Obituary

Gerald M. Siegel (1932–2014) – A tribute

Gerald “Jerry” Siegel began his career with the people and places that shaped our field: Robert West, Oliver Bloodstein, Wendell Johnson, and Joe Spradlin, at Brooklyn College, the University of Iowa, and the University of Kansas. He then became an Assistant Professor in the fledgling Department of Communication Disorders at the University of Minnesota, in 1961, where he also held an adjunct appointment in the Department of Psychology’s Center for Cognitive Science. Over the course of the next 36 years, until his retirement in 1997, Jerry’s work at Minnesota contributed in almost innumerable ways to the science and practice of speech-language pathology. Even more important, to those of us who had the privilege of knowing him, was that his life also modeled a truly inspiring combination of kindness, decency, and devotion to friends, family, and community.

Among his first major contributions was a series of studies completed in collaboration with another young faculty member, Richard Martin, which became known as the “Minnesota Fluency Studies.” The Siegel and Martin collaboration was driven by their interest in applying behavioral principles to stuttering and their acute awareness of a “paradigm clash” in the field of stuttering theory and treatment. In his 2014 book Jerry succinctly described his view of that clash as follows: “what caught my attention was the stark contrast between predictions made by Johnson (his Diagnostogenic Theory) and those made by Skinner's learning theory” (p. 36). Of course, Johnson famously predicted that drawing attention to stuttering or punishing the behavior would exacerbate it (Johnson, 1955); whereas Skinner had repeatedly shown that arranging an aversive stimulus to occur contingent on any problem behavior would decrease its probability of occurrence. It was a paradigm clash that Martin and Siegel (plus colleagues, especially Sam Haroldson) began to resolve with a brilliant series of single subject time-series experiments. They showed initially that normal disfluencies could be reduced by verbal contingencies (Siegel & Martin, 1965a, 1965b), and subsequently that shock and verbal contingencies on occurrences of stuttering could dramatically reduce their frequency of occurrence (Martin & Siegel, 1966a, 1966b). Ultimately Time-Out from speaking delivered immediately after a moment of stuttering proved to be an even more effective and reliable response-contingent stimulus (Martin & Haroldson, 1979).

This series of studies was nothing short of revolutionary in so many respects. They not only served to diminish the influence of Diagnostogenic Theory on stuttering, but also led directly to a complete transformation in approaches to the treatment of stuttering in children. This began in large part with the famous “Puppet Study” (Martin, Kuhl, & Haroldson, 1972) that laid the foundation for current behaviorally based treatments of stuttering in children, developed further by Bruce Ryan, Janis Costello Ingham, and Mark Onslow. Equally important, however, and potentially overlooked by previous reviews of the Minnesota Fluency Studies, was the fact that they were also largely responsible for introducing single subject research methodology to the study of speech and language disorders. In doing so they provided our field with a methodology that made it possible to blend treatment and research so that clinical practice could be systematically evaluated for its efficacy. This does not mean that Jerry disavowed the use of group research designs. Indeed, in an important 1987 paper, Siegel and Young argued that due recognition should be given to the appropriateness of both methods. Nonetheless, the
research program he helped foster at Minnesota showed how single subject research could be used to test theory and could form the logical basis for later large-scale studies. The introduction of this methodology to our field was one of his many major contributions towards the improvement of clinical practice and enhanced clinical research within our discipline.

His research interests also extended beyond stuttering. Prior coming to Minnesota, and for several years after, Jerry directed a series of studies about communication with adults and children with developmental delays. These studies investigated the “direction of effect” that flows between participants in communication situations, including those that occur between parents and child who is typically developing versus one with a language disorder (Cramblit & Siegel, 1977). These studies about children with developmental delays helped stimulate the investigation of child-directed speech, originally known as “motherese,” in our field, by Broen (1972; Jerry’s doctoral student) and many others. After the Minnesota Fluency Studies ended, Jerry also formed a collaboration with Herb Pick, Jr. (Siegel, Pick, & Garber, 1984), and they became interested in studying the role of audition on speech and signing by speakers who are deaf. In these and many other examples, Jerry’s research programs expanded our field’s knowledge and practices in many groundbreaking ways.

He was also passionately interested in the philosophy of science, something that provided the context for one of this author’s most memorable experiences with Jerry’s ability to combine science, clinical thinking, and teaching. He took a sabbatical in my department at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1986. During that time, we co-taught a remarkable graduate seminar on communication disorders and the role of theory in science. Along with a small group of graduate students, we covered a range of topics that gave rise to some marvelous debates, most of which led to publications (Siegel, 1987, 1988, 1989; Siegel & Ingham, 1987; Siegel & Young, 1987). As often seemed to happen with Jerry’s work, the papers from that seminar helped to prompt some of the spirited debates that have taken place in our field concerning the role of clinical research in our discipline and the unique (or otherwise) contribution that our field makes to the clinical sciences (Bench, 1987; Bloodstein, 1988; Ingham & Siegel, 1989; Siegel, 1988).

Jerry’s other contributions to the discipline included being Editor of ASHA Monographs and a member of the ASHA Publications Board, and he received, among others, the JSHTD Editor’s Award, the ASHA Foundation Award, an ASHA Fellowship, and in 2002 the Honors of the Association. He retired from academia in 1997, but he continued to write, think, debate, and learn. His later books (Siegel, 2012, 2013, 2014) provide a rich array of writings that offer readers an insight into the thoughtful, personable qualities that so characterized him and that also charmed generations of students and colleagues. Included among these is a treasure trove of commencement addresses that he provided to graduates in Communication Disorders at Minnesota; these gems of their genre reveal a delightful sense of humor and have become almost collectors’ items.

Jerry Siegel died on November 17, 2014, at the age of 82, leaving his wife Eileen and two sons, David and Joshua, and four grandchildren, Jacob, Elana, Allison, and Zachary. He was preceded in death by his daughter Karen. With Jerry’s passing our discipline has certainly lost one of its greatest researchers. More importantly, we have lost a gentleman and a scholar who led us to think, to question, to study, to learn, and to seek always just the right balance of science, humanity, and even spirituality. He will be missed.

References


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