

# Robert Rescorla, Psychology

APRIL 14, 2020 | VOL 66 ISSUE 30 ([HTTPS://ALMANAC.UPENN.EDU/VOLUME-66-NUMBER-30](https://almanac.upenn.edu/volume-66-number-30)) | DEATHS | PRINT



*Bob Rescorla*

Robert Arthur (Bob) Rescorla, emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, died in Austin, Texas, on March 24. He was 79, and his death followed complications resulting from a fall in his home.

“Dr. Rescorla was the world’s most distinguished scholar in the area of the psychology of animal learning and a great teacher,” noted his long-time colleague Paul Rozin, professor of psychology at Penn. Dr. Rescorla was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was raised in Westfield, New Jersey. He was an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, where he graduated with highest honors. During that period, he studied with Hans Wallach, and two other psychologists Henry Gleitman and Solomon Asch, both of whom later became professors of psychology at Penn. In 1962, Dr. Rescorla came to Penn as a graduate student, starting his research on Pavlovian conditioning under the mentorship of psychologist Richard Solomon.

Dr. Rescorla received his PhD from Penn in 1966 and took a position as assistant professor of psychology at Yale University, where he rose to the rank of full professor. He returned to Penn as professor of psychology in 1981, and he remained at Penn as the James M. Skinner Professor of Science (1986-2000) and later Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Psychology (2000-2009) until his retirement in 2009, at which time he earned emeritus status. Dr. Rescorla also served with distinction as chair of psychology (1985-1988) and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (1994-1997).

Dr. Rescorla was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1985 and served as president of the Eastern Psychological Association (1986-1987), and he received the Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions from the American Psychological Association (1986). He became the William James Fellow of the American Psychological Society (1989), was awarded the Howard Crosby Warren Medal of the Society of Experimental Psychologists (1991) and Doctoris Honoris Causa, University of Ghent (2006) and was elected as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2008).

A tribute written by Dr. Rozin noted: “Dr. Rescorla was perhaps the greatest pure experimental psychologist of the 20th century. He was the undisputable heir to Ivan Pavlov, the foundational figure in experimental psychology and the person who introduced the phenomenon of the conditioned reflex and provided its first theoretical interpretation. Dr. Rescorla exceeded Pavlov in his scientific contribution, expanding this concept into a fundamental basis for association and liberated it from its limited and arguable linkage to reflexes. In Dr. Rescorla’s work, Pavlovian conditioning was about the association of event representations, and that association itself was predicated on the idea that what animals learned was the predictive value of events (the “Rescorla-Wagner” model). In so doing, Dr. Rescorla provided a bridge between behaviorism, the predominant theory in psychology in the mid 20th century, and cognitive science, its successor as the major framework for late 20th century psychology. Dr. Rescorla was an exquisite methodologist who caused the field to rethink the nature of control groups. The elegance, efficiency and conclusiveness of his experiments is legendary. The principles that he and others developed in this research also became an important part of cognitive-behavioral therapy, the predominant modern form of psychotherapy, developed principally by another Penn Professor, Aaron T. Beck.

“Dr. Rescorla was also a passionate advocate for undergraduates and a great teacher. His lucid lectures in his animal learning course, offered for decades at Penn, were a model of clarity and intellectual engagement, and earned him the Ira Abrams Teaching Award, School of Arts and Sciences, in 1999. He was the complete academic.”

Dr. Rescorla is survived by his wife, Shirley Steele; former wife, Leslie Rescorla; sons, Eric (Lisa Dusseault) and Michael (Melanie Schoenberg Rescorla); grandchildren, Darwin, Lincoln, Alexander and Nicholas; first wife, Marged Lindner; and sister, Barbara Rescorla Brandt.