

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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John McConnon Darley



John Darley is retiring this year after 44 years on the faculty of the Department of Psychology and 11 years on the faculty of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. One of the foremost figures in social psychology, famous for his studies of why bystanders to emergencies fail to help, John has been an inspiring teacher and mentor to generations of Princeton students and colleagues.

John was born on the April 3, 1938, in Minneapolis. His father, John G. (“Jack”) Darley, was a counseling psychologist who worked in the areas of student personnel psychology, individual differences and psychological testing. Jack was also a legendary teacher and administrator at the University of Minnesota and a major figure in psychology on the national scene. Thus, psychology was very much the family business in the Darley household, and John grew up conversing with eminent psychologists in his own living room.

John received his B.A. in psychology from Swarthmore College in 1960 and his Ph.D. in social relations from Harvard University in 1965. A year before he finished his dissertation, he accepted a job as an assistant professor at New York University.

While at NYU, John began the line of research that would make his career. On March 27, 1964, The New York Times reported the story of Kitty Genovese, a New York woman, who was slain in a brutal, 30-minute attack near her home in Kew Gardens, Queens. The story centered on the fact that 38 people witnessed the murder but not one of them called the police or stepped forward to intervene. It excoriated these unresponsive bystanders for their apathy and callousness. John and his Columbia University colleague, Bibb Latané, talking about the event several weeks later, took a different view. Recognizing that a powerful, social dynamic was at work, they proposed that the unresponsiveness of the bystanders was driven not by apathy and

callousness, but rather by uncertainty and indecision. Moreover, they maintained that this uncertainty and indecision were exacerbated by the presence of so many other bystanders not intervening. John and Bibb set out to test their account in a series of beautifully crafted and carefully executed laboratory and field experiments. These experiments remain some of the finest examples of the power of social-psychological experimentation to illuminate real-world phenomena. By the time John came to Princeton, as associate professor of psychology, in 1968, he was well on his way to becoming one of the most famous social psychologists in the history of the discipline. In short, his career had a remarkably good first act.

Fortunately, John's career had strong second and third acts as well. The second act was the period he spent as associate professor, then full professor and then the Dorman T. Warren Professor of Psychology here at Princeton. During that time, John built up the social psychology program into one of the two or three strongest in the country. He published a steady stream of articles on altruism and bystander intervention, deviance and conformity, attribution theory, social comparison processes, and expectancy confirmation, all in top psychology journals. These articles consolidated John's reputation as one of the premier social psychologists in the country, a true generalist who made important contributions on a remarkably wide range of topics. Also during this period, John wrote an introductory psychology textbook with colleagues Sam Glucksberg and Ron Kinchla, co-authored several papers and a book on professional issues in psychology, and chaired the Department of Psychology from 1980-85. On the basis of his contributions to psychology, John received many prestigious honors and awards, including the Distinguished Scientist Award from the Society of Experimental Social Psychology (1997) and fellow status in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2005). He also served as president of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology (1989) and the American Psychological Society (2002).

At the same time, John was always a great champion of interdisciplinary exchanges and applied research. He spent about

a decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s studying behavioral approaches to energy conservation in collaboration with colleagues in engineering — work that presaged the recent explosion of research on the topic. His interest in social influence and group dynamics led to a project on how organizations socialize wrongdoing. Most significantly, a side interest in laypeople’s conceptions of the law and the legal system that began in collaboration with a legal scholar grew into John’s main line of research for the last decade of his career.

John’s interest in applied questions and interdisciplinary collaborations led to the third act of his career, spent with a joint appointment in the Wilson School. John flourished in the school, dedicating himself to the development of the required course on psychology and policy for master’s students and teaching a very popular course on negotiation. He also participated in the Program in Law and Public Affairs, the Joint Degree Program in Social Policy, and the WWS faculty council.

Of all the roles that John has played during his illustrious career at Princeton, however, the one he enjoyed most was as mentor to younger scholars. John has loved working one-on-one with students, especially graduate students and senior thesis advisees. He has a strong intuitive feel for the mentor-mentee relationship, and was prepared to play a mentor role for postdocs and younger colleagues, as well. John enjoys nothing more than spending an hour or two with a student, a postdoc or a new assistant professor, tossing around ideas, designing research and getting to know him or her. In those interactions over the years, he has managed to communicate three very important messages: that psychological research matters, that it is a great deal of fun and that the young person has something to contribute. Many a career in academic psychology was launched, nurtured or reinvigorated by an hour or two spent with John.