

# Lee Ross, Who Studied the Illusion of Personal Objectivity, Dies

May 17, 2021



Lee Ross, a psychological scientist celebrated for his work on biases in decision making, died Friday, May 14 in Palo Alto, California. In a career that stretched over 50 years at Stanford University, Ross was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1994) and the National Academy of Sciences (2010). In 2003, he received the [APS William James Fellow Award](#) in recognition of his extensive research on judgement, inferences, and decision making.

Ross died of a longstanding heart condition and was in the company of his family at the time of his passing, according to APS Fellow Hazel Markus, a close colleague.

Born in Toronto in 1942, Ross influenced many fields of psychology, including attitude formation and change, social cognition, judgment and decision-making, social influence, intergroup relations and political psychology. His research generally focused both on sources of bias and error and strategies to ameliorate them.

[Read about other psychological scientists who died in 2021.](#)

Among the many psychological phenomena Ross identified throughout his career, perhaps the best

known is fundamental attribution error—now commonly referred to as “Ross’s fundamental attribution error”—a term he coined to describe the human tendency to perceive other people’s behavior as reflective of their fundamental character, rather than the result of situational factors, while explaining our own behavior away as a result of our environment.

In his 2019 “[Inside the Psychologist’s Studio](#)” interview, Ross spoke with Swarthmore College Psychology Professor Andrew Ward about applying his research to citizen diplomacy in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. These efforts were made through collaboration with the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation, which Ross cofounded with APS William James Fellow Amos Tversky, among others, in 1984. In a 2018 *Observer* column, Ross and Donald Redelmeier (University of Toronto) also discussed how greater awareness of [the illusion of personal objectivity](#) can help guide medical practice.

Ross also wrote numerous books, including *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgement* and *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* with APS William James Fellow Richard Nisbett (University of Michigan at Ann Arbor) and *The Wisest One in the Room—How You Can Benefit from Social Psychology’s Most Powerful Insights* with Thomas Gilovich (Cornell University).

“On behalf of everyone at APS, our thoughts are with Lee’s family, friends and colleagues,” said APS Executive Director Robert Gropp. “His career, filled with significant scholarly contributions and a commitment to contribute solutions to important societal problems, is an inspiration.”

Ross is survived by his wife Judith and their children Joshua, Timothy, Rebecca, and Katherine.

### **Selected research by Lee Ross in APS journals**

#### [Psychological Science](#)

[Wishful Thinking: Belief, Desire, and the Motivated Evaluation of Scientific Evidence](#) (2011)

#### [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#)

[From the Fundamental Attribution Error to the Truly Fundamental Attribution Error and Beyond: My Research Journey](#) (2018)