

The Field Loses a Pioneer - Dr. David Shapiro



David Shapiro was one of the great psychophysicists, and one of the first researchers to discover biofeedback effects on the autonomic nervous system. He passed away on February 4, 2020 at the age of 95.

After serving in the army in after World War II, he studied psychology, taught and did research all over the world, while mentoring dozens of students in the field of psychophysiology, a field that he pioneered. In the 1960's and early 70's he taught at Harvard University, where, he began investigating whether people could obtain voluntary control over skin conductance, heart rate, blood pressure, and other autonomic functions. This was a radical idea at the time, because it was commonly believed that psychological control of autonomic functions could only be achieved by respondent (classical) conditioning, and that operant control was impossible. He demonstrated that autonomic control in humans could be as finely controlled as bar pressing in a pigeon, showing predicted cumulative curves of autonomic responses under various schedules of reinforcement. Later he produced volumes of research on psychological factors as they affect cardiovascular function, particularly control of blood pressure, and demonstrated biofeedback effects for treating hypertension.

He continued doing research at UCLA on the psychosomatics of blood pressure control, continuing this research as professor emeritus until very recently and had a profound personal effect as a mentor to generations of young psychophysicists. He was warm, caring, and selfless in his support of students. His standards were uncompromising, but his support unflinching. We will miss him!

Paul Lehrer, PhD, BCB – February 4, 2020