

# Aphasia Insights!

## Joseph M. Wepman and “*Reintegration into a Functioning Whole*”

By Tom Broussard, Ph.D.

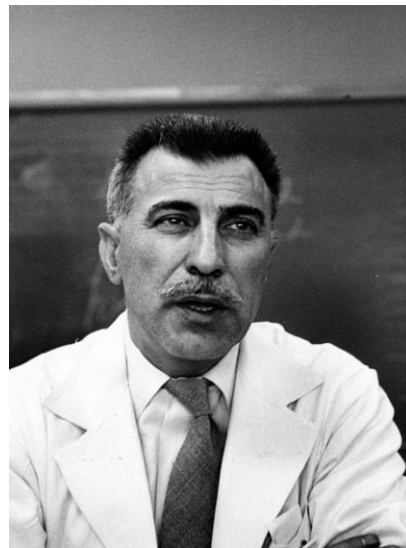
This is the next in a series of articles about the science and scientists behind stroke, aphasia, language, plasticity and recovery.

**Joseph M. Wepman** was born in Copemish (“Big Beech”) (pop. 195), Michigan and died in Riverside, California (12/24/1907-3/18/1982). He graduated with a BA from Western Michigan College of Education in 1931 (now Western Michigan University), received his Ph.M at the University of Wisconsin in 1934, and his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1948.

Dr. Wepman worked as a research psychologist (1943-1944) and as a clinical psychologist (1944-1946) in the U.S. Army Air Corps during WWII. He also served as Director of the Aphasia Center and was Chief Clinical Psychologist at Dewitt and Letterman General Hospitals (1943-1946).

After the war, he served as a clinical instructor in surgery and a lecturer in psychology at the University of Chicago from 1946 to 1957. With new responsibilities starting in 1958, he became the chair of the Psychology Department and the director of the Speech and Language Clinic at Chicago for many years.

Dr. Wepman conducted research in many different areas; auditory and visual perception, aphasia, and psycholinguistic processing. His work



**Joseph M. Wepman**

Credit: Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

on aphasia spanned decades from 1947 to 1976 which provided significant contributions to aphasia rehabilitation. Wepman and Hildred Schuell were both founders of the stimulation approach to aphasia therapy but with different approaches (Tesak, 2008, Coelho, 2008).

He applied his “whole person” concept (Wepman, 1958) to aphasia therapy in his book *Recovery from Aphasia* (Wepman, 1951), and described the symptoms of the disorder of aphasia going beyond language as the only deficit to be fixed.

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“But the integrative action of the nervous system is different from these, in that its agent is not mere intercellular materials, as in connective tissue, nor the transference of material in mass, as by the circulation; it works through living lines of stationary cells along which it dispatches waves of physico-chemical disturbance, and these act as releasing forces in distant organs where they are finally impinge.

Hence it is not surprising that the nervous integration has as a feature of relatively high *speed*...” pg. 3

**Sherrington, CS. The Integrative Action of the Nervous System. Sir Charles Sherrington, O.M. Cambridge at the University Press, 1947 (1906).**

Aphasia Nation, Inc. is committed to educating the wider public about stroke and aphasia and the “*Aim High for Aphasia!*” international Aphasia Awareness campaign.

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“The language disorder we are discussing is called aphasia. By definition, aphasia is any language problem resulting from organic disturbance of cortical tissue... The language problem manifests itself in the areas of symbolization, comprehension, and reproduction of concepts while the individual is using or attempting to use conventional spoken or written symbols. The brain defect which produces the aphasia is seen to produce also many other far-reaching symptoms beyond the realm of language” (Wepman, 1951, pg. 4).

“Nonlanguage Deviations in Aphasia” listed in Table 1 of *Recovery for Aphasia* describes 34 characteristics including; “Loss of attention and concentration, Loss of memory, Reduced association of ideas, and Abstract-concrete imbalance (loss of ability to abstract; concrete concept formation)” to name a few (Wepman, 1951, pg. 33).

Wepman believed that aphasia is a language disorder with nonlanguage deficits as a result of the underlying damaged neural capacities that also affect the nonlanguage components of communication.

Wepman considered that therapy needs to be adjusted to address the patient as an *individual* “in need of re-establishing the use of neural capacities which are present and potentially functional, but which are blocked from use by the pathological condition existing within the cortex” (Wepman, 1951, pg. 85-86).

He embraced many earlier theories “that aphasia is a disorder of speech or a language problem, narrowly conceived” but advanced his new theory that “aphasia is a disorder

affecting the patient’s *total reaction pattern* due to a disturbance of the integrating capacity of the cortex” (Wepman, 1951, pg. 85).

“He (Wepman) felt that the therapy should be directed toward aiding the brain in its ‘process of reintegration”” (Martin, 1975, pg. 74).

Wepman published “Aphasia Therapy, A New Look” with his new approach of “indirect therapy” changing from direct training, and “shifting almost completely from language qua language to a concentration on the ideas underlying communication” (1972, p. 203).

As he avowed, it “is far beyond the concept of speech recovery as traditionally understood; it involves a total personality readjustment, a new-found stability as a person” (Wepman, 1951, pg. 4).

His “New Look” therapy was the “central foundation of indirect therapy” with “an emphasis upon the dynamics of communication rather than on the inner mental activity of the aphasiac” (Martin, 1981) and stated that “recovery follows reintegration of the remaining cortical tissue into a functioning whole” (Wepman, 1951, pg. 18).

There are many competing theory-based speech therapies but, as Wepman said, “There is no right or wrong way. There is only your way. Whatever you do, stimulate your patients--be stimulating that means. Think of the whole patient, his needs to recover in a real world and to communicate with it. Make your language, your own verbal efforts in therapy, be the handmaiden of your

thoughts. Always keep in mind that aphasia occurs only in people. Humanize your therapy; treat the person, not the language” (Wepman, 1972, pg. 214).

As Wepman stated so well, “A patient’s language doesn’t improve—he improves, and his language reflects it” (Wepman, 1972, pg. 438).

Signed: *The Johnny Appleseed of Aphasia Awareness*

The author is a three-time stroke survivor and aphasia. He could not read, write or speak well which took him years to recover.

He is Founder and President, Aphasia Nation, Inc., a non-profit organization whose mission is to educate the wider public and especially the hospital and healthcare providers, about aphasia, recovery and plasticity, the foundation of all learning.

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