

# Donald W. Fiske

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*This month's column is a memorial to one of the field's pioneering researchers in methodology, who happened to also be Susan Fiske's father. He passed away after a long illness, and at press time, she and her family are coping with their loss. The Observer will feature remembrances from his colleagues in a future issue; the following is reprinted with permission from the University of Chicago News Office.*

Donald W. Fiske, a University of Chicago psychologist whose research taught scholars how to measure a person's abilities and personality, died April 6 in his Hyde Park home. He promoted rigorous methods to make psychology a true science and accordingly influenced generations of researchers. He was 86.

He co-authored an early article with Donald Campbell that provided a quantitative approach for measuring differences between people. This analysis separated the distorted information gathered in questionnaires, interviews and other research methods from the information that was a truer reading of a person's actual characteristics. It became a classic in the field and is still required reading for many students in psychology.

"That 1959 paper, entitled 'Convergent and Discriminant Validation by the Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix,' which appeared in the *Psychological Bulletin*, is the most cited article in the history of the Psychological Bulletin," said John Cacioppo, the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology at the University of Chicago and APS Board Member. As of 10 years ago, it had received over 2,000 citations, twice as many as any other article in the 100-year-old flagship journal.

"Although Fiske often investigated personality traits and measures, the methods he developed were tremendously influential because they could be applied widely in the field of psychology," Cacioppo said. "Fiske pointed out ways in which the concepts in the field were imprecise, and he provided a means of increasing their precision."

Fiske was the author, co-author or editor of 11 books dealing with measurement and other methodological issues in psychology. One of his books was *Measuring the Concepts of Personality* (1971), which traced the core issues of his early research.

Fiske continued his work by studying the use of observer ratings, including people's self-observations. He argued that researchers should avoid interpreting self-observations as accurate measures of the traits they were describing. His books, *Face-to-Face Interactions: Research, Methods, and Theory* (1977, co-authored with Starkey Duncan), *Strategies for Personality Research* (1978), and *Interaction Structure and Strategy* (1985, also co-authored with Duncan), established more reliable methods of measuring personality traits. He advocated using fine-grained nonverbal behavior and concrete indicators so that judgements about personality could be made reliably.

“Personality traits are abstractions. When we say someone is shy or outgoing, we are characterizing the way in which an individual behaves over time and across situations,” Cacioppo said. “For instance, someone might appear to be outgoing when in fact he or she is in a social role that requires him or her to act in an outgoing fashion, such as a teacher in a classroom, or because the person is particularly knowledgeable about the topic being considered in a specific circumstance. Fiske developed formal methods that made it possible to isolate and identify the most likely meaning of measures or observations of this phenomenon.”

He devised techniques for distinguishing valid measurements and minimizing idiosyncrasies resulting from psychology’s methodological limits. In later work, he expanded his work on how psychology and the other social sciences could become more rigorous. That research was pursued in his book *Metatheory in Social Science* (1986, co-edited with Richard Shweder). “His contributions advanced dramatically how behavioral and other social scientists think about the abstract meaning of their concrete observations and measures,” Cacioppo said.

Patrick Shrout, professor of psychology at New York University, said, “Donald Fiske was one of the rare psychologists in the second half of 20th century who had a deep understanding of the philosophy and mathematics of measurement, and who also had penetrating insight into the psychology of reflection and self-disclosure. He had a unique ability to move back and forth between the technical assessment of test validity and personality theories that were informed by the psychological tests.” Fiske was elected president of the Society for Multivariate Experimental Psychology in 1968 because of his ability to make contributions to statistics and to personality research, Shrout said.

Fiske, born in Lincoln, New Hampshire, and raised in Medford, Massachusetts, received an AB in 1937 in philosophy from Harvard University and a 1939 AM in psychology, also from Harvard. After teaching at Harvard and Wellesley, he joined the aviation psychology section of the U.S. Navy in 1942. He was named head of the section in 1946 and then went to the University of Michigan, where he was an instructor, and completed his PhD in psychology in 1948.

He joined the psychology faculty of the University of Chicago in 1948 and was chair of the department from 1982 to 1985. He was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and president of the Midwestern Psychological Association. His avocation was sailing in lakes and oceans all over the world.

In 1999, the University of Chicago Department of Psychology established an annual Donald W. Fiske Distinguished Lecture series in his honor. His daughter, Susan T. Fiske, a professor of psychology at Princeton, delivered the inaugural lecture in 2000.

Besides Susan, survivors include his wife, Barbara Page Fiske; his son Alan Page Fiske, a professor of anthropology at UCLA; and eight grandchildren.