

Tracy S. Kendler, Psychology: Santa Barbara

1918-2001
Professor Emerita

Tracy Kendler, nee Sylvia Seedman, was born August 4, 1918, in Brooklyn, New York. Her first name was changed to Tracy when four of the five counselors in a camp for preschoolers were named Sylvia, and having just seen "The Philadelphia Story," Sylvia eagerly volunteered to become Tracy. After overcoming her mother's resistance to going to college (getting a husband was considered more important) she opted to enter Brooklyn College where a meeting with Abraham Maslow, her teacher for introductory psychology, suggested a possible career in psychology: "You're not bad looking and you don't have a New York accent." A more definite decision to become a psychologist resulted from the intellectual excitement that Tracy experienced in an advanced class in thinking taught by Solomon E. Asch, a convert to Gestalt psychology, and in whose class a romantic attachment was formed with Howard Kendler. Several faculty members advised both of them to apply for graduate work at the University of Iowa where they could study with Kurt Lewin, a German refugee whose orientation in psychology was within the tradition of Gestalt psychology.

Tracy, at Iowa in September 1940, was informed by the head of the Psychology Department that there were no jobs for women. This grim reception did not deter Tracy from her desire to lead a scholarly life. She decided to do a M. A. thesis with Kurt Lewin but shifted to Kenneth Spence, a young neobehaviorist, to sponsor her doctoral research because of his clear commitment to a natural-science psychology. In the fall of 1941,

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Tracy completed her name change by marrying Howard at a time when the tradition prevailed for women to assume their husband's surname. Although Spence was impressed with Tracy's talents, he nevertheless expressed ambivalence about Tracy's career plans. Wouldn't she and Howard, also his student, be happier if she became a supportive wife and mother? Tracy's scholarly ambitions prevailed and might have changed Spence's attitude toward women scientists; several years later he married one of his own students who became a distinguished psychologist.

Throughout her graduate student career, Tracy never was offered a research or teaching assistantship. She financed her studies by doing psychological testing at the psychiatric section of the medical school. She decided to stay with Howard during the war years and as a result had a checkered career; a clinical psychologist in a state hospital for the insane, a statistician on personnel selection research, a volunteer clinician in two infantry station hospitals in Texas, and finally, when Howard was assigned a commission as clinical psychologist at Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, DC, Tracy found a real job at the Pentagon in the highly respected Army Air Force Selection Program. When the University of Colorado successfully requested Howard's discharge from the Army to assume an assistant professorship, Tracy was

offered a full-time non-ladder instructorship at a salary level significantly below that of Howard's.

Approaching 30 years of age, Tracy made a decisive decision that would have a profound effect on her career. She opted to have children with the hope that its impact on her career would not be great. After two years in Colorado, Howard was offered an associate professorship at New York University with the opportunity to initiate a strong program in the psychology of learning. Tracy soon found a job in New York with the Commission for Community Relations, a branch of the American Jewish Congress (AJC), which did research on social prejudice. She worked with the AJC legal department in cooperation with the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) to collect and interpret evidence relevant to the problem of whether segregated schools can provide equally effective education. In the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case (1954), the Supreme Court declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal.

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After about six months, Tracy quit the job because her son Joel appeared unhappy and she lost confidence in the full-time nursemaid she had hired. Soon thereafter Tracy became pregnant and one month after the birth of a second son (Kenneth) a family move from midtown Manhattan to suburbia was made to provide the children with a better environment. At this point Tracy's on-and-off career ceased completely, only to be resumed two years later when the Air Force asked Howard to do research on training films. Tracy was appointed a Research Associate at New York University and helped plan the research and later do some of the data analyses while two other psychologists did the fieldwork. Much of Tracy's research could be done at home, thereby allowing her to fulfill her motherly duties.

Soon thereafter, Tracy's career got on track. Her doctoral thesis supported the implications of Spence's mathematical model of discrimination learning. Howard had discovered that in a specific discrimination learning task, suitably adapted for rats and college students, each group behaved in an opposite manner to each other. What would happen if this research was extended to young children of different ages? Would they behave more like rats or adult humans or somewhere in between? The Kendlers submitted a joint research proposal to the National Science Foundation that was funded in 1954. Tracy, still a Research Associate at New York University, was finally engaged in research that fascinated her and could be done while she remained at home. The large number of nursery and elementary schools in suburbia provided subjects who enjoyed playing the "game" that Tracy had devised to provide information about the psychological processes involved in their learning. The research led to a joint paper by the Kendlers that generated a tremendous amount of research and was considered a "Citation Classic."

In 1954, eleven years after obtaining her Ph.D., Tracy was offered a half-time graduate assistantship to teach a year laboratory course in experimental psychology at Barnard College, the women's college at Columbia University. She gladly accepted because her younger son was beginning kindergarten and she looked forward to teaching a group of bright and hardworking

students. The next year she applied for the suddenly vacated faculty position in Child and Adolescent Development. The Chairman of the Psychology Department had an application from a

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male psychologist who, he told Tracy, would be hired, not because he had a superior record, but because he would not have the divided responsibilities of a married woman with children. The man declined the position and Tracy became an Assistant Professor in 1955, a belated, but happy, beginning of her academic career. The National Science Foundation continued to support her research, which received much attention, during the eight years she spent at Barnard. She was promoted to Associate Professor in 1959 and granted tenure the next year. She aspired to do graduate teaching in the psychology department at Columbia but that opportunity was not forthcoming. There were no women psychologists in the Columbia department. In fact, the University Faculty Club officially excluded women, except in the restaurant on the top floor where they could be served if they were guests of male members.

In 1963, Howard was offered an opportunity to help develop a graduate psychology program at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California (UCSB). Because of the nepotism rule, she could not be offered a faculty position. Instead, the title of Research Psychologist was tendered, which would enable her to apply for a research grant to be administered by the University. Although Tracy had qualms about giving up her position at Barnard, she felt optimistic about getting research support. The family decided to move to Santa Barbara, and Tracy was awarded a five-year public Health Service Grant to carry on her developmental research. She, with the help of a superb assistant, collected a great deal of important data that was analyzed with a special computer program. Although doing research seemed ideal, she missed teaching. This became apparent to the members of the department, who warmly accepted Tracy as a colleague, particularly enjoying discussions with her. With the Graduate Dean's support, the department requested permission from the Board of Regents to waive the anti-nepotism rule in order to appoint her to a faculty slot reserved for a developmental psychologist. The request was granted in 1966 and Tracy was appointed Professor of Psychology. This was the first time the rule was broken at UCSB, and the second time in the entire California system.

Tracy was proud of her achievement because of her strong conviction that persons should be judged as individuals independent of their gender, ethnic affiliation, or marital status. She was also

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proud of her seven Ph.D. students, two M.A.'s, and one post-doctoral student at UCSB. She became Professor Emerita in 1989. During her career she published 65 articles, mainly reporting research results. After she retired, she published the book entitled *Levels of Cognitive Development* (1995) that proposed a theory that interpreted critical aspects of cognitive development and suggested possible underlying neurophysiological explanations. She received several honors: the first woman elected to the Governing Board of the Psychonomic Society,

membership in the Society of Experimental Psychologists, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and President of the Western Psychological Association.

In 1997 she was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. She died on July 28, 2001. At her memorial a colleague stated, "I will remember her as a clear thinker who persevered until she got to the bottom of things. I will remember her, as a person of great integrity and dignity, who was kind and supportive to me." Although the description accurately described her as a Professor of Psychology, it was also an apt portrayal of Tracy as a 20-year old undergraduate psychology major at Brooklyn College.

Howard H. Kendler