

# In Memoriam: Robert P. Abelson (1928-2005)

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Bob Abelson was born in New York City on Sept. 12, 1928. He received his BA from MIT in 1948, and his Ph.D. from Princeton in 1953. He then joined the faculty at Yale, where he taught for 40 years. He died on July 13, 2005.

Bob made foundational contributions to social psychology, political psychology, and cognitive science, as well as important contributions to statistics. Central to his work was a deep concern with the nature and structure of human beliefs and knowledge. His 1958 model of symbolic psycho-logic", with Milton Rosenberg, was an early attempt to map the psychological structure of attitudes, and was followed by influential analyses of cognitive consistency (or its absence).

Bob's computer modeling of "hot cognition" in 1963 highlighted the importance of affect in an era that increasingly emphasized cognition. His simulation of a true believer (with John Carroll in 1965) resulted in the "ideology machine" (aka the Goldwater Machine) — a significant contribution to the emerging field of political psychology that inspired others to model ideological thinking.

With Ithiel Pool, he conducted one of the first simulations of voter behavior in 1960, and Pool, Abelson & Popkin's description of this endeavor *Candidates, Issues, and Strategies*, was recognized as a classic work of social science. In 1982, Abelson, Kinder, Peters, and Fiske showed that affect is a major determinant of voter preferences for candidates.

Bob was also a founder of and major contributor to cognitive science. Both independently and in his close collaboration with Roger Schank (which resulted in the landmark 1977 book *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding*, Bob argued convincingly that human thought was embedded in a rich web of organized, specific knowledge about the world.

As a statistician, Bob was known for suggesting elegant ways to analyze data and test hypotheses. His widely used 1995 book *Statistics as Principled Argument* presented considerable practical wisdom on using statistical analyses to make empirically-based arguments.

Bob also did important applied work. He helped John Tukey develop a system for projecting election outcomes and served as an election night statistical consultant for NBC. He was one of the designers of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. He worked as a pollster and consultant for numerous political campaigns, including the presidential campaigns of Kennedy, Carter, and Mondale.

Bob received Distinguished Scientific Contribution Awards from the American Psychological Association, APS, the Society for Experimental Social Psychology and the International Society of Political Psychology. He was also a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Statistical Association.

Bob was a beloved mentor and colleague to many people, who benefited tremendously from his intellectual rigor, creativity, open-mindedness, playfulness, and generosity. He was particularly gifted at “cutting nature at its joints,” at seeing what distinctions were important. Frequently, he captured or illustrated his insights in a story. These stories shine brightly in our memories of Bob. And so, to remember Bob, we have gathered a group of colleagues to tell and celebrate his story.

**Stephen J. Read**

University of Southern California

**Ira Roseman**

Rutgers University

It is hard to summarize the impact of a figure as influential and creative as Bob Abelson. A preeminent social psychologist for half a century — known for his work on cognitive consistency, attitude structure, social scripts, and political ideology — Bob brought a statistician’s rigor, an artist’s eye, and a playwright’s ear to our field. Yet, of Bob’s manifold skills and accomplishments, what many may remember best — as he would have predicted — are the stories.

Good stories, it is said, happen to good story-tellers. Were empirical evidence of this proposition needed, Bob Abelson would be Exhibit A. A dedicated amateur thespian and well-known “Charades” maven, Bob used his storytelling abilities to great effect in his research, his theorizing, and his teaching, as well as in everyday life. We are all the beneficiaries of this propensity.

Although more of a theorist than an experimentalist, Bob thought about classic social-psychology experiments as empirical parables. A good experiment, he would explain, must tell the reader a compelling story, and ought to be written, savored, and described in that fashion — as exemplified in his last book, *Experiments with People*. From beginning (“The title tells the tale” and “Abstracts should be short, but not Sanskrit”) to end (“Remind me of the real-world here”), Bob taught that the effective design and presentation of experiments required attention to their narrative, as well as their theoretical, properties. Nor is it accidental that the heart of Bob’s famous work modeling goal-driven behavior was social “scripts” — schematic knowledge about the dynamic unfolding of social interactions.

Bob’s lectures in social psychology overflowed with stories his students would later wish they could emulate. None, however, could tell these tales with the same brio, much less the dozen accents, that Bob could muster. That his multivariate statistics class contained comparable doses of folksy wisdom and pithy parables was considerably more striking. Who, but Bob Abelson, could have written a book on statistics, containing “laws” like “You can’t see the dust unless you move the couch” or “There is no free hunch”?

Bob’s sparkling humor and witty charm were literally infectious. His students would often find Abelsonian mannerisms creeping into their own research and teaching. Many still find the magic phrase “mumble, mumble,” uttered *sotto voce* along with a certain wave of the hands, a terribly convenient device for skipping over the boring (or, occasionally, the unexpectedly tricky) parts of complex theoretical arguments. Many still refer to hypothetical persons-in-the-street, not by their traditional monikers, “John Q. Public” or “Jane Doe,” but by their Abelsonian names: Smerdley, Fenwick, and Fenstermacher.

One lesson of Bob’s illustrious career seems clear: Even serious senior social psychologists can, and

should, have fun. It certainly makes for more memorable stories — the sort we will all remember about Bob.

**Mark R. Lepper**  
Stanford University

I first met Bob Abelson in graduate school at Princeton, where we shared a suite for one year. I soon learned, with mixed feelings, that for relaxation Bob liked to sing folk songs in a fine baritone voice, accompanying himself skillfully on his guitar.

The psychology department quickly learned that Bob would not accept the standard view without question. At a departmental seminar in 1950, when S-R psychology still held sway, and before the view of the brain as information-processor had taken hold, two senior professors were arguing heatedly about the relative importance of the stimulus and the observer's expectations in visual perception, although neither could articulate the issue very well. Bob shocked both by innocently asking, "Where does all this fit in the general scheme of things?" In a sense that has always been Bob's question.

Bob was skilled in mathematics and, later, in computers. His early work with John Tukey, the late statistical genius, speaks to Bob's quick intelligence and readiness to reject orthodoxy when needed. His work with Roger Schank and others on scripts as explanations of human behavior was, like that of Simon and Newell, years ahead of its time and not well-received by computer-phobic psychologists.

His marvelous book, *Statistics as Principled Argument*, presents an important perspective on using statistics. Statistical methods, he claimed, were not catechisms to be followed but rather means to some scientific end. Bob's advice: "Get the details right, to be sure, but never lose sight of the big picture."

**Bert F. Green**  
Johns Hopkins University

Before coming to Yale in 1970, I had never taken a course in social psychology. Nevertheless, I was told by many to seek Bob out. I did, and nothing has been the same since. He was my teacher, my mentor, and my friend from that day forward. Many students, as I was later told, were hesitant to see senior faculty, especially without an appointment. I'm glad I didn't know this because I quickly developed the habit of barging into his office several times a day with whatever new idea I had. It was spectacular for me. I would enthusiastically share whatever I was thinking in very raw form and he would repeat it back to me all dressed up in elegant attire. I would occasionally say "A" therefore "B" and he would say it was really "A" therefore "G" and I needed to include the B-F that I left out since the progression, in my mind, was obvious and therefore unnecessary. He also recommended that as a rule, I put aside the mystery and let the reader in on what my papers were about by moving my last sentence to the beginning of the manuscript. To this day I laugh to myself about this whenever I write. Finally, I had so wanted to understand how Bob thought that I finally mastered the verbal equivalent of his hand waving. This was quite a feat, as anyone who took a statistics course with him will attest.

Bob's intellectual influence on me was enormous. He knew how to think top-down, bottom-up, and inside out. Still, the gift I find most precious was that he showed me how important it was to take your work seriously, but never take yourself too seriously. I will continue to seriously miss him.

**Ellen J. Langer**

## Harvard University

Among the gifts Bob gave his students was a sense of the power of intellectual honesty. I was drawn to work with Bob when, after showing how his “ideology machine” could simulate a cold warrior’s thinking, his 1973 chapter cautioned that some of its seeming accuracy reflected the programming “gimmickry” of inserting Goldwater’s characteristic phrasings into the output. This was the opposite of self-promotion and adversarial academic debate, and made the work’s achievements that much more credible and appealing.

Bob and I would have lunch each week, talking about ideas and data, what could be done politically, discoveries and musings, dilemmas and their resolutions. Like all who entered Bob’s office, I was welcomed into his mind (his current preoccupations could be seen there on the blackboard) and invited to collaborate with him in extending what was known.

During evenings of beer and scripts at the Abelsons’, Bob was interested in people’s contributions, insights, pursuits, and idiosyncrasies. It was stimulating, exciting, *fun*! I remember Bob’s laugh, like someone was tickling him, on the edge of too much. This was just the way that intellectual inquiry or any activity in which we spend much time should be.

After taking my first job, I’d return to work on unfinished projects, share ideas, catch up. Once I expressed some reticence about letting go of a cherished hypothesis. Bob asked if I’d rather point out the flaws in my own work or have someone else do so. Who among us would disagree with this Socratic lesson?

Bob’s ideas, good works, sagacity, and persona made vivid imprints on many fields, and on those who met him. Luckily he can still be found, playful and wise, on every page he left for us.

## **Ira J. Roseman**

Rutgers University, Camden College of  
Arts and Sciences

Bob Abelson was a man for all reasons. Bob was not only a towering intellect and scientific thinker, he was of the world. I remember watching mid-term election returns in 1966 at Bob’s house. We were carefully following the Maryland race for Governor. Spiro Agnew was a moderate Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic state. But his Democratic opponent was a staunch segregationist and a strong block of cross-over Democratic votes got Agnew elected. We were rooting for Agnew and elated that he won. The rest is history.

In 1968 Bob came back from a trip to Eastern Europe with an Alexander Dubcek bumper sticker. He had found a hero he could root for and believe in. He was enthralled by Dubcek’s reformist communism, but the Soviet Union was less enthralled and invaded Czechoslovakia and removed Dubcek from office.

I also sat with Bob at his house to watch the returns in 1988 when the first Bush was elected. I remember Bob railing against Robert McNamara for escalating the Vietnam War, and Ronald Reagan for sacrificing our liberal ideals.

It was great fun to have meetings with Bob while I was developing my dissertation on humor. I was

working on a theory of humor based on incongruity. But incongruity was not enough, Bob cautioned, it needed an explanation. To illustrate, he said, what if I threw this book out the window and it fell UP! It would be incongruous but insufficient for humor, he thought. I burst out laughing at the idea and he had to laugh too.

Bob was funny until the end. At his 65th birthday party he was quite hampered by his Parkinson's symptoms but in remarking on their effect, he said, "They call me zippy." It was an hilarious allusion. It was tragic that his brilliant mind, great sense of humor, and passion for social justice were trapped in a body that simply stopped working.

**James M. Jones,**  
University of Delaware

Bob and I were colleagues at Yale and wrote a book about social psychology with Aiden Gregg. As friends, we frequently played chess together. Bob was a swashbuckler at chess, brazenly advancing his pawns and maneuvering his knights in crazy patterns. He ignored "principles" and rarely conceded.

Bob would sometimes move uncontrollably during our games, knocking over pieces and one time sinking improbably through the sweat-soaked seat of a wicker chair. We couldn't stop laughing. He would also freeze up. I once found him statue-like in the vestibule of one of the Yale colleges, after a series of unlikely mishaps in our attempt to meet for chess. We laughed about that too. On another occasion he was stuck at the top of the stairs at the entrance to the Psychology Department. "Push me" he said, knowing more than I did about the nuances of Parkinson's. As I nudged him forward into what I thought would be a messy headlong tumble, his legs suddenly sprang into action and I had to race after him.

The last time I saw Bob he was working on a book about how to win at Scrabble, and on a list of reasons for not believing in God.

Two things impressed me about Bob. One, he never complained. Two, he was always working on something that was half serious and half playful. Bob knew how to juxtapose the two approaches.

I can still see him at the chess board, musing over a configuration of pieces, murmuring one of his favorite lines — "I see," said the blind man." I miss Bob.

**Kurt Frey**  
University of Bridgeport

Forty years later and my notes from Bob Abelson's ANOVA and FANOVA courses are still on my bookshelf. The cutting-edge content of his courses has now made it into mainstream texts, but every year or so a question arises that causes me to thumb through my dog-eared notes so I can better explain something to a student (or myself). It was a joy to sit through these statistics classes — Bob's wit made statistical concepts spring to life, as anyone who has read his wonderful text *Statistics as Principled Argument* can well imagine. And his wisdom taught me way back then not to reify the .05 level, that it was effect sizes that really mattered, and that using specific contrasts to test precise hypotheses was the correct way to avoid type II errors that warrant a share of the concern that is typically focused on type I errors. Only after leaving Yale did I discover that Bob's was a "left-leaning" approach to statistics

which, to my mind, matched his good politics.

Bob not only was my statistics professor, he was also my dissertation advisor, and he showed enormous generosity in that role. He took me on as an advisee as I was beginning to plan my dissertation, something I now realize meant a lot of work with none of the tangible rewards that one gets from beginning students who may work on their advisor's program of research. Bob gave much to me in his mentoring role, including a computer program that analyzed my complex experimental design long before there was SPSS or SAS. Without his brand new "Anova 8" program that handled up to an 8-factorial design, I would have spent many months at the Monroe calculator churning out sums of squares. His also gave me the gift of freedom to bend the rules when the dissertation research that my committee had signed off on failed to yield interesting results. With his support, I submitted as my dissertation a study I had conducted in my third year of graduate school. It ultimately became a "citation classic," thanks in no small measure to Bob's counsel as I analyzed the data and developed the discussion in a much more thorough way than I ever would have without his help.

### **Leslie Zebrowitz**

Brandeis University

Oxford is well known for its dreaming spires, its beautiful, centuries-old architecture. The Department of Experimental Psychology is not housed in one of these buildings. It was built at the end of the 1960's and involved a lot of concrete. But it is at the edge of the University Parks, with their graceful trees and a small river wandering through. When Bob spent a few months here in the summer about two decades ago, we would frequently go for strolls through the Parks (was it really sunny and warm that summer?) looking for ideas and trying to knock them into shape. We were trying to develop alternative ways of looking at the psychology of explanation based on scripts, prototypes, and other knowledge structures (rather than the ways developed by "attribution theory"). Those walks meant a lot to me. I was delighted when some 10 years later, Bob sent me a copy of his book "Statistics as Principled Argument." He referred fondly to our walks together and referred to our conversations as "Psychology as Meandering Theory"!

A few years previously I had spent some months working with Bob at Yale. Besides the intellectual buzz of those around him, I remember that trip for the hospitality showed by Bob and Willa — who at one point put up my wife, me, and three small children in their house on Whitney Avenue; for visits to their cabin in the country where we played baseball with the children (and later, in Oxford, cricket); and for the gradual realization of the myriad other talents possessed by this intellectual giant for whom I had had so much respect, and then developed a deep affection.

### **Mansur Lalljee**

Oxford University

Bob Abelson taught me stats — but, in doing so, he taught me much, much more! In his legendary courses in statistics (and, of course, in the context of collaborating on research) Bob taught me (and my fellow graduate students) the logic of science, but possibly even more importantly, he taught us to appreciate the art of science. For Bob, good science depended on both logic and art. Bob was amazingly smart. He was also passionate and had an incredible aesthetic appreciation of psychological science. Put simply, Bob had a "nose" for the important/interesting question and an "eye" for how to "bottle" the

phenomenon. Thus, over time, it became clear to me that not all experiments are created equal. The few destined to become referent experiments for a finding or even for a theory needed, of course, to be logically sound, but also aesthetically designed, executed, and analyzed! Although few of my own experiments have met Bob's high standard, even after 36 years I always ask myself, "would Bob find this research pleasing?" Bob also taught me how to write — and, if my writing even approached 50 percent of the quality of Bob's elegant prose, I certainly would have increased the probability of having, at least, a few of my experiments clear his "appreciation hurdle." In 1986, as a member of APA's Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award committee, I was honored (and thrilled) to make the "case" for Bob: Needless-to-say, it was a "no-brainer."

**Mark P. Zanna, FRSC**

University of Waterloo

Social psychologists of my age most associate Bob with his work on the organization of knowledge and beliefs into scripts. Having lunch with Bob often invoked his idea of the restaurant script and the various violations of it going on around us — such as when someone at the table ordered food prior to actually receiving a menu. These violations tended to startle and distract workers and diners, just as the idea of a script suggested.

Bob was one of the early political psychologists. For many years, he served as an election night consultant to NBC news, using polling data and early computer modeling to project the outcome of various contests all over the country. Bob loved to tell the story (a story that likely was embellished by all of us over time) of how the night of one election — let's guess it was 1968 — while he was supposed to be providing the NBC news anchors with analyses to support their "calling" of states for Nixon or Humphrey, the computer system he was relying on crashed. So he tuned in CBS, while sitting just off camera on the NBC news set, and whenever Walter Cronkite indicated that a particular state had gone for one of the candidates, he quickly wrote it down and gave it to the NBC anchors, who promptly announced these results as based on their exclusive election night forecasting system.

Bob was my first teacher in graduate school, and for decades all first-year graduate students learned their basic statistics from him. Bob was a marvelous, captivating, and entertaining teacher. His favorite example involved a character named "Smedley." To evoke Bob, I once used "Smedley" in an article. I gave Bob a draft for comments, and he circled the name in red pen, and wrote "the preferred spelling is S-M-E-D-L-E-I-G-H, if you don't mind."

Outside of research and beyond the classroom, I had a lot of fun with Bob. One of our shticks was at the department's holiday parties in the early 1980s. Bob always dressed as Santa and distributed the presents. He was very proud of not using a fake beard, and invited the younger children to pull on his to see that it was real. Perhaps as early symptoms of Parkinson's began to bother him, Bob claimed that he was going to be forced to retire his act, saying things like, "see, I don't have it any more, "ho, ho, hoh, ugh, ugh." So I made him an offer: If he showed up in the Santa suit, I'd dress as an elf and help him with the kids and the gifts. He took the dare, and the Santa act went on for another few years.

I guess it is obvious: I miss Bob. I miss his wisdom, of course, and the way he inspired us to love ideas just for their own sake. I miss meeting him in the Kirtland Hall lounge reviewing the baseball scores first thing in the morning. I miss our phone conversations of recent years. But mostly I just miss the twinkle

in his eye . . . whether he was playing Santa . . . or Bob Abelson.

**Peter Salovey**  
Yale University

Bob Abelson was my graduate school stats teacher at Yale, over time became my colleague in writing a manual for anti-war activists, and later a friend who offered support and consolation.

A decade after I graduated, we met at a conference on attitude change. While experts discussed subtle aspects of method and theory, our building was surrounded by tanks and soldiers, weapons drawn against student and faculty protesting the Vietnam War. All but Bob and I continued with the agenda, disregarding the meaningful attitudes and social-political phenomena erupting around us. Bob invited me to work with him on what became a simple, accessible field manual for promoting efforts toward peace. SPSSI published this as “Canvassing for Peace: A Manual for Volunteers.” We had evidence that it indeed helped in some political campaigns.

Bob hired my kid sister, Vera, out of high school as a research assistant. She always remarked how he treated her with respect even though she was the lowest one on the totem pole. Some years later, when Vera was dying of breast cancer in a New Haven hospital (at only 39), I came there to be with her in what was supposed to be the final week of her life. Bob and Willa insisted that I live with them, and were a constant source of support, good humor, and unconditional love. The good feelings and hopefulness they conveyed to me enabled me to do some psychological magic on my sister with hypnosis, reframing, mastery exercises, and changing the conception of staff toward her as a lovely person rather than dying patient. At the end of that fateful week, I took my sister home, where she lived happily with her husband and young daughter for another full year.

In the midst of his debilitating Parkinson’s Disease, Bob made a video greeting for me on the occasion of my retirement. He was funny and friendly to the end. I miss him muchly.

**Philip G. Zimbardo**  
Stanford University

At a meeting in Woods Hole in 1971, I heard Bob talk about his Goldwater Machine idea. He talked about beliefs, how to represent them, and how they related to goals and used an idea he called “scripts” to explain it all. (I borrowed the term for something else later — with his permission of course.) I was very impressed with Bob’s intelligence and originality. I didn’t then and I don’t now, get impressed with people very often. I knew I had to leave Stanford and go to Yale to work with Bob. Bob was no politician, despite his interest in the subject, but eventually he did pull off getting Computer Science to offer me a job. In 1974 we began to work together. We were the odd couple. No one knew how we could possibly get along, but we got along like long-lost soul mates. We saw the world the same way. I was fast and he was slow. He said at one point in our first collaboration “ok so it will be Schank, Schank, Schank, and Abelson.” He didn’t write much of that book, but the ideas were a true collaborative effort. Whenever I had an idea I was passionate about, Bob was there to listen — and to elaborate. He “co-authored” at least two of my other books without writing a word or allowing me to credit him. He had no ego. He was not into the fame game. He just loved thinking. We thought together.



We were also friends, of course. We shared interests as friends do, but I have had many friends. I have had only a handful of true colleagues. A month before he died I called him at the nursing home to discuss a new project about the Armenian Holocaust. He said “ I have been thinking about oppression.” It was a funny and sad remark, and very Bob. I miss him.

### **Roger Schank**

Northwestern University  
Founder, Socratic Arts

For three decades Bob Abelson was a sounding board and a source of insight during political campaigns. Writing questionnaires and devising presidential campaign strategy with Bob provided me a master class in modern psychology — and a large dose of his quirky, eccentric humor.

Whenever a new questionnaire was needed, I would call Bob and go over the questionnaire with him. This was always illuminating and sometimes painfully exasperating. With lightning quickness he would give absurdly quirky, humorous answers to any ambiguous or misleading question.

Bob had an ability rare among theorists to move from diagnosis to concrete, specific actions designed to solve a problem. He developed depth interviews to draw out people’s scenarios for a future President Carter that made a real difference to the 1976 election. His analysis pointed to the need for a vice president familiar with Washington because voters worried more about an outsider handling Congress than about an outsider handling the Russians — for which you could just “hire a Kissinger.” And when Carter’s overly precise answers — I will do X unless A or B or C — looked like waffling and indecision Bob came up with the solution — just start every answer with a one word statement — yes or no.

Until the end Bob remained engaged, even when his paragraphs of advice for Kerry or Lieberman wandered across many pages of shaky scrawl. And he remained offbeat and quirky: an attendant from Ghana prompted a rendition of “I’m Ghana get you on a slow boat.

### **Samuel L. Popkin**

University of California, San Diego

From the beginning of my graduate school career, Bob was a major force in my intellectual life. I wasn’t ever a student of Bob’s, although I was on a postdoc with him. Yet Bob had a much greater impact on my thinking about social psychology than anyone else I worked with or whose work I read.

I first encountered Bob’s work in my first semester of graduate school, when I sat in on an informal seminar on narrative that Ray Hyman was running at the University of Oregon. Some of the papers we read were Bob’s early work on scripts. I remember reading this work and thinking that this guy had it exactly right! That this was the right way to think about social behavior and social perception. I immediately wrote to Bob and he immediately wrote back to this first year graduate student, sending me all his current papers on scripts. I was in heaven!

Years later I wrote and received an NSF postdoc to work with Bob from 1981 to 1982. I still remember opening the letter from NSF and reading it. We never published together (although we had several failed experiments together), but his influence runs throughout my career.

Above all else, Bob was exceptionally wise in how to think about the world and human behavior. He was much better than anyone else I ever encountered at how to think about the social world, what were the pieces that captured the important distinctions.

Psychology has lost one of its giants.