American Psychologist

Nancy Elinor Adler (1946–2024)

Elissa Sarah Epel

IN MEMORIAM

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APA Fellow Nancy Elinor Adler is one of the most cited scientists (top 0.1%) in the world (2022, Clarivate). She was a pioneer who shaped several key movements, including defining the field of Health Psychology, and deepening global recognition of social determinants of health. She won numerous honors and awards, including the David Rall Medal from the National Academy of Medicine.

Nancy was born in Manhattan in 1946. As a young girl, she was charmed by books about the teenage detective Nancy Drew and felt the books gave her an indelible enthusiasm for solving mysteries. Nancy graduated from Wellesley College (1968) and received her PhD from Harvard (1973) in social psychology. Her thesis showed that after abortions, women coped well rather than experiencing enduring depressive symptoms, work that continues to have policy implications in the context of the battle over women's reproductive freedom.

After a period as a faculty member at the University of California Santa Cruz, Nancy was drawn to the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) by George Stone, who offered her an opportunity to introduce social psychology to the school of medicine where she worked for 45 years before retiring in 2022. At UCSF, she coedited the first book on the field of Health Psychology and started the first graduate and postdoctoral programs in Health Psychology. In 1998, she founded the UCSF Center for Health and Community, where she fostered an interdisciplinary group of researchers focused on social determinants of health and health equity.

Posing the question, "How do social and behavioral drivers get 'under the skin'?" Nancy led a movement to explain the scientific foundations of health disparities. As director of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health, she immeasurably impacted our understanding of the mechanisms linking social factors and health. With network colleagues, she documented the effect of socioeconomic status on health gradients. In 1994, she coauthored high-profile, groundbreaking articles on the graded relationship between socioeconomic status and health and outlined the potential mechanisms.

Nancy instinctively understood that the effects of social status could not be explained only in terms of objective characteristics like education and income. In 2000, she published her first article on what came to be known as the "MacArthur Ladder," in which she demonstrated that rankings of subjective social status were closely tied to physiological health and stress reactivity. Over 400 academic articles using her subjective social status measure have since been published.

Based on her remarkable scientific accomplishments, Nancy became the first psychologist to serve on the National Institute of Health Director's Council and the National Academy of Medicine Council. She recognized the importance of these nominations, sharing with younger psychology colleagues, "We have a seat at the table now." She was brilliant, humble, and a generous mentor, dedicated especially to women leaders, and her legacy lives on in the many scholars who worked directly with as well her as well as those she influenced from afar.

Nancy died at 77 at her home, on January 4, 2024, surrounded by loving family. She is survived by her husband, Arnold Milstein; two daughters, Julia Adler-Milstein and Sarah Adler-Milstein; her brother, Richard Adler; and three grandchildren.

The UCSF Center for Health and Community is establishing an annual Nancy Elinor Adler Endowed Lectureship Award for scholars who "illuminate the field of social and health disparities and conduct meaningful interventions."

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