A History of Modern Psychology

A *History of Modern Psychology* provides students with an engaging, comprehensive, and global history of psychological science, from the birth of the field to the present. It examines the attempts to establish psychology as a science in several countries and epochs. The text expertly draws on a vast knowledge of the field in the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and Scandinavia, as well as on author Per Saugstad’s keen study of neighboring sciences, including physiology, evolutionary biology, psychiatry, and neurology. Offering a unique global perspective on the development of psychology as an empirical science, this text is an ideal introduction to the field for students and other readers interested in the history of modern psychology.

Per Saugstad was a Norwegian psychologist. He served as professor of psychology at the University of Oslo from 1967 until 1990, when he retired.
A History of Modern Psychology

Per Saugstad

University of Oslo
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Foreword

When my father, Per Saugstad, died at ninety years old, he left the manuscript for the present volume, the fruit of several decades of hard work. The book first appeared in Norwegian in 1998, and in 2009 in a second edition, which in fact was a completely revised text. During the revision he had prepared a parallel English manuscript, for which, however, he was unable to find a renowned international publisher before his demise in 2010.

*A History of Modern Psychology* is motivated by a concern to put psychology on a scientific footing. My father believed the schools of psychology have replaced one another without drawing sufficiently on what was good and useful, or mistaken, in the preceding school. His idea is that collaborators in the field should guide their work by greater familiarity with the attempts in modern time to establish psychology as a science. Lecturing on the history of psychology at the University of Oslo for twenty-five years, he studied these attempts in depth, and by seeking the experts in psychology and in adjacent fields, at home and abroad. The present publication reflects this broad and detailed scholarship in the treatment of the major schools of psychology in Germany, Britain, France, Russia, and the United States from about 1850 to the near present.

My father began his academic career in the humanities, achieving a master’s degree in English, German, and Norwegian language and literature in 1945. He published a book on the Norwegian poets Henrik Wergeland and J. S. Welhaven, and an anthology of Norwegian poetry. In the late 1940s, the sociologists and social psychologists Paul F. Lazarsfeld and David Krech came to Norway to recruit students to study social science or psychology in the United States, and my father was encouraged to apply. Having become interested in psychological aspects of poetry, he applied to the psychology program at the University of Chicago, and went on to receive a PhD in psychology in 1952. Later, he often stressed how fortunate he was to have been taught and supervised at the University of Chicago by some of the leading figures in American psychology at the time – E. C. Toleman, L. L. Thurstone, W. Köhler, and A. A. Riesen.

In Chicago, my father had become interested in experimental psychology, and upon his return to the University of Oslo in 1952, he conducted experimental work on problem solving and perception. However, the contrast between the psychology in Chicago and in Oslo was notable, as the psychology department at the University of Oslo at that time was very much dominated by psychoanalysis. In this environment there was little interest in, and indeed little appreciation of, his American approach to psychology. He, on the other hand, found psychoanalysis unscientific as well as authoritarian, and soon he was
embroiled in a disagreement with his psychoanalytic colleagues about the essence of the psychological discipline, which escalated into a fierce battle. To me and my siblings, Tone, Ola, Didrik, and Anne, this feud appeared as David's fight against Goliath. My father did become a senior lecturer in 1962, and in 1967 a full professor at the University of Oslo, where he supervised a large number of doctors of psychology during a long career.

The conviction that psychology was not yet a science turned my father's work from experimental psychology in the 1950s to a theoretical search for the foundation that would enable psychology to become a science. The search resulted in four monographs grappling with this problem: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Psychology (1965); A Theory of Communication and Use of Language: Foundations for the Study of Psychology (1977); A Theory of Language and Understanding (1980); and Language: A Theory of its Structure and Use (1989). These books express his enduring interest in human cognition, and the relation of language and thought in particular. They also mark a gradual development in his ideas on the appropriate foundation of the scientific study of psychology – from an attempt at reconciling phenomenology and behaviorism, via a phase much influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language, and culminating in an approach to psychology adopting a Darwinian framework. I am under the impression that he developed his biological approach to psychology largely independently of what is now called evolutionary psychology, and he later stressed that it differs significantly from the way in which the latter approach applies evolutionary biology to psychological phenomena. Though he retained his belief in a Darwinian approach to psychology to his death, he clearly thought that such an approach should be informed by the history of psychology.

My father’s main interest in life was always problems of an intellectual nature – in psychology, philosophy, biology and the natural sciences, and politics – and we, his children, became sparring partners from early on. Yet he was, of course, much more than an academic, and alongside the seriousness in intellectual matters he had a youthful playfulness that he retained as long as he lived. He loved swimming and hiking in the woods and the mountains. While he could at times be stern and edgy, especially in the difficult years of his battle at the University of Oslo, he was also gentle, kind, and generous, not caring much about accumulating personal wealth. He never obtained a driver’s license, and traveled often by public transportation, taking the opportunity to engage his fellow travelers in spontaneous conversations, which is rather uncommon in Norway. My impression was that his fellow travelers appreciated these episodes just as much as he did.

Perhaps this blend of intellectual curiosity, playfulness, open-minded friendliness, honesty, and rigor in research and thought, is what made him a highly respected teacher at the University of Oslo. And amongst his colleagues, in Oslo and abroad, he was widely recognized as an uncompromising truth seeker, always measuring his own work by the highest academic standards.
A History of Modern Psychology reflects all the above: my father’s broad academic background, his great delight in theoretical thinking, and his high academic standards and unrelenting questioning of widely accepted “truths.” On behalf of the family, I want to express our gratitude to Cambridge University Press for making his life’s work available to an international audience, and I hope his book will achieve for psychology what he aimed for.

Jens Saugstad