

Obituary

“TO DO SO MUCH . . .” NEIL S. JACOBSON: 23 FEBRUARY 1949 – 2 JUNE 1999

“Most people would welcome the chance to make a tenth of the contribution in any one area”, began Steve Hollon at Neil Jacobson’s memorial service in Seattle, Washington this past June. “If you stop and think of the number of different domains to which he has made such a contribution, it really just boggles the mind. And, at the same time to be so beloved by so many people . . . To do so much – with such grace, with such clarity, and with so much concern and caring for family, for students, for friends – he was absolutely a marvel.”

Neil was indeed a marvel. His contributions to the fields of depression, couple therapy, and domestic violence were beyond measure. He published over 200 papers and 11 books. He was recognized and celebrated numerous times, receiving two consecutive Research Scientist Awards, the distinguished MERIT award, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy’s Lifetime Contribution to Family Therapy Research award, the American Family Therapy Academy’s award for Distinguished Contribution for Family Therapy Research, and was named Psychologist of the Year by the California Psychological Association and Distinguished Alumnus by the University of North Carolina. He was former president of the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy and the American Psychological Association Society for a Scientific Clinical Psychology. He was the recipient of over 20 years of continuous funding from the National Institute of Mental Health; and at the time of his death, he was Principal Investigator of two of the largest studies, one focusing on treatments for depression and the other on marital therapy, ever conducted in their respective fields.

Neil began his career in psychology as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Alan Marlatt, later to become Neil’s friend and colleague, was on the faculty at Wisconsin at the time and recalls that Neil was often referred to as “little professor” even as a young undergraduate. Neil’s future proved this early moniker correct. He completed his graduate work in clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina and his predoctoral internship at Brown University, Butler Hospital, under the direction of David Barlow. He then took a position at the University of Iowa in 1977 and moved to the University of Washington in 1979, where he remained on faculty until his death on 2 June 1999 following a sudden and unexpected heart attack.

Neil’s passion for the study of behavioral intervention began prior to entering graduate school when he read Bandura’s *Principles of behavior modification*. In graduate school, he began his work in the treatment of couple distress and his dissertation represented one of the first well controlled studies in the BMT field. While a student, he

also published in *Psychological Bulletin* what was at the time the definitive review of behavioral marital therapy (BMT). During his internship, Neil began collaborating with Gayla Margolin on their 1979 text, *Marital therapy*, which quickly became a classic in the field and today represents the first empirically supported treatment for couple distress recognized by the American Psychological Association.

Despite the obvious success of BMT, Neil was not satisfied. Always a rigorous and exacting methodologist, Neil began to question the clinical significance of the improvements that BMT produced. In his groundbreaking paper (Jacobson et al., 1984), he suggested that only half the couples receiving BMT improved during treatment and only one third moved into the nondistressed range by the conclusion of treatment. Neil criticized the state of the field – and his own previous work – refusing to accept that the current technology was sufficient. This refusal to accept the status quo was to become one of the hallmarks of all of Neil's work, underlying his contributions to each of the fields he studied. Neil had extraordinarily high standards and demanded that his students, his colleagues, and the field at large adhere to these standards. As John Gottman remembers, Neil was “always aspiring towards truth and knowledge, never satisfied with only statistical significance, always combining the clinician and the researcher. A scientist always in a stage of dialogue, he provoked discussion and soul searching. He was engaged deeply in a community of scholars – challenging, revising, integrating, theorizing. He made people think, review, and not just blindly accept.”

Neil's work led to profound changes in the couple therapy field. His emphasis on clinical significance created a new benchmark for all future empirical investigations of couple treatment. It also initiated his careful scrutiny of the technology of BMT and his search for a more powerful treatment. In 1991, Neil began his collaboration with Andrew Christensen at UCLA, which led to the development and investigation of Integrative Couple Therapy (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Christensen & Jacobson, 2000). Neil and Andy believed that this treatment, which integrated a focus on acceptance with the traditional BMT focus on change strategies, offered a more powerful technology for alleviating couple distress and one that was, in fact, more firmly rooted in the principles of behaviorism.

Neil also brought his methodological innovations (e.g., observational coding of couples, inclusion of physiological measures, longitudinal designs, etc.) to the study of domestic violence. His unique combination of staunch empiricism and his strong feminist and contextualist principles led to tremendous advances in the field. In collaboration with John Gottman, Neil increased our understanding of the nature and impact of husband violence and the relevance of the problem to the field of couple therapy. Neil's work in this area also illustrates his commitment to social change and activism, qualities that had their roots in his involvement in the anti-war movement during college. Neil worked tirelessly to find ways to communicate his research findings to a wider public audience, through his involvement with battered women's advocates, judicial systems, and the publication of his 1998 trade book with John Gottman, *When men batter women*. Neil often admonished his students that it was not enough to publish our research findings in the field's academic journals; we needed to find ways to make our research “count” in the world at large.

Neil's steadfast belief in the power of behavioral principles to create effective and long lasting change also gave rise to his contributions in the field of depression. At the time of his death, Neil was passionately involved in our lab's current clinical trial comparing the efficacy of cognitive therapy (CT), behavioral activation therapy (BA), and paroxetine in the treatment of major depression. This study had its roots in Neil's earlier component analysis study (Jacobson et al., 1996), conducted in collaboration with Keith Dobson, which found that the behavioral component of cognitive therapy produced equivalent change to that of the full CT package. Neil believed that a behavioral approach could provide a more powerful method for treating depression, one that could be provided in more cost-effective ways and disseminated more widely than the currently available treatments. Although the results of this study are not yet in, Neil's enthusiasm for the BA model is a reminder of his deep conviction about the potential contributions of behavioral interventions and his tireless commitment to challenging the field to do better – to find ways to help more people, more efficiently and more effectively.

As is apparent from the above description, Neil's work was also noteworthy for his ability to engage his colleagues with him in his scientific pursuits. His research involved long standing collaborations with his closest friends, many dating back to college and graduate school. Interestingly, he was also unique in seeking out collaborations with his professional critics – many of whom went on to become dear and cherished friends. His ability to combine so effortlessly the roles of friend and collaborator was also apparent in Neil's mentoring of his students. He was a dedicated advisor, and I and other students have often described being part of his lab as being part of a family. The scope of his investment in his students is perhaps well illustrated by his honored tradition of "existential lunches." At the end of each academic year, Neil would take each of us for a decadent lunch at the restaurant of our choosing to discuss our academic accomplishments, our professional goals, as well as larger life issues. As my friend and fellow student Sara Berns commented at Neil's memorial service, "Neil wanted us to be happy in every realm that we could and he cared very deeply that we were." This mentoring continued long after Neil's students left the lab, as he gave feedback on grants and papers, advised on both career and personal decisions, and provided ongoing encouragement, support, and opportunities.

Neil was a rigorous and creative methodologist, a demanding and exacting empiricist, a prolific author, a devoted teacher, a talented clinician, and a committed activist. In a two-and-a-half decade career, he transformed and inspired not one but three fields of research and practice. However, in the final analysis, I suspect Neil will be remembered not only for his enormous intellectual and scientific contributions to the study of couple therapy, domestic violence, and depression. As Don Baucom commented in 1997, during his opening remarks at a conference on couple therapy that Neil organized, "Neil is perhaps best known for being Neil." Neil's wife, Virginia Rutter, often referred to his "indomitable Neilness".

Neil had a boundless enthusiasm, a mischievous and irreverent sense of humor, an abiding love of controversy, discovery, and debate, and an extraordinarily warm and generous spirit. He made life marvelous and fun. He was a wonderful friend and a devoted husband and father. He is survived by his wife, Virginia Rutter, his three

children, Matthew Hemplemen, Emily Jacobson, and Jesse Jacobson, his parents, Lloyd and Marjorie Jacobson, and his brothers, Tom Jacobson and John Jacobson. He was a constant inspiration for us all. He is deeply missed.

Sona Dimidjian

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