

## A Tribute to Solomon Asch

Morton Deutsch  
Teachers College, Columbia University

This past winter Michelle Fine, Howard Gruber, and I met together in our roles as members of SPSSI's Kurt Lewin Memorial Award Committee. As we reviewed the names of previous recipients we were struck by the surprising omission of the name of Solomon Asch. Clearly, it was an oversight. Asch, the world's most distinguished living social psychologist, obviously had deserved to receive this honor from SPSSI many years ago.

The regulations regarding the Lewin Award, as we understand them, require the recipient to be physically present to receive the award and, also, to give an address when it is received. From our knowledge of Asch's health, it was evident that he would not be able to fulfill these conditions. Michelle, Howard, and I nevertheless felt that SPSSI should find some way of honoring him. We knew that the SPSSI Council was about to meet so we tried phoning Faye Crosby but were only able to get her answering machine. I left a lengthy message on her tape and wrote her a letter indicating that we felt SPSSI should honor Asch at a special session of the 1992 APA meeting and we hoped that this could be done. Faye and the Council were enthusiastic about honoring Asch and, like us, felt it was long overdue. However, the APA program had already been set and the only opportunity for doing this would be at this session, which is to honor SPSSI authors as well as Solomon Asch.

Asch has been informed of SPSSI's honoring him by Faye Crosby and I have spoken to him about it. He is delighted by it. His frail health, however, does not allow him to be here in person.

We have not arranged any formal ceremony or talks for this occasion since we were not clear about the relationship between this event and other activities planned for this session. Nevertheless, I would like to say a few words in appreciation of Asch, as would Howard Gruber, and perhaps as would others of you, too.

I have met Asch only a few times. Each time I have been struck by his seriousness as well as his intellectual playfulness; by his deep thoughtfulness and penetrating analyses; by his intensive involvement in the world and his detachment from its everyday superficialities; by his dignity, aesthetic sensibility, and his humane awareness and concern. His work in social psychology is entirely consistent with my personal impression of him.

Asch was a master experimentalist whose experiments were aesthetic as well as scientific gems. They have a beautiful simplicity but the more one examines them the more profound are their implications. In an interesting and evocative way, they challenged and were constructive counterweights to widely-held views of psychological processes which characterized humans in their worst light -- as being irrational, arbitrary, and egocentric. Asch's Gestalt-rooted, implicit view was a more benevolent view of humankind, namely, that people tend to be as good (i.e., as coherent, as understanding, as well-organized, and as responsive to their social environments) as conditions permit.

Asch's view is that our psychological processes become transformed in society. We become self-conscious; we become oriented to the future

and to the past, as well as to the present; motives and goals arise out of our ability to perceive and compare ourselves to others. Our enlarged sense of alternatives and possibilities introduces at the center of human life a permanent tension between what is and what might be. The ends of life are not merely to live, but to live a meaningful and significant life.

Asch is one of the few experimental social psychologists who has had the boldness and imagination to recognize that an adequate social psychology must not lose sight of what is distinctly human. His work even today presents a challenge that we have not yet met and is a guiding light that we could follow for human as well as scientific benefit.