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## Kihlstrom, John F.



John F. Kihlstrom  
University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA,  
USA

### Introduction

Pretty much the first thing John Kihlstrom ever wanted to be was a psychologist – not a cowboy, or a fireman, or a teacher – and a *personality* psychologist at that. And the inspiration for this ambition was not Freud, or even Skinner, but rather the lone psychologist who served his local public school system.

Kihlstrom was born on October 24, 1948 in Norwich, New York, the third child of Harriet Foster Kihlstrom, then a legal secretary, and Waldo Helge Kihlstrom, a Presbyterian minister whose church was in nearby Sherburne. He has an older sister, Jean, now a retired nurse and health administrator, and an older brother, Donald, now a retired schoolteacher and antique dealer. Soon thereafter his father took up a new ministry in Horseheads, New York, where his mother worked as a school secretary. After his parents separated, his mother moonlighted for Francis P. (Frank) Coyle, the school psychologist, typing the reports he prepared on students who were dealing with various educational difficulties. Those reports had to be proofread, and there was nobody else but he available to check the typescript while she read

the original aloud. Set aside the ethical questions: Kihlstrom was just a little kid at the time, and his mother made sure that he did not know any of the children discussed in the reports. But he became fascinated with how Coyle was able to use psychological tests to delve into the minds of other people; and he decided that he wanted to do that, too.

This decision was cemented by an interview Kihlstrom's mother arranged with Dr. Michael Beer, an organizational psychologist at nearby Corning Glass Works, whose children attended her school (he later became a professor at the Harvard Business School). Personnel management looked like the same kind of enterprise: using tests and measurements to help employees become better workers and managers. Beer also gave him some of the best advice he ever received: "Don't ever tell anyone you collect stamps."

Those were the days before high schools (at least his) offered Advanced Placement Psychology, so any formal introduction to psychology had to wait until college. Kihlstrom did read Calvin Hall's *Primer of Freudian Psychology*, searching in vain for the good parts, but psychoanalysis never attracted him. Good stories, to be sure, but not too plausible. No tests, no measurements, no independent corroboration. Following his interview with Beer, he had applied to Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, which would have given him an Ivy League education at a public university price. But he really wanted a liberal arts education, and he was

not ready to commit to industrial and organizational psychology. Colgate, his first choice, offered a full scholarship, so there he went (1966–1970). But psychology had to wait again, until sophomore year, because the psychology department did not permit freshmen in its courses.

## Education

When Kihlstrom finally got to the introductory course, the textbook was by Morgan and King, two physiological psychologists who did not spend much time on personality. Psychology majors also took a two-semester methods course. The first half was based on Underwood's *Experimental Psychology*: the class conducted studies of absolute and difference thresholds with Von Frey hairs, verbal learning with memory drums (no computers yet), and everyone got an animal to train. Some students got rats; he got a goldfish who learned to turn on a light in what he now understands to be an expression of intrinsic motivation. The second half was on personality and social psychology (no developmental psychology in what was, then, an all-men's school!). The text was Byrne's *Introduction to Personality: A Research Approach*, which surveyed research on particular constructs, such as authoritarianism and achievement motivation, to illustrate the measurement of individual differences and the study of personality structure, development, dynamics, and change. Tests and measurements and external validity, to be sure, but he remembers thinking "There's got to be more to personality than that!"

Kihlstrom wanted an approach that would view the person whole, and he found what he was looking for, to some extent, in the survey course in personality, taught by William E. Edmonston and based on Hall and Lindzey's *Theories of Personality*. About half of the book was devoted to various psychodynamic theories, which still left him cold – though he admired their attempt to say something deep about personality. But it also had chapters on comprehensive "factor theories" of personality (mostly Eysenck and Cattell), as well as Lewin's field theory, with what Ned Jones (Jones 1985) called his "grand truism"

of  $B = f(P,E)$ . Kelly's personal construct theory, which became important for him later, was not discussed in the first edition.

Colgate had no graduate students, so all psychology majors were encouraged to apprentice themselves in faculty members' laboratories. Edmonston was the personality psychologist, so Kihlstrom chose him: it was only afterwards that he learned that Edmonston did hypnosis research (Kihlstrom and Frischholtz 2010). Still, as generations of psychologists had learned before him, hypnosis is a fascinating phenomenon, intrinsically interesting to experimenter and subject alike. By the time he completed his junior year, he was completely hooked, and was preparing a senior honors thesis trying to measure alterations in consciousness (Kihlstrom and Edmonston 1971). It was the 1960s, after all.

During senior year, Kihlstrom also took a course on "Depth Psychology and Religion" taught by M. Holmes ("Call me Steve," not that any student would have dared) Hartshorne, an existentialist theologian who had studied with Paul Tillich, and who also had been his freshman advisor (eventually, Kihlstrom would take all of his courses). Hartshorne introduced Kihlstrom to Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which struck a responsive chord. He really resonated to the existentialists' emphasis on the necessity, in an absurd world, of giving meaning to life and the universe: "existence precedes essence" and all that. It was the 1960s, after all. When Kihlstrom applied to graduate school, he still wanted to do hypnosis research, but he also wrote that he sought to "quantify the concepts of existentialist theories of personality." Burt Rosner, then the department chair at the University of Pennsylvania, told Kihlstrom that they admitted him just to see what he looked like.

At Penn (1970–1975), Kihlstrom was in the Program of Research Training in Personality and Experimental Psychopathology, which was its version of a clinical training program. His admission letter was signed by Julius Wishner (Kihlstrom 1995), as the director of the Clinical Training Program, and when Kihlstrom called him to tell him that he did not *want* to be in a clinical training program, Wishner replied "Don't

worry – you’re not” and hung up the phone. Kihlstrom set his interests in existentialism aside for the time being and devoted himself to hypnosis research with Martin Orne (Kihlstrom 2001), his wife, Emily Carota Orne (Dinges et al. 2017), and their associate Fred Evans (Kihlstrom 2006). Most of that research concerned posthypnotic amnesia, and Kihlstrom gradually turned his interests toward memory and consciousness. But Orne, a psychiatrist who also held a PhD in social psychology, had been a student of Robert W. White, who in turn had been part of Henry Murray’s research group at Harvard (and replaced him as director of Harvard’s Psychological Clinic); so personality and social psychology were never far from Kihlstrom’s mind. Memory, after all, is a critical component of self and identity (Kihlstrom et al. 2002); and unconscious processes figure prominently in many classic theories of personality (Kihlstrom 2012).

And Wishner had dissembled a little bit. Kihlstrom *was* in a clinical training program, after all, if one that emphasized research rather than practice. In 1898, Penn had actually opened the first university-based psychology clinic, directed by Lightner Witmer, who coined the very term “clinical psychology.” Kihlstrom took the mandatory course in personality assessment, reading Meehl on “The Dynamics of ‘Structured’ Personality Tests” and clinical vs. statistical prediction, Cronbach and Meehl and Loevinger on construct validity, and Campbell and Fiske on the multitrait-multimethod matrix. Wishner, who had been a student of Sam Beck’s at Northwestern, taught the students how to score and interpret the Rorschach, which he called “psychology’s most interesting test” (Beck had studied with Oberholzer, a student of Bleuler’s who had worked with Rorschach himself). The class also read Mischel’s *Personality and Assessment*, with its trenchant critique of traditional personality testing and the trait psychology that underlay it – and arguments for the importance of the meaning of the situation, as construed by the individual.

At the end of his graduate studies (1974–1975), Kihlstrom took a clinical internship at the Temple University Health Sciences Center,

a large inner-city hospital, where the psychiatry department, led by Charles Shagass, was organized along team lines. Physicians controlled diagnosis and treatment, psychologists did the psychological testing and some therapy, and social workers focused on outplacement. At rounds, the psychologists’ testing reports were taken seriously. Kihlstrom was in heaven and traded all his therapy cases for testing cases until he got caught – at which point he was assigned the worst cases imaginable.

## Personality and Cognition

Kihlstrom’s first faculty position was at Harvard (1975–1980). During his job interviews, he was repeatedly asked what he wanted to teach, and he answered that he wanted to teach courses on experimental psychopathology and altered states of consciousness. The first three times, George Goethals (the senior tutor), Robert Rosenthal (an old friend of Martin’s), and Brendan Maher (the chair, and a leading experimental psychopathologist himself) then asked him how he would feel about teaching a graduate course in personality assessment. Kihlstrom replied each time that it would be OK; but when, on the fourth interview, Dave McClelland asked about teaching, he promptly said that “I’d really like to teach a course in personality assessment.” Before he even gave his job talk (at which both Maher and McClelland fell asleep), they were talking to him about Harvard’s health and retirement plans.

Kihlstrom never did get to teach that course in experimental psychopathology, though he did get to teach a course on altered states; but his favorite course at Harvard turned out to be that graduate course in assessment, which he co-taught with McClelland. Their primary texts were Wiggins’s *Personality and Prediction*, to give students a view of psychometric methods at their most sophisticated; Rapaport’s *Diagnostic Psychological Testing*, to introduce them to projective tests and clinical interpretation; and, of course, Mischel’s book. The course had gone untaught for several years, so there was a buildup of students who wanted to take it, including Ritchie

Davidson, Robert Dworkin, Stanley Klein, Judy Harackiewicz, and Dan McAdams. McClelland had no use for personality questionnaires, so the two instructors complemented each other nicely; Kihlstrom remembers that faculty and students alike had a very good time, and they all learned a lot from each other. Kihlstrom also learned a lot from his junior faculty colleagues, especially Reid Hastie, who patiently tutored him in the psychology of memory and introduced him to social cognition.

At the time, personality psychology was undergoing a crisis and a transition. It had begun in earnest with Mischel's book, which proffered the "personality coefficient," amounting to  $r = .30$ , thus explaining about 10% of variance, as the ceiling on the prediction of behavior in some specific situation from assessments of personality traits. Other studies quickly followed, all suggesting that behavior was not as coherent, stable, consistent, and predictable as the Doctrine of Traits had led us to expect. This led to a "battle of the effect sizes" between those who favored the traditional trait view and those, rooted in experimental social psychology, who favored an opposing Doctrine of Situationism. In 1973, Ken Bowers (whom Kihlstrom knew through hypnosis research) had proposed a resolution of the trait-situation debate in terms of a Doctrine of Interactionism, which held that "situations are as much a function of the person as the person's behavior is a function of the situation" (Bowers 1973). Interactionism resonated with Lewin's "grand truism," so it seemed to be a good idea, and empirical studies employing the "S-R inventory" technique showed that the statistical interaction of person and situation accounted for more behavioral variance than either main effect taken separately (e.g., Dworkin and Kihlstrom 1978). Later, Albert Bandura added his Doctrine of Reciprocal Determinism (Bandura 1978), invoking bidirectional causality among the three causal elements: persons, environments, and behavior (Kihlstrom and Harackiewicz 1990). At that point, it seemed personality theory and research had acquired a richness and complexity suitable to its subject matter.

There remained the matter of just how persons affected situations. Interactionism, as Bowers conceived it, was more dynamic than implied by the interaction term in the analysis of variance. Kihlstrom got some insight into these dynamics during a sabbatical year at Stanford (Harvard did not often give tenure, but it did give junior faculty time off to get another job). He had gone West to spend time with E.R. ("Jack") Hilgard, a distinguished hypnosis researcher (among many other distinctions; Kihlstrom 1994, 2002), who was about to retire. Mischel and Bandura were there as well, and Kihlstrom looked forward to having some contact with them (at Colgate, he had taken a course on the history and philosophy of science with Mischel's brother, Theodore). At a weekly seminar led by Robert Abelson, who was visiting from Yale, Kihlstrom happened to sit next to Nancy Cantor, one of Mischel's graduate students, and they started talking about the work she was doing on personality prototypes. One thing led to another, and pretty soon they were developing the idea that cognition was the key to the person-situation interaction. That is, people responded to their *mental representation* of the situation, and that mental representation was itself a product of their own constructive cognitive activity. The insight was not original with them, of course. It had its roots in Mischel's often-ignored assertion that behavior was controlled by the *perceived* situation, and to Kelly's stress on the importance of the individual's *construal* of the situation – and, even further back, to Lewin's emphasis on the *psychological* situation, and even symbolic interactionism and the Thomas Theorem (Merton 1995). Both Mischel and Maher had been students of George Kelly at Ohio State, and after Kihlstrom returned to Harvard, he added Kelly's thoroughly cognitive theory of personal constructs to the assessment course. He also convened an evening seminar on "Personality and Cognition," in which Judy Harackiewicz, Stan Klein, Beverly Chew, and Dan McAdams, among others, were active participants. When Nancy took her first job at Princeton, the two of them organized a symposium on "Personality, Cognition, and Social Interaction" dedicated to breaking through the institutional boundaries

that had separated personality and cognitive social psychology (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1981).

Cantor and Kihlstrom also tried their hand at writing a textbook based on this theme. The chapters they drafted gave a critical picture of what the psychology of personality was like in the mid-1980s, but there was not yet enough social-cognitive research on personality to sustain a textbook. With their publisher's permission, the project morphed into a scholarly monograph announcing a new "social intelligence" view of personality (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1987), deeply rooted in Mischel and Kelly.

Of course, "social intelligence" had been in the air at least since Thorndike (1920) introduced the term. But Thorndike, and most others who came after him, construed social intelligence as something like "social IQ": a trait-like dimension on which individual differences could be measured by instruments modeled on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale and which could predict how well individuals performed in social situations. In contrast to this "ability view" of social intelligence, which persists to this day (Goleman 2006), Cantor and Kihlstrom proposed a "knowledge view" based on the meaning of "intelligence" in such terms as *military intelligence*. That is, a person's experience, thought, and action in some situation depended on the knowledge and beliefs – the *intelligence* – that he or she brought into that situation. People did not differ in how socially intelligent they were; rather, they differed in terms of *what social intelligence they had* – what they knew about themselves, the people they dealt with, and the situations they encountered them in. Somewhat paradoxically, in view of where Kihlstrom started out, the knowledge view abjures the sort of testing that would put the measurement of social intelligence on a comparative scale. The whole framework is "ideographic," in Allport's terms. Nevertheless, he and Cantor still get occasional requests for tests that would measure a person's social intelligence.

In 1979, as his time at Harvard was drawing to an end, Kihlstrom was surprised to receive the American Psychological Association's "Early Career Award" in personality. When he was nominated, he did not think he had a chance, but

individual differences are crucial in hypnosis research, and all of his research had included assessments of hypnotizability. The chair of the committee later told him that, in view of the continuing trait-situation controversy, they wanted to recognize someone who took individual differences seriously. And, in fact, he has done quite a bit of research on hypnotizability, including analyses of the structure of hypnotizability and its correlates in the wider domain of personality.

The Early Career Award led to an offer of tenure at the University of Wisconsin (1980–1987), where Kihlstrom was assigned to teach the introductory course and the survey course in personality – a combination he continued after he moved to the University of Arizona (1987–1994). At the time, many personality courses, and textbooks, began with Freud and later psychodynamic theories, against which traditional trait theories pale by comparison ("There's got to be more to personality than that!"). Instead, Kihlstrom began with types and traits, compared methods of personality questionnaire construction, and sampled experimental research on various constructs, culminating in *The Big Five* (which he likes to characterize as "The Big Five Blind Date Questions"). The focus, however, was on critically examining the four assumptions of the Doctrine of Traits: coherence, stability, consistency, and predictability – and finding the evidence for all four surprisingly weak. Only then did Kihlstrom turn to depth psychology as an alternative to the apparent superficiality of trait theory ("There's got to be more to personality than that!"), moving quickly from classical psychoanalysis to the neo-Freudian theories of Anna Freud, Adler, Horney, Fromm, Sullivan, and Erikson. These theories were mostly lacking in convincing empirical support too, and Kihlstrom said so. But, for better or worse, Freud changed the way we thought about ourselves, and it is impossible to understand the twentieth-century culture without knowing something about him, so he taught psychoanalysis as a contribution to liberal education (he did omit Freud entirely one year and found that the course went surprisingly well without him). There followed a discussion of situationism, interactionism, and

reciprocal determinism, leading up to the cognitive approach, with Mischel's and Bandura's cognitive versions of social learning theory, and Kelly's personal construct theory, as exemplars. Finally, Kihlstrom used research on gender to illustrate how biological, cognitive, and social factors worked together to yield – major features of personality: gender identity and gender role.

Kihlstrom's treatment of personality in the introductory course, which he continued to teach at Yale (1994–1997) and Berkeley (beginning in 1997), had a similar flavor. Most textbooks treat personality separately from social psychology and are focused on Freud and the Big Five, but he prefer to treat the two fields in an integrated fashion, using Lewin's "grand truism" as a framework (J.F. Kihlstrom 2013). Thus, behavior is influenced by both personal and environmental factors; people influence the environments to which they respond; and bidirectional causality allows environments to shape people and for behavior to feedback to change both the person who emitted it and the environment which elicited it. Kihlstrom then decomposes reciprocal determinism into "three dialectics" – between the person and behavior; between the environment and behavior; and between the person and the environment. This last, of course, returns us to the Doctrine of Interactionism and a consideration of how persons affect situations through mechanisms of evocation, selection, behavioral manipulation, and cognitive transformation. When it comes to personality development, he emphasized the critical role of the nonshared environment. In psychological terms, every child is born to different parents, raised in a different family, lives in a different neighborhood, attends a different school, and worships in a different church. Using the Lewinian framework, which turns out to be not a truism, but certainly grand, Kihlstrom finds that he can cover everything that is important in personality and social psychology.

In 1975, before leaving Penn for Harvard, Kihlstrom married Susan Jo Russell, who had been working in Orne's lab, and who in Cambridge returned to her career as an elementary school teacher and mathematics educator. They divorced in 1982. In 1984, Kihlstrom met Lucy

Canter, an MBA student at Wisconsin who had an earlier career as a social worker and had a special interest in healthcare. They married in 1986. While they were at Arizona, Lucy took a PhD in health services administration and research from the University of Minnesota, studying mental health "carve-outs" and the pharmaceutical industry. Together, they developed an interest in health cognition and behavior. Most of health psychology is concerned with the stress-disease connection, and psychoneuroimmunology, but from a cognitive point of view, they were more interested in patients' (and physicians') *beliefs* about disease, how these beliefs influence individual health behavior, and the role of cognition in problems of compliance with prescriptions for prevention and treatment (Kihlstrom and Canter Kihlstrom 1999). You can make a pill to cure disease, but then you have got to get people to take the pill – and there is no pill for that.

## A Generalist

Kihlstrom identifies himself as a cognitive social psychologist with clinical training and interests. For most of his career, he has kept one foot in cognitive and the other in social psychology (including personality), shifting his weight from time to time, always keeping an eye on clinical material for inspiration. These days, he is often identified as a cognitive psychologist, and in 2003, in another surprise, he was elected to the Society of Experimental Psychologists. But he has always felt more at home in personality and social psychology. Memory, for Kihlstrom, is not just a mental repository of stored information; it is deeply personal and social, part of human ecology. Social psychology is not just the study of social influence; it is the study of mind in action. And personality is about more than individual differences; it is where psychology gets to view the person whole. At Penn, Kihlstrom was trained by generalists to be a generalist, and he has published in almost every area of psychology, including animal learning (Mineka and Kihlstrom 1978, still one of his favorite papers) psychophysics (Tataryn & Kihlstrom 2017), and life-span

development (Denney et al. 1992). His 1987 *Science* paper on “The Cognitive Unconscious” is generally regarded as a milestone in the revival of scientific interest in unconscious mental life (Kihlstrom 1987), and he joined Stan Klein in papers that presaged the development of social neuroscience (Klein and Kihlstrom 1998; Klein et al. 1996). With Gordon Bower, Kihlstrom co-chaired a task force which made recommendations to enhance the support of basic scientific research by the National Institute of Mental Health (Behavioral Science Task Force 1995). From 1995–1999, Kihlstrom was Editor of *Psychological Science*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Society (as it was then known), whose motto was “We publish the psychology that *Science* doesn’t.”

At Harvard, Kihlstrom was a personality psychologist with clinical training. At Wisconsin, he was a social psychologist who wanted to be a cognitive psychologist. At Arizona, he was a cognitive psychologist who missed social psychology. At Yale, he could be both, and at Berkeley, he could be both *and* warm. In 2013, Kihlstrom was named the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor in the College of Letters and Science. There are five of these professorships, one for each division of the College of Letters and Science, endowed by the progenitors of a multigenerational Cal family. He is particularly pleased that his chair is located in the Division of Undergraduate and Interdisciplinary Studies. Kihlstrom really imprinted on his undergraduate experience at Colgate, and so he has always preferred undergraduate to graduate teaching, including the introductory course (which he has taught continuously since 1980, including online). And his experience with Colgate’s innovative Core Curriculum gave him an appreciation for interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Since leaving Arizona, Kihlstrom has not had the opportunity to teach personality. But as a member of both the cognition and social/personality programs at Berkeley, as well as the undergraduate interdisciplinary major in Cognitive Science (which he directed for 5 years), he has included personality in his courses on social cognition. The basic principle of cognitive social

psychology is that people’s behavior is determined by their mental representation of the situation they are in; and so we need to know about the cognitive processes by which those mental representations are constructed. The course is structured like a standard cognitive psychology course – perception, learning and memory, language, reasoning, judgment, and decision-making, neuroscience, and development – except that the objects of cognition are social in nature: persons, situations, and the behavior exchanged in them. In his view, individual differences in social behavior – the public expression of private personality – are caused by individual differences in social cognition – which brings us back to social intelligence, personal constructs, and the social learning processes by which our knowledge and beliefs about ourselves and others are acquired.

## Conclusion

Kihlstrom retired from Berkeley in 2018. He never did get around to quantifying the concepts of existentialist theories of personality, but he did carry the essential features of that viewpoint throughout his career. His research on hypnosis led him to develop an interest in the problem of unconscious mental life and to the view that consciousness – our awareness of ourselves and our place in the universe and our ability to determine our own actions – is the central feature of human personhood. His work on memory led to his view of the self as one’s mental representation of oneself (Kihlstrom and Cantor 1984), the role of the self in conscious experience (Kihlstrom 1997), and the critical contribution of autobiographical memory to personal identity. And his work on social cognition led him to appreciate how much of the social world is a creation of individual and collective consciousness and the role of cognitive processes in creating the situations in which our experience, thought, and action occur.

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