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## In Memoriam: Robert Rosenthal (1933-2024), Affable Giant of Psychology and Champion of Honest Science

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IN MEMORIAM

**Robert Rosenthal (1933–2024),  
Affable Giant of Psychology and  
Champion of Honest Science**

Etzel Cardeña  
Lund University



One of the 100 most eminent psychologists in the 20th century (Haggebloom et al., 2002) Harvard and University of California–Riverside Professor Robert Rosenthal, died from an aneurysm on January 5. He is primarily known for his research on the “Pygmalion effect” or “Rosenthal Effect.” In a nutshell, he showed that giving false feedback to teachers about randomly chosen students resulted in the latter achieving more than their peers because of the way they were (differentially) treated by the teachers, a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. He also co-created modern meta-analysis with Gene Glass. He was a delight to interact with, always responsive and kind when I approached him. One of his colleagues, Dave Funder, described him as “about the kindest, least pretentious person you’d ever meet” (<https://news.ucr.edu/articles/2024/01/10/psychology-research-giant-robert-roenthal-has-died>).

In 2016, I had the honor to interview Bob (as he liked to be called) for an article in *Mindfield*, which I edited at that time (Rosenthal, 2016). He started his career as an experimentalist in high school when he was 14 or 15, using a set of Zener cards that Duke University parapsychology J. B. Rhine had sent him in response to a letter! Rosenthal mentioned in the interview that he was impressed by parapsychology’s methodology

and analytic approaches. Incidentally, one of the students he tested was Russel Targ, the laser physicist who later became a major developer of remote viewing (e.g., Targ, 2004).

Bob considered himself an outsider to parapsychology but one who defended it against those who think it impossible, as did recently two open-minded editors of a mainstream journal who decided to publish a paper considering its quality rather than their own a-priori beliefs (Della Sala & Grafman, 2024; for examples of parapsychology-censoring editors see Cardeña, 2015).

Rosenthal developed statistical techniques to analyze psi research (e.g., Rosenthal & Rubin, 1989) and was asked by the National Research Council to review five areas of potential human enhancement. Despite finding that ganzfeld (monotonous sensory stimulation) psi research followed the most rigorous protocols of those areas, he and his co-author (Dr. Monica J. Harris) were “pressured to withdraw our... positive evaluation of psi so that... reports on other areas would be published” (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 26). They refused and he wrote a letter in *Psychological Science* mentioning the pressure and his conclusion that “we found the typical methodological quality of the Ganzfeld experiments to be superior to the typical quality of the four other areas” (Rosenthal, 1990, p. 329). The resulting book by the National Research Council (Druckman & Swets, 1988. P. iii) shamefully does not even include their names as part of the committee.

Decades before the current uproar about questionable research practices (QRP), he wrote a paper analyzing the psi ganzfeld database at that point and discussed replication and the problems of multiple testing, selective reporting, and others. His overall conclusion was that the ganzfeld psi supportive data could not be explained away by these flaws, although they likely reduced its effect size (Rosenthal, 1986).

In 1993, he helped Dean Radin get a grant from Harvard’s Richard Hodgson’s Memorial Fund (Radin, personal communication, January 22, 2024). Hodgson was one of the foremost original psychical researchers and he would likely be aghast to know that Harvard voted to allocate the money of his fund to “the acquisition of materials in the occult sciences” ([https://sites.harvard.edu/harvard-library-funds/home/all-funds/415\\_513603/](https://sites.harvard.edu/harvard-library-funds/home/all-funds/415_513603/)), among them items on “the global conspiracy,” “classic true crime stories,” and so on.

Considering Bob’s eminence and support for psi research, next time someone states that scientists do not support psi, you may ask that person whether Rosen-

thal and hundreds of other modern eminent scientists (<https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/eminent-people-interested-psi>) are not real scientists. Bob and Dr. Harris gave me permission to publish their report and, with gratitude, I do so in this issue.

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