

100 Years of 'the Experimentalists'

May 16, 2003

The Society of Experimental Psychologists celebrated the beginning of its centennial year March 7-8, 2003 by holding its 100th annual meeting at Washington University in St. Louis. The centennial observation will culminate in 2004 with a meeting at Cornell University where the society was established in 1904.

Known initially as “the Experimentalists,” the society was formed by Cornell psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener (1867-1927) as a vehicle for organizing small, informal gatherings of North America’s leading experimental psychologists. Members and invited guests were encouraged to speak about current research in their labs and to exchange barbed criticisms in smoke-filled rooms; women were specifically excluded.

“Titchener created the Experimentalists in his own image,” suggested Ludy Benjamin Jr. a noted historian of psychology and professor of psychology and educational psychology at Texas A&M University. During a brief talk on SEP history offered as part of the annual meeting, Benjamin discussed Titchener’s complete dominance of the group’s early meetings. Titchener’s control of the society, he noted, was released only in his death in 1927. The group voted to admit women the next year and changed their name to the Society of Experimental Psychologists.

This year’s meeting included some 45 participants from universities in the United States and Canada. Henry L. (Roddy) Roediger, III is chair of SEP and organized this year’s meeting. The two-day meeting produced a series of talks on contemporary issues in psychology. “The format of the meetings may not have changed too much over the years,” Roediger said. “We still seek to exchange the latest information from our labs. However, the original members would be astounded to see that smoking is banned from the meetings and that women form an integral part of SEP. In fact, Carolyn Rovee-Collier was awarded the Howard Crosby Warren Medal this year, the most prestigious award the Society has traditionally given.” Rovee-Collier is professor of psychology at Rutgers University.

In addition, the society presented its Norman H. Anderson Lifetime Achievement Award to Bennet Murdock, professor of psychology emeritus at the University of Toronto. This award was offered for the first time this year and is sponsored by a generous donation from Norman Anderson of the University of California, San Diego. SEP’s other new award, the Early Investigator Award, was awarded to Zhong-Lin Lu, associate professor of psychology at the University of Southern California.

The Society has generally adhered to Titchener’s original vision that the meetings be small and fairly casual. They are limited to members of the Society and to faculty and graduate students of the host department. The original bylaws limited membership to less than 50, although that number has been liberalized in recent years. Currently nine new members are inducted each year. New members elected this year include John Cacioppo, University of Chicago; Morton Ann Gernsbacher, University of Wisconsin at Madison; Richard Ivry, University of California, Berkeley; John F. Kihlstrom, University

of California, Berkeley; Richard E. Nisbett, University of Michigan; Hal Pashler, University of California, San Diego; Keith Rayner, University of Massachusetts; Sara Shettleworth, University of Toronto; and Zhong-Lin Lu, University of Southern California. Induction into the group is a significant honor.

Roediger remarked that “Examination of this list of new members reveals trends that were unthinkable in Titchener’s time. Several social psychologists were voted in, and developmental psychologists are also included in SEP. We now try to consider members of all fields in which experimental methods are used to study behavioral phenomena, from neuroscience on the one hand to social and personality psychology on the other.”

After a welcome from Edward S. Macias, Executive Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Arts and Sciences at Washington University, the talks began. Roediger provided a historical talk, noting that the centennial of SEP happened to correspond with the Sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) of Washington University. He therefore spoke on “Experimental Memory Research Before Ebbinghaus” in which he detailed the contributions of Francis Eugene Nipher (1847-1926), the first Wayman Crow Professor of Physics at Washington University in St. Louis. Nipher conducted and published experiments on immediate serial recall and discovered, among other things, the serial position effect showing the first and last elements of a series are better recalled than items appearing in the middle of a list. Nipher published this work in the 1870s, before Hermann Ebbinghaus began his research in 1879 and published it in 1885.