 50 years ago there were three main television networks and a few well-subscribed news magazines. Those days will never return, so intellectual life will probably become increasingly fragmented as we live in our small bubbles of information. Widespread fame is harder to come by outside of politics, sports, and entertainment. Fame is more local than ever in academia, with the many fractionations of our fields.

Fame Is Specialized

The Editor probably invited us to write for this special symposium because he thought fame mattered. It is a reasonable position, because (at least in America) we seem to all think this way. Having fame, even local fame, is better than not having it. There is no doubt about it in Western cultures. Westerners are more concerned about fame than are people from more collectivist countries, where paying attention to oneself is considered unseemly (e.g., Wang, 2013). Every occupation in the United States seems to have its hall of fame. I just checked via Google and, as I expected, there is a Soap Opera Hall of Fame, as well as an American TV Game Show Hall of Fame. My hometown (St. Louis, MO) used to have a Bowling Hall of Fame, but it was snatched away by Arlington, Texas, where it is now the International Bowling Hall of Fame. St. Louis has recovered, because we now have the Chess Hall of Fame. So being famous is a highly specialized business. Psychology is no exception, even though there is no Psychology Hall of Fame (yet).

Lists of famous psychologists abound on the Internet, idiosyncratic in nature. On a sounder basis, Diener, Oishi, and Park (2014) generated "an incomplete list of eminent psychologists of the modern era" using various criteria that they combined into one score and an ordered list. Other criteria would generate other lists, no doubt, but their criteria (which I will not explore here) give rise to at least one operational definition of "fame" or "eminence."

How to attain eminence or fame? That is one issue posed by the Editor. I have already mentioned some ways, but here are some guidelines/strategies. They do

not guarantee fame, but most famous psychologists share these qualities:

1. Study interesting, important phenomena in your area of expertise. Design impeccable, highly powered, studies or studies that produce conclusive results. Why not study something that is big and powerful and that matters? (Of course, events in the last decade have shown that researchers can become famous, for a time, with less than impeccable research.)
2. Write well. Tell a compelling story. People should want to read your papers as a pleasure, not a duty. Study great journal articles and ask what makes them great. I have come to think of the empirical journal article as an art form in addition to communicating results.
3. Develop one or more interesting theories that encompass several phenomena. Theoretical and review articles are generally much more highly cited than empirical articles (although yes, there are exceptions to this and all such rules).
4. Write synthetic reviews in appropriate journals or in book chapters. You might send pdfs of chapters to colleagues in your field, because book chapters are even less read than journal articles.
5. Give powerful talks that tell an interesting story. Work on your speaking skills. Study good speakers to learn what makes them good. Adapt your style a bit, but don't try to imitate someone when your skill set is not comparable. No one really keeps up with the literature any longer (it's impossible), so at least when speaking at a conference you might get a hundred people to hear about your work.
6. As you gain experience, write a book. Books are the only hope for fame that is more than fleeting. I could name half a dozen in cognitive psychology alone that made a huge difference. Of course, most don't make a difference but at least some really do.
7. If you have followed Steps 1 through 4 and 6, you will become well cited and citation rates—the impact your work has—is correlated with (and arguably causes) fame and influence (Ruscio, 2016). There is not much else you can do to achieve high citation rates besides publish great articles; don't try to game the system (e.g., don't constantly self-cite). Prizes will follow, because citations are probably as good an index as we have of fame (although it is hard to compare across fields due to differences in citation frequency). With citations and prizes come eminence and fame (Diener et al., 2014).

Does It Matter?

Let's return to the quiz at the beginning. Unless you aced the test (and you didn't), we can conclude that the most famous experimental psychologists from 80 years ago are unknown to most of us today, even those of us like me who still toil mostly in the tradition of classic experimental psychology. Skinner is the exception in that list, but does anyone still read him besides the operant conditioning and behavior analyst communities? The last two times I taught my History of Psychology course to 16 or so students (half graduate students, half advanced undergraduates), I asked them if they had ever been assigned anything by Skinner in their classes or read anything by him on their own. The first time no one raised a hand, and the second class (2 years later) provided a perfect replication. (Ignorance, like truth, replicates.) I assigned Skinner (1956), so at least they read one.

Clark Hull was also a great psychologist of Skinner's era. When I was a graduate student at Yale (1969–1973) and the Psychology Department was located in the medical school, a portrait of Clark Hull was on the wall as one entered the building. I still have an excellent mental image of the painting after seeing it hundreds of times, with a learning curve on a blackboard in the background behind the great man. We all knew who he was, and I took a learning course (from Allan Wagner) in which some of his papers were assigned. Dean Simonton, a fellow writer in this symposium, visited Yale in the 1990s to give a colloquium on great psychologists, as he is the foremost scholar studying this issue (Simonton, 2002, 2016). In the context of a discussion of this proposed article on e-mail, he wrote:

> . . . one of my favorite stories comes from my colloquium on 'great psychologists' at Yale back in the late 1990s. Trying to use a local example, I mentioned Hull, Yale's most distinguished psychologist during the 1930s and 1940s. Yet I just saw blank stares. So I took a quick poll to see if anybody in the room knew who he was, and saw only a few hands raised—all by very senior members of the department. After my talk, we went into a reception room that conspicuously featured a portrait over the fireplace. It was the classic picture of Clark Hull shown in all of the history of psychology textbooks! When I asked around to see if anybody in the room knew who that person was, nobody knew. Some just guessed that it was some wealthy donor. Yet Hull and Hullians were once the most influential figures in experimental psychology, with an influence that even pervaded personality and social psychology. In his heyday, Hull was

considered psychology's Isaac Newton! How have the mighty fallen. (personal correspondence, February 1, 2016)

The picture referred to was the one I passed every day. After the department moved in the 1970s, it was placed in the departmental lounge.

You might be thinking, "Well, Skinner and Hull were eminent behaviorists and behaviorism fell out of fashion." However, the Editor of *Perspectives* and I have had similar experiences of mentioning prominent cognitive psychologists in recent talks and receiving only blank stares.

If you still doubt my claim that fame in psychology is evanescent, ask yourself how often you have read papers from 100 years ago (say, the World War I era) in the past 2 years? The answer is probably zero or close to it. If so, we can predict that a century from now, current publications from our era will be read at the same rate. Fame is not only local to specific fields, but also to specific time periods. Each of our fields moves on, and I can cite examples of how phenomena in my area were "rediscovered" because the new discoverers had not bothered to learn about the deep history of their own fields.

Long-Term Fame

"But wait," I hear you thinking, "You must be wrong, because some psychologists do achieve long-term, enduring fame: William James and Sigmund Freud and a handful of others are known from a century ago and will be known a century from now." True enough, my critic. I stand (modestly) corrected. Most everyone I can think of in our field who achieved enduring fame, lasting a century, wrote books that people continue to read. James's (1890) *Principles of Psychology* continues to be read, even though he himself more or less gave up on psychology after writing it and spent the last period of his life writing about his philosophy of pragmatism (James, 1907/1995) and studying the possibility of communication with the dead and other psychical phenomena (his 50 or so essays on the topic have been collected by Robert McDermott in James, 1986). Similarly, Freud is read today, but I suspect more by philosophers and literary scholars than by psychologists. So, exceptions to my claims do exist. I just suspect that few people reading this article (or its author) will represent such an exception.

Let's consider fame in a different context: American politics. Roediger and DeSoto (2014) examined how knowledge of presidents—people much more famous than any psychologist would hope to be—declines over time. Students were asked to recall all the presidents they could remember in 5 minutes (with no assessment as to whether the students knew anything more about them). We had data from 1973/74, 1991, and 2009. Because we know the general shape of the forgetting curve in many domains (Rubin & Wenzel, 1996; Wixted & Ebbesen, 1997) and we had several data points, we could plot predicted forgetting curves for at least the most recent presidents of the 1973 era. The curves are shown here in Figure 1. We found sharp forgetting rates for several presidents well known to older readers of this article (Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford, and Carter). Kennedy and Nixon were also forgotten, but the curve was less steep. Of course, some presidents from the 19th century (Fillmore, Pierce, and Arthur, among others) were recalled by very few students in all three samples, though they

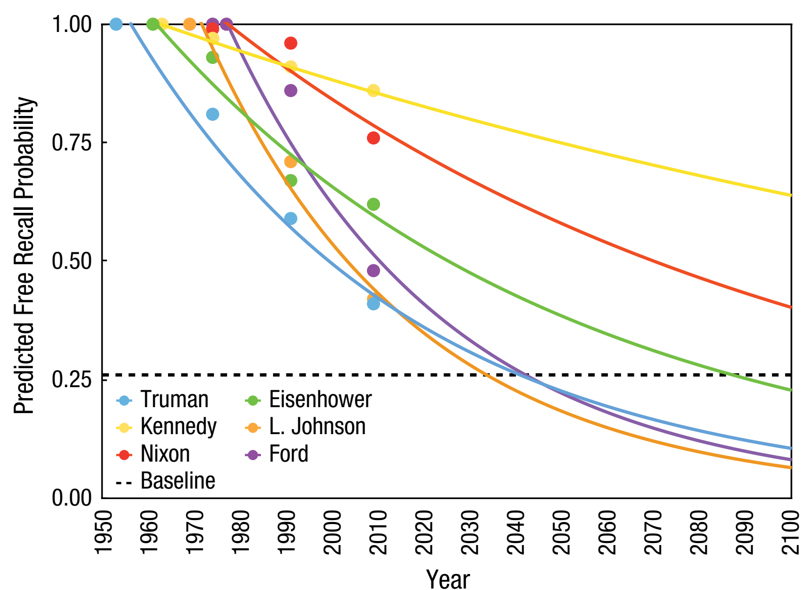

Fig. 1. Forgetting the presidents. The functions represent predicted forgetting curves for six presidents based on data from 1973/74, 1991, and 2009. The points show original data (probability of recall in a 5-min period).

were doubtless known by virtually every American while president. Thus even the most famous person in the country will be forgotten, just as will the most famous psychologist of today. We estimated from his forgetting curve that Lyndon Johnson would be remembered about as well as Zachary Taylor by the year 2054. And that is simply remembering (or at least recalling) his name, not anything that he did in his lifetime.

We cannot measure the fading fame of psychologists in the same way, but the forgetting curve is probably steeper. Sigmund Freud's writings will still be read in 100 years, but yours and mine will not be. The best we can hope for is to be Elmer Culler (on my original test list). At least he is mentioned in an article in 2016 as having won an award for his research. To find out what he did, see Brogden's (1962) poignant obituary of Culler, his research, and his challenging life. He was famous in his time. After all, he won the Warren Medal before B. F. Skinner did.

Conclusion

Fame is local, both by area and by time. This point has been made by scholars in other contexts (usually politics or other historical figures), but it is as true of psychology as of any other field. As with other writers in this series, the best advice is to do the research, the writing, and the teaching that you are passionate about. Fame may or may not come for a time, but should not be an all-consuming concern. Even if it comes, it will soon fade away.

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