
William Stephenson (1902-1989)

Internationally known for his work in psychometrics and the development of Q technique and factor analysis, William Stephenson was at various points in his career a member of university faculties in London, Oxford, Chicago, Washington, Berkeley, Missouri, and Iowa. His eventful life ended on June 14, 1989, from complications following a stroke.

Born May 14, 1902, in Northumberland, England, Stephenson was originally trained in physics (PhD from Durham University in 1926) at a time when the implications of quantum theory were being hotly debated. It was at Durham that he became personally acquainted with Kurt Koffka, one of the founders of Gestalt psychology; both quantum and Gestalt principles subsequently found their way into his psychological theories and procedures. He left Durham to study with Charles Spearman at University College, London, where he received his PhD in psychology in 1929 and was later an assistant to Spearman's successor Sir Cyril Burt. It was during his London days that he was nominated by Ernest Jones for psychoanalysis with Melanie Klein. This was a time of vigorous intellectual activity in psychology, and Stephenson was in the thick of it. His first book was on educational psychology (*Testing School Children*, 1949); earlier he wrote with David Katz on phenomenology and with William Brown on test theory, and he helped found the British Rorschach Society. Nothing psychological was foreign to him.

In 1935, Stephenson became assistant director (later director) of Oxford's Institute of Experimental Psychology. It was during this period that he first introduced (in a letter to *Nature*, 1935) what has become known as Q methodology and began contributing to the more than 120 publications on this subject (with other topics directed at another 30 publications). He was an early editorial board member of *Character and Personality* (now *Journal of Personality*) and *Psychometrika*, in which his founding papers on Q were published.

After World War II, Stephenson emigrated with his family to the United States, and in 1948 he joined the psychology faculty at the University of Chicago, where he wrote his best-known work, *The Study of Behavior: Q-technique and Its Methodology* (1953). He departed Chicago in 1955 and, after spending three years as director of advertising research for Nowland and Company, became distinguished professor of advertising research at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. Although it is rarely cited by psychologists, his book *The*

Play Theory of Mass Communication (1967) has been compared in its profundity with the works of Marshall McLuhan, Herbert Marcuse, and Jacques Ellul. Upon his formal retirement in 1972, Stephenson was honored with a volume of essays entitled *Science, Psychology, and Communication*.

Stephenson's ideas were slow to gain acceptance, and they did so primarily outside psychology. A small journal, *Operant Subjectivity*, devoted to pursuing his ideas, began publication in 1977. In 1985, the University of Missouri established the Stephenson Center for Communication Research and began hosting annual Q Conferences, attended by psychologists and other scientists from the United States, Europe, Canada, Latin America, and Australia. In April 1989, Stephenson was invited back to England for the first time in 40 years to address the first British Q Conference, hosted by the Department of Psychology at the University of Reading. There he learned that the ideas he had introduced more than a half century earlier had been rediscovered by a new generation of psychologists and were the subject of several dissertations, theses, and books. In October 1989, Missouri's annual Q conferences were institutionalized as the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity.

After his retirement, Stephenson wrote voluminously on the connections between the two strands of his intellectual development, physics and psychology. His articles on Newton's Fifth Rule and a series of articles on quantum theory and Q methodology portray this most vividly. Stephenson's concern was with establishing the conditions for a science of subjectivity, and it was a lifelong disappointment that British and American psychology were never able to see past the technicalities of Q sorting and factor analysis to broader methodological and conceptual matters.

In many respects, William Stephenson remained as far ahead of his time at the end of his life as he did when his career began; however, in his final days it pleased him greatly to glimpse a new generation of social scientists reading his books and articles for the first time and—unencumbered by awe for bygone critics—beginning to grasp what he was trying to accomplish. Few innovators have enjoyed such good timing, and fewer still have deserved it quite as much.

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