



IN MEMORIAM

Leo Postman
Professor of Psychology, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1918 – 2004

Leo Joseph Postman, professor emeritus of psychology and a dominant figure in the study of human memory, died on April 22, 2004, of heart failure at his home in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He was 85.

Postman was “a major theoretician in the development of the theory of forgetting,” said friend and colleague Donald Riley, professor emeritus of psychology. “His contributions were monumental.” Postman was listed in a 2002 article in the *Review of General Psychology* as one of the 100 most eminent psychologists of the last century. “Within the field of human memory, the range of his contributions has been vast,” wrote one of his former students, Geoffrey Keppel, professor emeritus of psychology, in recommending Postman for the Berkeley Citation. Postman received the award, the highest honor given to University of California, Berkeley faculty and staff, upon his retirement in 1987.

In 1961, Postman founded the Institute of Human Learning at Berkeley, which lives on today as the Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences, a center devoted to an interdisciplinary study of the mind and the brain.

Postman primarily studied perception, learning, and memory. He participated in the beginnings of the “new look” school of perception that emphasized the role of cognitive factors such as emotions and expectations in determining what people perceive.

His main interest, however, was forgetting. Based on studies he began in 1958, he became known as the principal spokesman for and architect of modern interference theory, the only comprehensive account of forgetting that exists today. The theory, Keppel wrote, holds that forgetting is the result of interference from a variety of sources, including past memories, various aspects of the current memory, and new memories acquired subsequently— that is, a dynamic interaction of the entire memory system, past and present. Postman was sensitive to the weaknesses of the theory, and spent the last part of his career investigating the mechanisms that conserve memory in the face of interference. Much of this research was conducted at the institute he founded and directed until 1977.

Postman, who served as chair of the Department of Psychology for several years in the late 1950s, had a reputation for excellence in teaching, emphasizing clarity and organization.

Born June 7, 1918, in St. Petersburg, Russia, Postman moved at an early age to New York City, obtaining his B.S. from the College of the City of New York in 1943 and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1946. He taught at Harvard from 1946 until 1950, interrupted by one year at Indiana University, and joined the Berkeley faculty in 1950.

In his first years at Berkeley, Postman was recognized nationally as a major figure in the field of perception and the role of motivation in perception. His research shifted, however, and he embarked on a long series of

studies on learning with and without the intent to learn (the latter being what is referred to as incidental learning). He later switched to the study of forgetting, which he pursued until his retirement.

A member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Psychological Association, he also served in 1968 as president of the Western Psychological Association, and in 1974 received the Warren Medal of the Society of Experimental Psychologists for outstanding achievement in experimental psychology.

Postman was married for 58 years to Dorothy Lerman Postman, who for many years worked with her husband at Berkeley and shared his love of psychology and of reading. They met when, as a graduate student teaching assistant, he graded her psychology paper. The couple moved to Marblehead a decade ago. In 2003, Dorothy Postman, who had a B.A. from Radcliffe College and an M.A. in psychology from Wellesley College, died after a long illness. Leo Postman leaves a sister- and brother- in- law, Lorraine and Edward Berman, of Marblehead, a niece and three nephews.

He was buried at Temple Sinai in Danvers, Massachusetts, on April 25.

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Office of Public Affairs