
William James McGuire (1925–2007)

William James McGuire, considered by some to be the “father of social cognition” and a leading expert on attitude change and the self-concept, died in his home in New Haven, Connecticut, on December 21, 2007. He was surrounded by his family at the time of his death and will be missed by legions of former colleagues and students.

While serving on the faculties of Yale University (1955–1958, 1971–2007), the University of Illinois (1958–1961), Columbia University (1961–1967), and the University of California, San Diego (1967–1970), McGuire was for several decades the field’s premier researcher of the psychology of persuasion. His creative, groundbreaking experimental research in this area not only brought the study of attitudes and social influence to center stage in psychology but also shaped neighboring fields in sociology, political science, communication, and marketing. McGuire was a fellow of eight divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA) and a past president of APA Division 8 (Personality and Social Psychology).

He published dozens of influential papers on the self-concept, the relation between language and thought, the structure of ideological belief systems, and the history of social psychology. With his process-oriented studies of participants’ cognitive responses to successful and unsuccessful persuasive attempts, McGuire helped to pioneer *social cognition*, a subdiscipline focused on human information processing that began to emerge in the 1970s at the intersection of social and cognitive psychology. He also developed his own approach to the philosophy of science, which he first labeled *contextualism* and later *perspectivism*. For this work, McGuire received the highest honors and awards psychology has to offer, including APA’s Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions (1988), the Association for Psychological Science’s William James Fellow Award (1989), the Society of Experimental Social Psychology’s Distinguished Scientist Award (1992), and the International Society of Political Psychology’s Harold Lasswell Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions to Political Psychology (1998). He was named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2002.

William James McGuire was born into a poor Irish Catholic family in New York City on February 17, 1925. His earliest memories were of accompanying his father, a milkman, on delivery routes to Harlem stores by horse and wagon at dawn. McGuire said it was World War II that provided him with his education. He joined the war effort at 17 and ultimately played a role in the liberation of the concentration camp at Dachau. His painful experiences as a military tank driver led him to forgo automobile driving for the next 60 years. After the war, McGuire attended Fordham College on the GI Bill, where he studied philosophy and psychology and subsequently taught courses in rational psychology and natural theology. He returned to

Europe under more fortunate circumstances in 1950–1951 as a Fulbright Fellow in phenomenological philosophy at the University of Louvain in Belgium, where he encountered the Edmund Husserl Archives, the writings of Merleau-Ponty, and the laboratory of the experimental psychologist A. E. Michotte.

The following year McGuire entered the doctoral program in psychology at Yale University. Although he expected to apply symbolic logic to Hullian learning theory, McGuire was instead taken by Carl Hovland’s thriving new center for research on communication and persuasion. He learned much from Yale faculty members Irving Child, Leonard Doob, Irving Janis, and Neal Miller, as well as from fellow students Daniel Berlyne and Roger Shepard. McGuire’s philosophical training prepared him well for the infusion of cognitivism that occurred in psychology during the 1950s. After graduation, McGuire completed postdoctoral work at the University of Minnesota with Leon Festinger, who was then developing cognitive dissonance theory.

McGuire returned to Yale as an assistant professor for three years before moving to the University of Illinois, where he joined the Communication Research Institute under Charles Osgood. According to professional lore, McGuire made a bet with a dubious colleague that he could obtain tenure without publishing any journal articles. In 1961, the year after receiving tenure, McGuire published 10 papers and returned to his hometown of New York to teach at Columbia University, where his colleagues included Otto Klineberg and Stanley Schachter in psychology and Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in sociology. While at Columbia, it was the topic of resistance to persuasion that brought McGuire widespread admiration in social psychology. Drawing on an analogy from medicine, he proposed inoculation theory to explain why people’s beliefs are susceptible to change in domains that are seldom exposed to persuasive attack. McGuire’s ingenious experiments demonstrated that vulnerability to persuasion could be prevented by *belief immunization*—that is, by exposing an individual to a relatively weak attack on a belief and allowing him or her to engage in counterargumentation. This research laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the dynamic theory of thought systems and still stands as an exemplary model of precise, elegant experimentation.

McGuire’s reputation as a brilliant researcher and writer was thus firmly established by 1964, shortly before he published several influential literature reviews that allowed him to more fully develop the theoretical foundations of experimental work on attitude change. One of these, widely known as “McGuire’s 1969 *Handbook* chapter,” was a book-length manuscript of more than 80,000 words, requiring 179 small-print pages of the *Handbook of*

Social Psychology. That chapter—along with a similarly important contribution to the 1985 edition of the *Handbook*—capitalized on a taxonomy that distinguished among source, message, channel, recipient, and target variables in persuasion and largely set the agenda for two decades of attitudes research.

McGuire had a reputation for being a loner, except at cocktail parties, where he revealed a gift for regaling those in attendance with humorous stories sprinkled with literary and film references. He published little with anyone other than his wife, Claire V. McGuire, who provided a solid foundation not only for the McGuire family but also for the McGuire laboratory. In no way, however, did his solitary approach to work detract from his tireless generosity in reviewing and commenting supportively on the work of students and colleagues. As editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and as an ad hoc reviewer for many other granting and publication outlets, McGuire wrote thousands of polite, telling action letters that rivaled the length of the original submissions. He later noted (in *Constructing Social Psychology: Creative and Critical Processes*, 1999), “I consider my main teaching contribution during 40 years in academia to be this Stakhanovite commenting on specific manuscripts from across the nation and the world” (p. 97). This sentence is characteristic of McGuire’s writing in two major ways—first, in that it includes a reference that was designed to send careful readers scurrying for a dictionary and, second, in that the text is fully comprehensible even without a knowledge of Alexsei Stakhanov, the 1930s Soviet coal miner who was glorified for vastly exceeding production quotas.

McGuire moved to the University of California, San Diego at a turbulent time, when many were questioning the Vietnam War and the role of psychologists in reforming society. In what came to be known as the “crisis in social psychology,” philosophically oriented critics challenged both the universalistic aspirations of scientific psychology and what they perceived to be moral indifference among experimental psychologists to social problems. In the article “The Yin and Yang of Progress in Social Psychology: Seven Koan,” McGuire (1973, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) expressed some measure of sympathy with critics and seemed to acknowledge certain limitations of the information-processing approach he had pioneered, but he remained firm in his commitment to basic scientific values:

In our father’s house there are many rooms. . . . there is a place for the philosopher of mind and the social philosopher, as well as for the scientific psychologist. But the scientific psychologist can offer something beside and beyond these armchair thinkers in that we not only generate delusional systems, but we go further and test our delusional systems against objective data as well as for their subjective plausibility. (p. 452)

In 1971, McGuire returned to Yale, this time as chair of the Department of Psychology. His next 25 years were extremely productive, which is especially remarkable given that the methodology he favored for understanding the self-concept consisted of grueling analyses of qualitative

data produced in response to simple, open-ended prompts such as “Tell us about yourself.”

During this period, the McGuire family hosted innumerable dinner parties at their New Haven home for visiting speakers, departmental faculty, and Yale students. Even occasional visitors would recall the books that filled nearly every corner of the house and the sofa pillows with portraits of Marx, Engels, and Chinese Communists that Claire had sewn from silk posters acquired from a Communist propaganda store in New York. The family’s warmth and generosity, especially to graduate students and junior colleagues, touched several generations at Yale. Many of McGuire’s former students—including David Sears, Reid Hastie, Philip Tetlock, Deborah Prentice, Curtis Hardin, and John Jost—pursued scientific careers in social and political psychology at least in part because of his inspiration.

The vast oeuvre that followed from McGuire’s self-proclaimed “delusional systems” determined the intellectual contours of 20th-century research on attitudes, social cognition, the self-concept, and many other psychological themes. In the late 1990s, McGuire reworked many of his most important scholarly and personal writings in a book titled *Constructing Social Psychology: Creative and Critical Processes* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Much of his later work was undertaken in libraries and other favorite spots in London and Paris, and his intellectual impact remains palpable in social psychological circles throughout Europe. McGuire received honorary degrees from the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, Hungary, and the University of Bologna, Italy. To celebrate his scientific and pedagogical accomplishments at home, a conference was held in his honor at Yale University on April 19–22, 2001. A Festschrift subsequently published by APA (Jost, Banaji, & Prentice, 2004, *Perspectivism in Social Psychology: The Yin and Yang of Scientific Progress*) contained the following assessment:

It is safe to say that social psychology has never seen anyone else like William J. McGuire and probably never will again. He is notorious for being brilliant, fastidious, generous, humble, grandiose, short-tempered, iconoclastic, and hilarious, and he set almost unattainable standards for the field in at least three ways. First, he started as one of the field’s most painstaking and precise experimental pioneers in social cognition. . . . Later, he became one of its most ambitious and integrative historians of cumulative knowledge. . . . And by now, his reputation is secure as one of the most creative, witty, and erudite writers ever to ponder the social mind. (p. 11)

McGuire is survived by his wife Claire; their three children, James W. McGuire of Middletown, Connecticut, Anne M. McGuire of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Steven T. McGuire of Guilford, Connecticut; and his brother Eugene McGuire of Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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