Paul Fraisse (1911-1996) Energetic International Psychologist

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Paul Fraisse, a leader of French and international psychology, died in his sleep at his home near Paris on October 12, 1996; he was 85, having been born March 20, 1911. Fraisse was widely known as an energetic leader of psychological organizations; a gifted teacher and thesis mentor of about 50 psychologists, several of whom later became prominent in their own right; a productive investigator, especially in the field of perception of time; and a prolific writer and editor. His interests in a broad range of subjects accentuated his ability as a lively conversationalist. Throughout much of his career, Fraisse struggled to obtain an adequate place for psychology in the university and in the scientific scene in France. His own career reveals some of the problems of establishing psychological science in France.

Fraisse did not go directly into psychology. While completing his studies at the lycee, he decided to become a Jesuit priest. But, as he wrote later, he tried to follow the regulations so strictly that he developed continual headaches and other psychological symptoms. After two years, he left the novitiate. Doctors prescribed a year of rest and told him not to consider further studies.

Nevertheless, Fraisse resumed philosophical studies at the Catholic University of Lyon, still hoping to prepare for the priesthood. A faculty member suggested that he go to the Catholic University of Louvain where experimental psychology had an important place in the Institute of Philosophy. There he spent 1935-37 as laboratory assistant to Professor Albert Michotte, doing experiments on visual perception and preparing for examinations in philosophy. Fraisse presented the results of his research on perception at the XI International Congress of Psychology in Paris in 1937. From then on, he participated at most of the International Congresses of Psychology. It was arranged in 1937 that Fraisse would give courses in psychology at the Catholic University of Lyon but would live in Paris where Professor Henri Pieron, on the recommendation of Michotte, took Fraisse into his laboratory. Lyon then had no laboratory of psychology and only vague plans to establish one in an indefinite future.

The late 1930s and early 1940s brought a series of disasters to Fraisse. In 1938 his wife and infant son died in childbirth. In 1939 he rejoined his regiment just as the war started, and he was captured in Belgium by the Germans in 1940. He escaped in 1942 but was recaptured at the border. In June 1943 he was returned to France as a non-commissioned sanitary officer, thanks to false papers provided by his father. That fall he remarried and he rejoined Pieron’s laboratory. During his long career, Fraisse occupied many major positions in French psychology, including:

• Directeur a l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes du Laboratoire de Psychologie Experimentale et Comparee (1952-79); he had been Directeur-Adjoint (1943-52) when the Laboratory had a somewhat different name: Laboratoire de Psychologie Experimentale et de Physiologie des Sensations.

• Professeur de Psychologie Experimentale at the Sorbonne (later the Universite Rene Descartes [Paris V])
• Secretary-General (1949-59) and President (1962-63) of the Societe Francaise de Psychologie.

• Member of the Comite National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) (1950-66 and 1970-75), and President of the Commission de Psychologie du CNRS (1960-65).

• President of the XXI International Congress of Psychology, held in Paris, 1976.

When Fraisse succeeded Pieron in 1952 as Directeur a l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes du Laboratoire de Psychologie Experimentale, he managed to enlarge its scope to promote research in a variety of directions, because France had few specialists in psychological science. He supervised students and researchers in a variety of areas, including social psychology, psycholinguistics, conditioning, memory, and animal behavior. Several of his students became instructors throughout France and abroad. Fraisse also became the Directeur of the Institut de Psychologie, which grouped together psychologists from the Universite de Paris, the College de France, and the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, to provide students with both theoretical and practical training. In the Institut, Fraisse created new diplomas: abnormal psychology, educational psychology, industrial psychology, and experimental psychology. He also helped to lengthen and deepen the courses of study. None of these accomplishments for psychology was achieved easily, as he noted in an autobiographical chapter in 1983.

Fraisse visited colleagues and gave lectures in many countries in Western and Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and North and South America. He also served on international psychological bodies in many positions including:

• Secretary-General (1952-70) and President of the Association de Psychologie Scientifique de Langue Francaise.

• Representative of the Societe Francaise de Psychologie to the Assembly of the International Union of Psychological Science/Union Internationale de Psychologie Scientifique(IUPsyS) (1952-60).

• Member of the Executive Committee of IUPsyS (1960-80) and President of IUPsyS (1966-69).

During the XVI International Congress of Psychology at Bonn in 1960, I asked Fraisse when he thought the Congress would again be held in Paris. Rolling his eyes in mock terror, Fraisse replied, “Not during my lifetime, I hope.” In 1976, while congratulating him on the success of the XXI Congress held in Paris under his presidency, I asked him whether he remembered his statement of 1960. Fraisse could not recall it at all, which was in keeping with his character, because he never shunned efforts that promised to promote psychology, in France and internationally.

He was editor and initiator of a number of volumes, publications, and series, including over 200 articles and the following positions and publications:

• Co-Directeur (1947-64) then Directeur (1965-94) of l’Annee Psychologique.

• Directeur of two series at the Presses Universitaires de France that covered a wide range of topics: the Psychology Section of the Bibliotheque Scientifique Internationale and the collection “Le Psychologue.”
• Fraisse and Jean Piaget were co-editors of the nine-volume *Traite de Psychologie Experimentale* which went through four editions (1963-76), and, with translations into nine languages, spread knowledge of psychology around the world.

• Fraisse founded the *International Journal of Psychology/Journal Internationale de Psychologie* to provide a mouthpiece for IUPsyS and an outlet for psychological research from around the world.

Fraisse wanted to see a “complete psychology” with all of its fields and approaches. Beyond that, he recognized that there are other kinds of knowledge, including philosophical and poetic. But his own efforts, he noted, were mainly in and for scientific psychology.

Fraisse’s main research contributions were in the field of perception and estimation of temporal duration. Continuing from the 1940s through the 1970s, his research spanned the transition from behaviorist psychology, which Fraisse stated had difficulty in including time as a variable, to cognitive psychology, which was open to such research. Reviewing his work and that of others, Fraisse identified three orders of physical duration, classified according to the phenomena they elicited: (a) less than 100 ms, at which perception is of instantaneity; (b) 100 ms to 5 s, at which there is perception of duration in the perceived present, and (c) above 5 s, at which estimation of duration involves memory.

Fraisse’s varied contributions were recognized by a number of awards, including the following:
Commandeur de l’Ordre des Palmes Academiques (1969), Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur, and honorary doctorates from the universities of Rio de Janeiro (1967), Bonn (1968), Lisbon (1985), and Barcelona (1989). France is one of the few developed countries that does not elect psychologists to its Academy of Sciences, but Fraisse was recognized by academies of other countries: he received a medal from the Polish Academy of Sciences (1978), and was elected Foreign Associate of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States (1982).

Fraisse was also engaged in social life. He was a member of the “personnalisme” movement of the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. With some other couples in this group, the Fraisses bought a large estate with several houses in a suburb of Paris where they lived and established a cultural center. Fraisse was an active member of the Socialist Party. When I visited Fraisse after the student uprising in Berkeley in 1964, he questioned me in detail about it. He later told me that this helped prepare him for the student uprising in Paris in 1968. He supported the students and was one of the few professors to remain in the Sorbonne when the police removed the students by force, but he maintained a critical distance from some of their demands. Thereafter he participated actively in the restructuring of the University of Paris in 1970; the plan incorporated a group of human sciences, including an Institute of Psychology and an independent Department of Psychology.

Paul Fraisse is survived by his wife Simone, retired Professor of French Literature at the Universite de Paris III, four children, and several grandchildren.