

December 7, 2008

Robert Zajonc, Who Looked at Mind's Ties to Actions, Is Dead at 85

By [MARGALIT FOX](#)

Robert B. Zajonc, a distinguished psychologist who illuminated the mental processes that underpin social behavior and in so doing helped create the modern field of social psychology, died on Wednesday at his home in Stanford, Calif. He was 85.

The cause was complications of pancreatic cancer, his son Michael said.

At his death, Professor Zajonc (pronounced ZYE-unts) was emeritus professor of psychology at [Stanford University](#), where he had taught since 1994. He previously had a long association with the [University of Michigan](#).

Until the mid-20th century, social scientists seeking the impetus for human behavior tended to look reflexively to people's environments. That, in an era when behavioral psychology reigned supreme, was precisely what they had been trained to do. Professor Zajonc, by contrast, also looked to the mind.

Published widely in professional journals and cited often in the news media, Professor Zajonc's work ranged across the mental and social landscape. Among the subjects he investigated over five decades were the effect of birth order on intellectual performance; whether the mere presence of spectators can influence a performer for good or ill; and whether smiling can be a cause, as well as a consequence, of a good mood.

What united his diverse output was an abiding concern with the relationship between feeling and thought. Professor Zajonc repeatedly explored the place in the human mental makeup where emotion butts up against cognition, partly in an effort to determine which influences which more strongly. (On balance, he came down on the side of emotion.)

He was also consumed with the tacit, half-hidden patterns — of words, images, experiences and much else — that unconsciously inform the ways in which everyone navigates the social world.

Professor Zajonc was perhaps best known for discovering what he called the “mere exposure” effect. In a seminal experiment, published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1968, he showed subjects a series of random shapes in rapid succession. The shapes appeared and disappeared so quickly that it was impossible to discern that some of them were actually repeated. Nevertheless,

when subjects were later asked which shapes they found most pleasing, they reliably chose the ones to which they had been exposed the most often, though they had no conscious awareness of the fact.

Familiarity, in other words, breeds a kind of affection, Professor Zajonc found. Even before he defined and named it, the effect was dear to the hearts of advertisers and other shapers of culture.

In another study, which attracted much attention in the popular media, Professor Zajonc found that the size of a family, and the birth order of the children, have implications for the I.Q. of each child. He found that the I.Q. score of each successive child decreases a little, partly because only the eldest receives undivided parental attention.

The difference in I.Q. between the eldest child and the next sibling in line averaged just three points, Professor Zajonc found. But the larger implication of his study was that I.Q., long thought to be the product of heredity alone, was at least in part socially determined.

Robert Boleslaw Zajonc, an only child, was born in Lodz, Poland, on Nov. 23, 1923. In 1939, after the Nazis invaded Poland and headed toward Lodz, he and his parents fled to Warsaw. There, the building in which they were staying was bombed, and Robert's parents were killed. Robert woke up in a hospital, seriously injured.

He attended an underground university in Warsaw before being dispatched to a labor camp in Germany. He escaped and, recaptured, was sent to a political prison in France. Escaping again, he joined the French Resistance and studied at the University of Paris. Reaching England in 1944, he worked as a translator for American forces in the European campaign.

When the war ended, he worked for the [United Nations](#) Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in Paris. He later studied psychology at the University of Tübingen before immigrating to the United States in 1948.

Professor Zajonc earned a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Michigan in 1955. He remained on the faculty for the next four decades, directing the Research Center for Group Dynamics and the Institute for Social Research there.

Some of Professor Zajonc's most influential work concerned "social facilitation" — the effect of the presence of others on a person's performance of a specific task. Previous research on the subject appeared contradictory, suggesting that spectators helped performers in some cases but not in others. But in which cases?

What Professor Zajonc found was that when performers have mastered a skill at a high level, they are helped by the presence of an audience. (Think of professional musicians or athletes.) But he also found that when a performer has mastered a skill only imperfectly, the existence of onlookers is a hindrance. (Think of Sunday duffers in any arena.)

Elsewhere in his work, Professor Zajonc explored the nexus between psychology and physiology. In one widely reported study, he found that smiling or frowning can alter blood flow to the brain as facial muscles relax or contract. This in turn affects the parts of the brain that regulate feelings, helping induce happy or sad emotional states.

In recent years, Professor Zajonc also studied the psychology of racism, terrorism and genocide.

Professor Zajonc's first marriage, to Donna Benson, ended in divorce. He is survived by his second wife, Hazel Rose Markus, a professor of social psychology at Stanford; their daughter, Krysia; three children from his first marriage, Peter, Michael and Joseph; and four grandchildren.

His books include "Social Psychology: An Experimental Approach" (Wadsworth, 1966) and "The Selected Works of R. B. Zajonc" (Wiley, 2004).

In a 2005 interview with *The Observer*, a publication of the Association for Psychological Science, Professor Zajonc explained his reasons for choosing the career he did. They harked back to the work he did for the United Nations in Paris.

"I had contact with the [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization](#)," he said. "The Unesco motto is: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed,' and having just been through a war, the motto was a sufficient incentive for me to get engaged in scientific initiatives that might make a contribution toward preventing future wars."

He added, "I am still waiting for that contribution to be made by psychology."

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