BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

John H. Flavell

August 9, 1928–March 13, 2025
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A Biographical Memoir by Henry M. Wellman and Louis J. Moses

John Hurley Flavell was a preeminent figure in modern developmental psychology. His most important contribution was his introduction of the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget to American psychology, and he also founded the field of metacognition. He won numerous awards for both his work and his mentorship of rising researchers, and his 1977 textbook, *Cognitive Development,* was foundational for generations of students in the field.

John H. Flavell (he always said that it should be pronounced as rhyming with "naval") was born in Rockland, Massachusetts, on August 9, 1928, to parents Paul and Anne O'Brien Flavell. His father, a civil engineer, was out of work for much of the Great Depression, and thus the family experienced some hardship during Flavell's childhood years. After graduating high school in 1945, Flavell enlisted as a private in the United States Army at the very end of World War II. He served only a year and a half in the rapidly demobilizing Army, but that was enough to get him to college under the GI Bill. He then attended Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, and after flirting with chemistry and pre-med studies, he became fascinated by psychology and graduated in 1951 with a degree in that field.

Flavell then pursued graduate study at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He completed his Ph.D. in clinical psychology in 1955 under the supervision of Thelma Alper on the topic of schizophrenic thinking. Much more influential in the long term, however, was his exposure at Clark to the ideas of German-trained psychologist Heinz Werner.

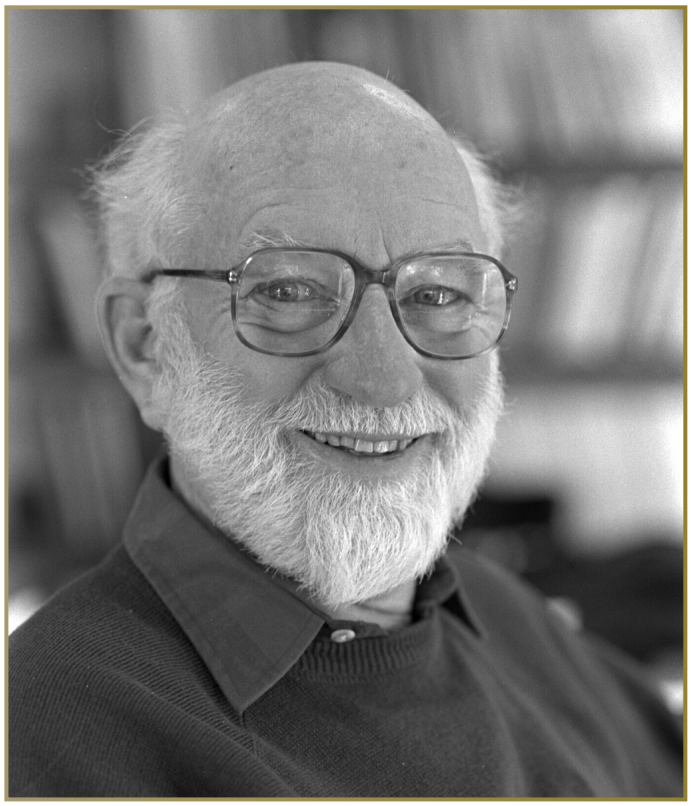

Figure 1 John Flavell. *Photo courtesy of Stanford University.*

Werner was famous for his claim (his orthogenetic principle) that development—in childhood and in psychopathology—proceeded from global, holistic states of mind to states of increasing articulation, differentiation, and integration. In contrast to Sigmund Freud's stage theory of psychosexual development, Werner's principle provided a non-stage framework for development. The debate over whether cognitive development can be said to proceed in stages would continue to intrigue Flavell throughout his career.

While completing his graduate work at Clark, Flavell met Eleanor Wood on a blind date. They subsequently married, and Ellie Flavell became a lifelong partner and longtime research colleague as well. The Flavells had two children

(Beth and Jim), two grandchildren, and at time of his death, three great-grandchildren. They were married for more than sixty-five years until Ellie's death in 2020.

After finishing his Ph.D., Flavell took a position as a clinical psychologist at a Veterans Administration hospital in Fort Lyon Colorado. He describes Fort Lyon in rather unflattering terms: "a God forsaken place, like western Kansas gone downhill, drier and more barren." Unsurprisingly, after a brief one-year period, Flavell accepted, sight unseen, a position at Rochester University in New York State in 1957, attaining the rank of associate professor by 1960. His Rochester period included a year at the Sorbonne University in Paris as part of his emerging interest in the works of Jean Piaget.

From Rochester, Flavell began what would become a steady move westward, first, in 1965, to the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. At that time, under the leadership of Harold Stevenson, the Institute was becoming the premier location for developmental science in the United States, in part thanks to hires like Flavell. In 1976, the Flavells continued their westward journey when, under prompting from Eleanor Maccoby, he joined the faculty at Stanford University, eventually becoming the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Psychology in the School of Humanities and Sciences. After many years of teaching and researching, Flavell was awarded emeritus status in 1992, but he remained active in research for well over a decade after that.

Flavell was the author of more than 120 books and journal articles, many of which are considered classics. Four of his many contributions to developmental psychology are particularly outstanding. At Rochester, he began a risky (for a non-tenured assistant professor), lengthy study of all the works of Jean Piaget, at the time little known in the English-speaking world. Flavell called it his "side project." Teaching himself French along the way, Flavell spent seven years reading and analyzing Piaget's many books (a monk-like endeavor, he once said). The resulting work was eventually published in 1963 as *The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget*, with a foreword from Piaget himself. Flavell's brilliant treatise effectively introduced Piaget, and the structuralist approach to children's thinking, to American psychology. Even French scholars secretly admitted to reading Flavell's book because many of them found the original Piaget too difficult to understand.

Flavell was primed to appreciate Piaget's constructivist developmental theory because of his immersion at Clark in Heinz Werner's organismic-developmental theory. At a time when American psychology was just beginning to throw off the thrall of behaviorism and embrace cognition, Flavell's clear and compelling presentation of Piaget's ideas extended the cognitive revolution to children's thinking. The Piagetian approach quickly became the dominant paradigm in cognitive developmental research, and, for Flavell personally, his study of Piaget began a lifelong passion for research on children's thinking.

A second foundational contribution to developmental science occurred at Minnesota, where Flavell wrote a series of seminal theoretical essays on cognitive development. These now classic essays address, for example, the validity and the difficulties of the "stage" construct—foundational to Piaget's approach to cognitive development—for explaining development; the nature of developmental sequences and transitions; the methodological pitfalls associated with assessing cognitive competence; and the introduction of the concept of metacognition as necessary to our understanding of cognition itself.

In a famous symposium in 1971 at the meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), Flavell presented a highly influential paper titled "What Is Memory Development the Development of?" After listing development of basic memory processes, of different memory systems, and of memory strategies (which Flavell had been busy researching), Flavell insisted there was a fourth factor to consider—children's developing knowledge of their own memory, which he labeled metamemory. Metamemory, and then more broadly metacognition, quickly became standard topics of research in cognitive science and cognitive development. Flavell is acknowledged as the founding father of metacognition, now an indispensable part of our understanding of human cognition.

Third, Flavell influenced generations of undergraduate and graduate students with the publication of his highly successful textbook, *Cognitive Development,* in 1977 (a fourth and final edition was published in 2002). Not only was this the first text on the topic to appear in North America, it was also lucid, exuding the unmistakable first-person voice of an active researcher in the field.

Finally, Flavell carried out groundbreaking empirical research of his own on children's thinking, not staying only with his early work on memory development but adding a series of topics, such as metacognition, that he introduced to the field for the first time. He pioneered research into children's development of perspective-taking and communication skills, their knowledge about perception, their understanding of the appearance-reality distinction, their developing "theories of mind," and their understanding of thinking and consciousness. His discovery in the 1970s of two levels of visual perspective taking has been especially influential. At Level 1 (typically two to three years of age), children understand that others may not see something that they do and vice versa—people can be mentally connected or not to some object or event. At Level 2, however (four to five years and beyond), children further recognize that two individuals

viewing the very same thing may nonetheless see it differently—you may see the turtle as right side up whereas I see it as upside down. They thus evidence an understanding of representations and a deeper representational understanding of mind.

Similarly influential was his finding that younger children fail to recognize the distinction between appearance and reality, for example, that an object may look like one thing (e.g., a rock) but actually be something quite different (e.g., a piece of candy). Flavell incorporated these and related findings into a persuasive "connections-to-representations" account of cognitive development.

While Flavell was pursuing these topics, a handful of others were founding the study of the child's theory-of-mind—children's developing awareness of how mental states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions govern the behavior and minds of self and others. Theory-of-mind was shown to be a cornerstone of social intelligence and satisfying social interaction, and hence social-emotional life. Flavell quickly and substantially contributed to this literature, both in research studies and in expounding and expanding his connections-representations ideas to account for theory-of-mind development.

Moreover, toward the end of his career, Flavell began a fascinating series of studies on children's understanding of consciousness, a seemingly indispensable but neglected aspect of mind. Over a century earlier, William James, the "father" of American psychology, had described how our thinking often proceeds from topic to topic in streams of consciousness (James, 1983/1890). Flavell and his long-time collaborators, Ellie Flavell and Francie Green, investigated when children understood mental experience as proceeding in this way. They concluded that whereas older children and adults (at least U.S., western, individualistic children and adults) clearly understand thinking like this, younger children do not. Thus, eight-to-ten-year-olds assert that someone sitting and staring intently at a spot on the wall is experiencing multiple thoughts about that spot. Indeed, children of this age assert that it is nearly impossible to have a mind completely "empty of thoughts and ideas." In contrast, younger children do not share these intuitions. They conceive of people as having single, punctate thoughts—a thought about an apple or a thought about a horse, but not a thought about an apple cuing a thought about a horse eating an apple, cuing a thought about a horse race, cuing a thought about an automobile race, cuing a thought about a track meet.

Flavell was also engaged in organizational activities, bringing his wisdom to developmental psychology more generally. He was president of the Developmental Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association from 1969–70, a member of the Governing Council of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) from 1975–83, and president of that society from 1979–81.

Not surprisingly, Flavell was the recipient of many prestigious honors and awards. Notably, he was one of very first developmental psychologists to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences (1994) and had earlier been elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1990). He was also the recipient of the American Psychological Association's Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award (1984), and in 1986 its award for Distinguished Contributions to Developmental Psychology (formerly the G. Stanley Hall Award). Along the way, he received honorary degrees from University Rene Descartes, Paris (1990), the University of Rochester (1991), and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece (1994).

Critical to his legacy, Flavell was the recipient of the Mentoring Award from the American Psychological Association. Indeed, Flavell was loved and revered by a long line of graduate students, junior colleagues, and other mentees. For so many of them, he was an ideal academic role model: all benefited from his curiosity, creativity, generosity, intellectual humility, humor, and wisdom.

John Flavell died March 13, 2025, at ninety-six years of age. It is difficult to imagine what the field of cognitive development would look like today had there never been a Piaget; it is similarly difficult to do so had there never been a John Flavell.

Acknowledgments

Much of the information regarding John H. Flavell's life came from an oral history conducted by Tom Lyon on April 22, 1993, for the SRCD Oral History Project, https://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/flavell_john_interview.pdf.

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