

SPR AWARD, 2001

For distinguished contributions to psychophysiology: Arne Öhman

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Arne Öhman received the Distinguished Contribution to Psychophysiology award in 2001 in recognition of a career marked by scientific achievements of lasting importance. In all of the areas of inquiry that he has graced with his scientific acumen, he has made significant contributions. Among these, his work on orienting, electrodermal conditioning, fears and phobias, preparedness, psychopathology, stress, and the evolution of emotion are particularly noteworthy.

Öhman was trained at the University of Uppsala, receiving his Ph.D. in psychology in 1971. His major academic postings have included the University of Bergen, the University of Uppsala, and the Karolinska Institute, where he currently is the head of the Department of Clinical Neuroscience. His honors are numerous, including membership in the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the Academia Europaea, and the Nobel Assembly. He has been an important contributor to the Society for Psychophysiological Research, serving as a member of the Publication Board, as a member of the Board of Directors, and as President of the Society.

Öhman has brought an impressive mastery of psychophysiological, learning, and conditioning methodology to his work. He has been particularly adept at applying these methods to study difficult and complex psychological issues. This application of precise experimental methodology to questions of intellectual substance is a hallmark of his research. Moreover, he is clearly at ease dealing with both the procedural and theoretical aspects of his work. In his papers, the reader always goes away impressed both by the elegance of his methods and the elegance of his thinking.

Öhman is one of the true pioneers in introducing empirical methodology to test hypotheses derived from evolutionary theories. His thinking about the ways that humans are prepared

by their particular evolutionary history to associate fear responses more readily to some kinds of stimuli rather than others provides an excellent example of his approach. In a series of elegant and now “classic” experiments he was both able to reject the alternative hypothesis of equipotentiality and to refine the notion of preparedness by showing differences between aversive and appetitive contexts. These studies profoundly changed the way we think about human emotion and evolution. Moreover they provide an invaluable prototype for deriving testable, falsifiable hypotheses from evolutionary theories.

Öhman is also a pioneer in “translational” clinical research—the application of basic laboratory research methods to the study of clinical problems. Throughout his career he has applied the psychophysiological tools honed in his research on information processing, orienting, and emotion to provide important insights about the nature of, vulnerabilities to, and prognosis for mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and phobias.

No discussion about Öhman’s contributions to psychophysiology would be complete without mentioning the important role he has played in making the field and the Society for Psychophysiological Research more international. Working in different countries, conducting research with an international cast of collaborators, sponsoring conferences, and hosting visitors, he has made the distances between psychophysiologicalists around the world seem smaller. In addition, his graceful and incisive writing style, personal warmth, commitment to science, and openness have drawn many other scientists to him and to our field.

For over 30 years, Arne Öhman has been one of psychophysiology’s most important contributors, practitioners, and ambassadors. This award recognizes the many contributions he has made to the field thus far and the many still to come.

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