
Guide to the David L. Rosenhan Papers

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Overview

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Biographical/Historical note

David L. Rosenhan (1929 – February 6, 2012) was a psychologist and pioneer in the application of psychological methods to the practice of trial law process, including jury selection and jury consultation. Rosenhan was the author of more than 80 books and research papers, including one of the most widely read studies in the field of psychology, "On Being Sane in Insane Places" (1973). He is best known for the Rosenhan experiment, a study challenging the validity of psychiatry diagnoses.

Born in Jersey City, New Jersey, David L. Rosenhan was a yeshiva student in his youth and received a BA in mathematics (1951) from Yeshiva College, and an MA in economics (1953) and PhD in psychology (1958) from Columbia University. Before joining the Stanford faculty, David Rosenhan was a member of the faculties of Swarthmore College, Princeton University, Haverford College, and University of Pennsylvania. He also served as a research psychologist at Educational Testing Service. He was a psychologist for the Counseling Center at Stevens Institute of Technology from 1954 to 1956; a lecturer at Hunter College and director of research in the Department of Psychiatry at City Hospital at Elmhurst from 1958 to 1960; assistant professor for the Departments of Psychology and Sociology at Haverford College from 1960 to 1962; lecturer for the Department of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania from 1961 to 1964; lecturer for the Department of Psychology at Princeton University from 1964 to 1968; and professor in the Department of Psychology and Education at Swarthmore College from 1968 to 1970.

In 1973 Rosenhan published "On Being Sane in Insane Places", one of the most widely read articles in the field of psychology. The article details the Rosenhan experiment. The experiment arranged for eight individuals with no history of psychopathology to attempt admission into twelve psychiatric hospitals during a three-year period. They described hallucinations and "empty" feelings and were diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenics. As soon as they were admitted they began acting normally and waited for the hospital staff to notice. The hospital staff never did notice, although many of the real patients caught on to the fakes. Psychiatrists attempted to treat the individuals using psychiatric medication. All eight were discharged within 7 to 52 days, but only when they had stated that they accepted their diagnosis. In a later part of the

study, a research and teaching hospital challenged Rosenhan to run a similar experiment involving its own diagnosis and admission procedures. Psychiatric staff were warned that at least one pseudo-patient might be sent to their institution. 83 out of 193 new patients were believed by at least one staff member to be actors. In fact, Rosenhan sent no actors. The study concluded that existing forms of diagnosis were grossly inaccurate in distinguishing individuals without mental disorders from those with mental disorders. Rosenhan wrote, "It is clear that we cannot distinguish the sane from the insane in psychiatric hospitals. ... The consequences to patients hospitalized in such an environment—the powerlessness, depersonalization, segregation, mortification, and self-labeling—seem undoubtedly counter-therapeutic." The paper created an explosion of controversy. Critics have questioned the validity and credibility of the study, but concede that the consistency of psychiatric diagnoses needs improvement.

At a time when legal scholars were just beginning to look to economics for insights into legal analysis, Professor Rosenhan was among the first to draw from the social sciences, especially experimental psychology, to examine assumptions made by legal scholars in the trial process. Building on research on juror behavior undertaken by the University of Chicago Law School Jury Project in the 1950s, Professor Rosenhan began to focus on other aspects of juror behavior. Among his interests was the jurors' ability to abide by the judge's instructions to disregard evidence the judge had ruled inadmissible.

Along with Martin Seligman, Rosenhan believed that there are seven main features of abnormality: suffering; maladaptiveness; vividness and unconventionality; unpredictability and loss of control; irrationality and incomprehensibility; observer discomfort; and violation of moral and ideal standards.

He was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; a former president of the American Psychological Association; a former director of the American Psychology-Law Society; a former president of the American Board of Forensic Psychology; a former vice-president of the Institute for Psychosocial Interaction; a former director at the Mental Research Institute; member of the Clinical Projects Research Review Committee at the National Institute of Mental Health; visiting fellow at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Wolfson College and Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University from 1977 to 1978; visiting professor at University of Western Australia, Tel Aviv University, and Oxford University from 1984-1985; and a visiting professor in the Department of Psychology at Georgetown University in 1988.

He died on February 6, 2012, at the age of 82. He was survived by his son Jack Rosenhan and his granddaughters Cecily and Yael, as well as his brother Hershel.

Access Terms

Stanford University. Department of Psychology. Faculty.

Stanford University. Department of Psychology.

Stanford University. School of Law.

Community mental health services.

Law--Study and teaching--United States

Psychology--Study and teaching (Graduate) --California --Stanford.

Psychology.

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LANG MH10993-08

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Windholz

Expectancy and desensitization in the treatment of fear

Cognitive Control of Anger and Aggression

Neurophysiologic Correlates of Autistic Behavior

Janis, Irving

Factors Influencing Tolerance of Deprivation

Psychologic, Immunologic and Pharmacological Aspects of Asthma

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