

2000

## Egon Brunswik (1903-1955)

David E. Leary

University of Richmond, [dleary@richmond.edu](mailto:dleary@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/psychology-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leary, David E. "Egon Brunswik." In *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, edited by Alan E. Kazdin, 480-481. Vol. 1. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**BRUNSWIK, EGON** (1903–1955), Austrian and American psychologist. Brunswik stood at the nexus of several philosophical and psychological traditions, created his own distinctive psychology, and died without foreseeing the influence of his concepts and methods. Yet more than forty years after his death by suicide, certain of his ideas and techniques are still being explored and used.

Brunswik was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 18 March 1903. In 1923, he undertook the study of psychology under Karl Bühler at the University of Vienna. In the same period, he participated in a discussion group (led by Moritz Schlick) that gave birth to logical positivism. He was also aware of contemporary developments in psychoanalysis, especially through his future wife, Else Frenkel-Brunswik. After earning his Ph.D. in 1927, Brunswik remained in Bühler's Psychological Institute in order to continue his research in perception. Then, soon after the publication of his seminal work, *Wahrnehmung und Gegenstandswelt* (Leipzig, 1934), Brunswik met Edward C. Tolman, who was on sabbatical in Vienna, and the two of them produced an important theoretical article on "The Organism and the Causal Texture of the Environment" (*Psychological Review*, 1935, 42, 43–77), which provided a suggestive synthesis of European cognitivism and American behaviorism. As a result, Brunswik spent much of 1935 and 1936 at the University of California, Berkeley, and moved permanently to Berkeley in 1937. He remained there until his death in 1955.

Brunswik's early perceptual research led him to develop a "lens model," positing that "distal objects" emanate energy which creates "proximal cues" on the surface, or "lens," of the organism. This "lens" transduces multiple cues into a central focus, or unified perception. In the United States, Brunswik adopted statistics to express the probabilistic implications of his thinking. (He was aware that any single cue is at best an approximate index of the object to which it refers.) After publishing "Probability as a Determiner of Rat Behavior" (*Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 1939, 25, 175-197), he applied his new-found approach to "Thing Constancy as Measured by Correlation Coefficients" (*Psychological Review*, 1940, 47, 69-78). This study showed that subjects can attain veridical perception, even when cues are unreliable.

An important feature of these studies was Brunswik's growing realization that behavior and perception had to be studied in more realistic ways. His next, radical step, definitive of his "probabilistic functionalism," was to study the perceptions of *one subject* within *multiple settings* in the *natural environment* (rather than many subjects in a single experimental situation). Thereafter, Brunswik advocated this new approach to psychological research, emphasizing "functional" and "ecological" validity.

"Distal Focusing of Perception" (*Psychological Monographs*, 1944, 56, 1-49) illustrated what could come from this exacting approach. For the rest of his life, Brunswik tried to convince others of its efficacy, while further elaborating its implications. Sadly, poor health, combined with pessimism about the acceptance of his ideas, brought about the ending of his life. In a vindication of his efforts, however, the concepts of ecological validity and of the perceptual system as an intuitive statistician have inspired subsequent developments in the discipline that seemed initially to ignore his radical innovations.

### Bibliography

- Gigerenzer, G. (1987). Survival of the fittest probabilist: Brunswik, Thurstone, and the two disciplines of psychology. In L. Krüger, G. Gigerenzer, & M. S. Morgan (Eds.), *The probabilistic revolution* (Vol. 2, pp. 49-72). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. An historical and conceptual study of Brunswik's place in psychology.
- Gigerenzer, G. & Murray, D. J. (1987). *Cognition as intuitive statistics*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. An extrapolation of Brunswik's notion of the perceptual system as an intuitive statistician.
- Hammond, K. R. (Ed.) (1966). *The psychology of Egon Brunswik*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The best selection of Brunswik's work, plus examples of its historical influence, edited by one of his major followers.
- Leary, D. E. (1987). From act psychology to probabilistic

functionalism: The place of Egon Brunswik in the history of psychology. In M. G. Ash, & W. R. Woodward (Eds.), *Psychology in twentieth-century thought and society* (pp. 115-142). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A historical and conceptual analysis of the basic dimensions and legacy of Brunswik's psychology.

*David E. Leary*