

R. Jay Turner, 12/19/1934 – 05/12/2018

R. Jay Turner, one of the premier research scholars in the sociology of mental health, passed away on May 12 after a brief illness. Raised in the East Bay Area of California, Jay married Grace Clevenger at the tender age of 19 and she remained with him for the remaining 64 years of his life.

After completing his Ph.D. at Syracuse University in 1964, Jay worked for a time for the New York State Office of Mental Health. In 1967 he published in the ASR (with Morton Wagenfeld) a seminal paper disaggregating the contributions of social causation and social selection processes in the relationship of occupational status to schizophrenia. It was to be just the beginning of his influence on the field.

After a stint as Director of the Research Evaluation Unit at the Temple University Community Mental Health Research Center, Jay moved in 1972 to the Sociology Department at the University of Western Ontario. As director of the Health Care Research Unit at UWO, Jay's work focused on the role of social support in psychological well-being. He produced several important papers demonstrating the importance of social support for buffering the effects of low social status or other high stress environments. Later, with his long-time colleague Bill Avison, he became an important figure in the development of accurate and comprehensive measures of stressful life experience.

After a brief period at the University of British Columbia Jay returned east to join the Sociology Department at the University of Toronto. In the early 1990s, sociologists applying stress process models to mental health outcomes began to explicitly link these processes to mental health disparities. Jay was at the vanguard of this movement, publishing a descriptive epidemiology of social support and later, with Blair Wheaton and Don Lloyd, an epidemiology of social stress experience. This latter paper, published in ASR, has been cited over 1300 times and received the Sociology of Mental Health section award for best publication.

In 1995, Jay left Canada for Florida. Among the projects he undertook during this period – first at the University of Miami and later at Florida International University – was a follow-up of a sample of youth in the Miami area. In a series of papers, Jay and his colleagues examined the impact of cumulative childhood stress exposure on mental health, race and ethnic differences in the stress process during the transition to adulthood, and social factors that influence the onset and course of substance abuse problems.

The next stop for Jay was Florida State University, where he continued to exploit the Toronto and Miami data, and where he helped build a strong program in population health. The last five years of Jay's academic odyssey took place at Vanderbilt University where he fielded a major survey in which he leveraged the substantial variation in SES among both blacks and whites in the Nashville area to disaggregate the roles of race and socioeconomic position in the creation of health disparities.

Although Jay's work spanned the fields of psychiatry and public health, his main home was within the ASA -- particularly within the Sociology of Mental Health and Medical Sociology sections. His extensive CV includes 26 articles published in ASA journals; 21 in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior. He was the main force behind the creation of the Sociology of Mental Health section in ASA and served as its very first chair in 1992. In 1998 he received the section's award for Lifetime Scholarly Contribution. Jay also was extensively involved with the Medical Sociology section throughout his

career, serving on the council in many capacities. In 2002, he received the section's highest award, the Leo G. Reeder Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Field of Medical Sociology.

As impressive as is his curriculum vitae, Jay's greatest contribution to the field may well have been as a mentor. His former students populate a large portion of the seats at any given mental health session at the ASA meetings. Too many to list here, their work is of consistently high quality and they occupy academic positions of influence. But Jay's students represent only the innermost circle of those who have benefitted for his mentorship and advice. Students of colleagues, and many young scholars he just happened to meet at conferences have come into his orbit and regularly testify to the value of his counsel.

Indeed, in the several weeks following his diagnosis, Jay received several telephone calls from people who, having found out about his condition, wanted to thank him for the difference he had made in their lives. The calls came not only from close colleagues and friends, but also from many people whose contact with Jay had been brief and ostensibly superficial -- undergraduate students from decades before, interviewers and coders employed on one of Jay's many studies. Though Jay could not recall all of these people, for all of them some suggestion or small piece of advice he gave had profoundly affected their lives for the better.

It is very gratifying to his family and friends that, over his last few months, Jay was able to get this Capra-esque view of his "Wonderful Life". He is a sterling example of the difference a wise and gifted person can make through simple kindness and caring.

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