The Founding of Psi Chi
at the Ninth International Congress of Psychology

Convocation to Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of Psi Chi
Friday, September 3, 1999, 11 a.m.
President’s Room, Woosley Hall
Yale University, New Haven, CT

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The idea for Psi Chi began in 1927 with a late night conversation between two psychology students, Fred Lewis and Edwin Newman, at the University of Kansas. They were working on separate research projects in the large basement of the psychology department there. Fatigued and trying to stay awake, they met over a hot drink. Lewis noted with some displeasure the absence of a national student organization in psychology. Newman challenged him to do something about it. With that challenge, the idea for Psi Chi began to take form.

Newman and Lewis spent the next two years writing to faculty at colleges and universities, corresponding with other students, and organizing discussion groups. They wanted to know what other people thought of their idea for a student organization. In contemporary terms we would say they conducted a needs assessment.

The response to their query was mixed. About a third of their respondents were strongly in favor, another third was lukewarm, and a final third was decidedly negative. The most positive response came from June Downey, at the University of Wyoming, one of the pioneer women in psychology. They were particularly grateful for her support because they had a very negative response from the distinguished Harvard historian of psychology, Edwin G. Boring. He wrote a blistering 3-page letter, detailing the reasons why he thought such an organization should not be brought into existence. At that time, Boring was a dean of American psychology and his opinion was not to be taken lightly.

Here are some of the things that Boring wrote to them. He said:

My own personal view, of which I shall speak first, is one of increased despair at the thought of this new fraternity, and I am going to write you frankly and positively of it since you should see the matter from all angles. . . . Your letter with the copy of the resolutions enclosed is more depressing to me than any of the many things of this sort I have received for a year or more. . . .

Research does not flourish under organization. These societies give but the illusion of support to research, when actually they are draining energy from it. . . . I shall not send your letter to any member of our staff and my reason is itself enlightening. One does not bother colleagues by bothering them with things that they would scorn, and I feel so sure that they would all echo my views, that it would seem discourteous to try to shift this problem to them. . . .

It would be just too bad—it seems to me—for psychology to start another abortive, debilitating organization.

Sincerely yours,
Edwin G. Boring
I cannot imagine the effect of his letter on these young people. It's a wonder they did not give up the idea right there. But they didn't. (In 1948, in a wonderful piece of irony, Edwin Newman, the co-founder of Psi Chi, became Chairman of the Dept. of Psychology at Harvard, effectively becoming E. G. Boring's boss. By that time, however, Boring had become a good friend of Psi Chi.)

In any case, after several preliminary meetings, it was decided that a psychology society would be formed. The plan was to hold the first organizational meeting of Psi Chi in September 1929, during the next annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

APA was the logical place to begin such a society. It was the most powerful organization of psychologists in the country, perhaps the world, and most psychologists of the day belonged to it. Moreover, it had become an enormous group. By 1929, it had 1100 members. (Who would have guessed that 70 years later APA would be more than 100 times that size?) But something curious was being planned for the APA meeting that year. There wasn't going to be one. Instead, there was going to be an international meeting of psychologists, the first to be held in the United States.

There had been an earlier attempt to hold an international congress in the U.S. in 1913 but the proposal had resulted in a great deal of bickering and infighting among the prominent psychologists of the day. One of the early organizers, James Mark Baldwin, had been forced to flee the country in a personal scandal, disrupting the planning. The psychologist who had been suggested as the president of that congress, and probably the only person who could have held it all together, was William James. Unfortunately, he died during the early stages of planning. The organizers simply could not overcome the many setbacks they experienced and the Congress was never held.

There were some problems in 1929 as well. The president of the Congress was to be James McKeen Cattell, a man with a reputation for being more than a bit cranky and high-handed. The host was James Rowland Angell, who had been a leader of the Chicago functionalist psychologists, and was now president of Yale. Among other things Cattell tried to persuade Angell to put up $50,000 to support the Congress. Cattell argued that Harvard University had made such a grant recently to an international gathering of physiologists. Angell quickly learned that Cattell was not telling the truth, and their dealings were off to a bad start.

In spite of their differences, the 9th International Congress of Psychology was scheduled for September 1-7, 1929, at Yale University. APA made plans for their president, Karl Lashley, to give his presidential address at the Congress, but otherwise APA effectively cancelled their plans to hold a meeting in deference to the international meeting. And what a meeting it was!

The Congress may well have been the occasion for the most impressive gathering of psychologists in the history of the discipline. From North America came 722 registrants, almost 3/4 of the total membership of the APA. Also attending were 104 international psychologists from 21 countries, including many from Europe, and others from Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, China, and Egypt. Among those present from the U.S. were Mary Calkins, Joseph Jastrow, Christine Ladd Franklin, Lewis Terman, Edward Thorndike, Margaret Washburn, Arnold Gesell, David Wechsler, Florence Goodenough, Robert Yerkes, and many others—a roll call of the most prominent American psychologists of the day.

Among the international visitors were Charles Spearman, from England; Wolfgang Kohler, Kurt Lewin, and William Stern, from Germany; the Buhlers, from Austria; Eduard Claparede and
Jean Piaget, from Switzerland; and Ivan Pavlov and Lev Vygotsky, from the USSR. Angell, as president of Yale, gave a welcoming address. Cattell, as president of the Congress, also gave an address. The highlight of the conference, however, may have been the address by Ivan Pavlov, the noted Russian physiologist and psychologist.

It was Pavlov's second visit to the U.S. and it's a wonder he returned. On the first visit, a half dozen years earlier, he had been mugged in New York's Grand Central Station and robbed of $800. He was 80 years old in 1929, but he was still an animated and passionate speaker. He spoke in Russian, but had a translator with him, a man by the name of Anrep, who had translated one of his earlier books into English. During one section of his speech, Pavlov became so passionate that the large audience broke into spontaneous applause. When Pavlov's words were translated by Anrep, it turned out that he had been describing a piece of laboratory equipment.

There are a few personal accounts of the event available. On the 40th anniversary of the founding, Edwin Newman wrote a lengthy piece on the Congress for the Psi Chi Newsletter. His article is particularly good for establishing the context in which the Congress took place. He tells us that it was a hot and muggy Labor Day Weekend when the Congress began, and that it took him five hours to make his way to New Haven from New York City because of the beach traffic. He also reminded us that September 3, 1929, the date of the first organizational meeting of the Psi Chi representatives, was a special date for the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the famed stock market indicator. On that date, the Dow Jones reached its highest level in history (remember this is 1929!) and it would not reach that level again for another 35 years. While Newman was reluctant to cite the founding of Psi Chi as a causal agent in the stock market collapse, he nonetheless suggested caution in founding future psychology honor societies.

The Psi Chi Charter was signed the following day, September 4, 1929. Representatives were present from eleven colleges and universities; three others signed by proxy. Additional chapters were allowed charter member status if they signed on by January 1, 1930. In all, 22 colleges and universities were eventually designated charter members. And that was the modest beginning of Psi Chi, in the midst of one of the greatest gatherings of psychologists ever assembled, and with a future so bright and exciting that no one there present, I believe, could ever have anticipated the wonderful things that lay in the future for the organization.
This article was originally presented as an address by John D. Hogan, PhD, at the Convocation to Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of Psi Chi held September 3, 1999, in the President's Room, Woolsey Hall, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

During his presentation on the founding of Psi Chi at Yale, Psi Chi Historian John Hogan points to a painting of the esteemed psychologist and president of Yale University, James Rowland Angell, who hosted the Ninth International Congress of Psychology at Yale in 1929. Harold Takooshian (right), Psi Chi's 1998-99 national president, organized the special convocation at Yale to celebrate Psi Chi's 70th anniversary.

Attendees at Psi Chi's 70th anniversary convocation held at Yale University, where Psi Chi was founded in 1929 during the Ninth International Congress of Psychology. The framed "Yard of Psychologists" photograph (published in the Winter 2000 issue of Eye on Psi Chi, page 12) pictures the original attendees at the 1929 Congress.

This is a select portion of the "Yard of Psychologists" photograph shown in its actual size. The original photo is truly remarkable, not only because it captured for posterity the gathering of so many notable psychologists on such an historic occasion, but also because of its detail, its framing, its size, the number of people included, and what must have been a monumental task of positioning the crowd and capturing their attention for the shot.