

SPR AWARD, 2004

For distinguished contributions to psychophysiology: Robert M. Stern

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Robert “Bob” Stern received the Distinguished Scientific Contribution to Psychophysiology award in 2004 for his scientific achievements in psychophysiology of visceral, particularly gastrointestinal, psychophysiology. The Society for Psychophysiological Research honors a pioneer whose contributions paved the way for the development of Behavioral Medicine and Social Cognitive Psychophysiology. Robert Stern’s textbooks educated and inspired countless students worldwide for psychophysiology and shaped a positive and critical attitude of the public toward our discipline.

Bob was born and raised in the Bronx in the “shadow of the Yankee-Stadium.” He describes his childhood often as “unremarkable,” hiding the information on the warm and loving atmosphere of the family environment. In this caring and altruistic–empathic climate a person grew who, later in adult life, reciprocated that attitude to all around him. As Department Head and head of countless Minority Committees his tolerant and open personality won him the sympathy of all around.

At Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he earned a degree in philosophy, instigating his lifelong interest in the mind–body problem and social–ethical problems of science. After an “intermezzo” at Tufts University, he met his mentor, R.C. Davis, at Indiana University, whose work on the electrogastrogram left him “imprinted” on the psychophysiology of the gastrointestinal tract and its function and its pathology in nausea, eating disorders, and motion sickness.

Most of his 100 publications from then on (the mid-1960s) were devoted to the topic of gastric motility and responsiveness. But in his early career as a young scientist at Penn State University, he wrote brilliant essays on “sociopsychophysiology,” detection of deception, and he conducted the first critical experiments on operant conditioning (“biofeedback”) of skin conductance. The mechanisms behind visceral perception and its implication for somatic and psychosomatic diseases then became a major focus of his research. This work remained one of the founding pillars of behavioral medicine. A lifelong mutual

friendship with the European “father” of viscerosception, Gyorgi Adam of the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest, brought Bob’s ideas and writings to the old continent and had a lasting influence on the rapid growth of European psychophysiology. Several awards from European and U.S. funding agencies for scholarships abroad intensified Bob’s international reputation. As a visiting professor at several German Universities (Mainz, Tübingen, Vienna), he contributed substantially to the amazing recovery of biological psychology in Germany after its destruction by Nazi rule. The book *Psychophysiological Recording* (first edition with W. Ray and R.C. Davis, second edition with Bill Ray and Karen Quigley) and his teaching at Penn State and abroad set the standards for scholarly education of psychophysiology until today.

After decades of careful experimentation with electrogastrographic (EGG) recordings using—among other methods—a rotating drum developed by the famous perception researcher and friend at Penn State, Herschel Leibowitz, Bob came to the conclusion that motion sickness and sensitivity to nausea have a genetic and a learned component. He tested numerous treatment approaches for nausea induced by motion sickness.

He favors a habituation–desensitization approach and thoroughly tested it in the controlled laboratory, a tantalizing task combining the huge rotating drum environment with the delicate measurement of gastric activity.

Robert Stern has been an active member of our society for more than 40 years, serving on the board and several committees, and is a brilliant scientist and an adviser on ethical and social–political issues. Bob recently retired, but he maintains his office at Penn State, where, with two colleagues, he is writing a book on the mechanisms and management of nausea. He spends his winters as a visiting professor in the GI division of the Wake Forest University Medical School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Scientists of his stature and with a broad view of our place in society and culture constitute a model mentor for students and scholars of psychophysiology.

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