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Remembering Donn Byrne

December 19, 1931–August 10, 2014

Kabir (1440–1518), the Indian mystic, asked, “Given both Guru [teacher] and Govind [God] standing in front of you, whom should you bow to first?” Kabir counselled, “All the glory should go to your Guru for showing the right way to Govind.” I then wholeheartedly bow to my esteemed Guru, Donn Byrne, a renowned personality and social psychologist. In 1970, I had just come to the United States for my doctoral degree from Ball State University. From my Fulbright orientation program in Tucson, Arizona, I wrote a letter to Donn, requesting that he train me. Swiftly cutting through all administrative hassles, he ensured my transfer from Ball State to Purdue University. For that intervention, I am grateful and blessed. I got to know Donn as a teacher, a scholar, and, eventually, a life-long well-wisher.

During his more than 4-decade academic career at the University of Texas (1959–1969), Purdue University (1969–1979), and the University at Albany–SUNY (1979–2001), Donn chaired the doctoral committees of 53 students. Back in the early 1970s, I was his 21st student. He advised me to “make only one difference between two experiments of an article.” While writing my doctoral dissertation, he told me, “Write it in less than 30 pages.” When I was leaving Purdue, Donn further advised, “Never put your name in print unless you have read the document twice;” “Do not write an article that can allow others to say that you are a sloppy researcher;” and “If someone questions your work, do give a fitting reply.” To this day, I have tried to follow all three maxims.

Donn wanted his mentees not only to get a job but also to contribute responsibly to the organization where they worked and to the country in which they lived. He wanted me to start my career at a research-intensive institution in India. Therefore, in 1972, a year before I received my degree, he contacted Kamta Prasad, who at that time was head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and recommended that he hire me as an assistant professor. That I was offered the job without any interview suggests how supportive Donn was of my appointment!

Of his numerous scholarly contributions to social psychology, personality, and human sexuality, Donn is perhaps most renowned for his classic similarity–attraction research. People had long suggested that “birds of a feather flock together,” but it was Donn who translated this adage into a testable hypothesis: The greater the similarity between the attitudes of two persons, he demonstrated, the greater the attraction between them. He was so attached to this “Law of Attraction” ($Y = 5.44X + 6.62$, where Y is attraction on a scale of 2 to 14, X is the proportion of similar attitudes, and 5.44 and 6.62 are empirical coefficients for the respective slope and intercept of the regression line) that he always queried me as to how well his equation fit each new set of data my students or I collected!

The foci of his monograph, *The Attraction Paradigm* (1971), were on “the way in which [social psychological] research is conducted and . . . the way in which both theoretical and applied may be seen to grow out of a base relationship [i.e., the law of attraction]” (p. 414). He noted, “. . . the attraction paradigm represents a continuing research program which may constitute a useful model for other research, and, if it has anything to offer, should continue to grow and to change” (p. 415). His 1961 *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* article and the 1971 monograph have been cited widely.

The mechanisms underlying the attitude similarity–attraction link are still debatable topics of research in social psychology. Interestingly, his similarity–attraction hypothesis has been one of the theoretical approaches to diversity research in management.

Donn wrote around 30 textbooks in psychology. Among them, *An Introduction to Personality: A Research Approach* (1966), which is now in its third edition, effectively replaced the traditional contents of grand theories in personality courses with a more empirical approach to the assessment, antecedents, correlates, dynamics, and change of a dimension of individual differences (e.g., authoritarianism, intelligence, self-concept, etc.). His *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction* (1974), now in its 12th edition, has been very popular and has been translated into several languages.

When Donn was hospitalized in 2013, he desired to meet me. When I visited him on July 18, 2014, Donn laughed, remembering the night in 1970 when I had called his house and his wife told me he had retired. I misunderstood her and was taken aback at the news that he had *expired!* Donn talked about his love for simple but good research, music, painting, reading, writing, and Indian food. When I was to leave, he cheerfully put his right hand on my head, wishing further success and happiness. Sadly, little did I realize that that was going to be my last meeting with him.

The motto of my present institution is *Tejasvi naavadhitamastu*, which, translated from Sanskrit into English, means, *Let our (the teacher and the taught) learning be radiant*. For me, Donn shall always be this Guru nonpareil who has made my



To view the full remembrance of Donn Byrne, visit www.psychologicalscience.org/r/Byrne-Remembrance.

learning very enriched and fulfilling, and thus radiant. As a mark of our respect for Donn, my coauthors and I dedicated our forthcoming article on attitude similarity, trust, and attraction to him. I am privileged that I got to know Donn and be mentored by him. I am equally privileged to welcome another Guru, Robert A. Baron, and nine academic siblings who have

joined me in remembering Donn Byrne, a great man who positively influenced our personal and professional lives. We will miss him dearly. Visit www.psychologicalscience.org/r/Byrne-Remembrance for the full tribute. ●

-Ramadhar Singh

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, India

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situations helps practitioners understand the long-term effects of adoption on child development. This work is important because the findings can help professionals understand what might put a family at risk or provide a protective factor against risk and enhance interventions that improve family relationships.

NICHD's extramural Child Development and Behavior Branch develops scientific initiatives and supports research and research training relevant to the psychological, psychobiological, language, behavioral, and educational development and health of children. For example, NICHD-supported researchers study at-risk populations to understand how health disparities and socioeconomic factors influence how different populations cope with stress. Researchers also study the long-term effects of adversity due to discrimination or socioeconomic factors to understand how stress plays a role in the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes, while also looking at biomarkers of metabolic syndrome and pro-inflammatory tendencies, which are linked to chronic diseases of aging. Such research provides an important understanding of the relationship among stress, coping, and health.

NICHD's Pediatric Trauma and Critical Illness Branch supports research and research training in pediatric trauma, injury, and critical illness. Throughout the course of development, children may experience any number of traumatic events — including child abuse or neglect, separation due to a parent's military service, or natural disasters. Psychological research helps us to understand how traumatic experiences affect children's psychosocial states, including how these stressful experiences during childhood may have effects on lifelong health. Studying

these areas can also offer insight about protective factors or coping mechanisms that contribute to resiliency — an area of health and well-being that is too often overlooked.

Obesity is an obvious example of how biological, environmental, and psychological factors all play key roles in well-being, health, and disease — and, therefore, that research into each of these factors is crucial. Reversing the obesity epidemic will require better understanding of biology, environment, and psychology. Research focused on one factor can improve research into another. For instance, research at NIH's clinical center in Bethesda, Maryland, which examines the roles of genes and the environment in obesity, can inform psychological research, with the end goal of utilizing all three factors to design effective interventions to tackle this national epidemic.

NICHD researchers have made progress in the area of teenage driving, through research that has identified a number of the underlying causes of risk for drivers, including teenage passengers and smartphone use and other distractions. We now understand the effectiveness of parental supervision and involvement, including setting limits on driving privileges that can reduce risky behaviors when their teens are behind the wheel. Research like this promises to bridge the divide between basic and applied population health science to create safer driving experiences for teenage drivers.

The understanding and insight gained from psychological science is extremely important to achieving the NICHD mission. The examples cited here are a very small sampling of the ways that psychological research has always been, and will continue to be, at the heart of what NICHD is about. ●

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