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# In Memoriam: Katherine Nelson (1930-2018)

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of another great in our field this week, a giant in the field of language acquisition. Katherine Nelson helped us all appreciate the power of the environment in shaping children's language development. She was one of the first who looked at individual patters within our broader theories (the referential and expressive child) and helped forward the idea that children need to see words used across a number of contexts to build up their mental dictionaries.

A note from her family is below:

Katherine Nelson, a pioneering scholar of the development of language and cognition in children, died at home on August 10, 2018.

Katherine Nelson's research career shed new light on the role of language in the development of cognition. Her early research examined differences in how children organized word recall; later work also focused on scripts and autobiographical memory as critical domains. Throughout her work, Katherine emphasized the social context of experience as well as individual stylistic differences among children on developing capacities for language and thought. Her work illuminates the complex interactions among experience, environment, and language in cognitive development.

Katherine grew up in a home infused with the common-sense spirit of the Swedish-Minnesotan heritage of her parents. She was the youngest of three children. Raised during the Great Depression and World War II mostly in Arlington, Virginia (with a stint in dust bowl-era Nebraska), she recalled her father regularly asking the children at the dinner table to report on what they had done for their country that day.

Katherine studied History at Oberlin College. In her senior year she met and fell in love with fellow student

Richard (Dick) Nelson; they were married shortly after graduation in September 1952. For a decade Katherine's activities were determined by Dick Nelson's academic career. In that period they lived in New Haven, Cambridge, Oberlin, Pittsburgh, Santa Monica, and Washington, DC. Two daughters (Margo, born 1958 and Laura born 1961) joined them along the way.

In 1963 the family returned to Santa Monica, and Katherine determined that she would earn a graduate degree in child development at UCLA, initially with the goal of becoming a school psychologist. When she first approached them, UCLA's Department of Psychology refused to consider her for graduate study, as she did not have the appropriate undergraduate preparation and, moreover, as an older (33-year-old) woman, she was thought to be unlikely to become an important scholar. She spent a year proving her worth in pre-requisite classes and she scored in the top ranks on the GRE; nevertheless she had to argue with the Department, challenging the sexism of the period, to gain entry into their program. Once admitted, she dove into graduate studies, and quickly established herself as an innovative and capable researcher. Her doctoral dissertation on organization and categorization in young children's word recall required novel work in experimental design and analysis; this study and her extensions of it were influential in the field of children's language and cognition.

She worked at Yale University from 1968-1978, first as a Post Doctoral Fellow and later as a member of the faculty. While at Yale her research evolved to focus on real world experiential effects on children's language and cognition, as well as on the role of autobiographical memory in the formation of meaning and concepts.

In 1978 Katherine Nelson joined the faculty of the City University of New York as Head of the Program in Developmental Psychology. She was named Distinguished Professor there in 1986. At CUNY she enjoyed the close community of faculty and graduate students, and found the project of mentoring the diverse group of students highly rewarding. She continued to collaborate with several of her former students throughout the decades. She argued for the importance of the social in cognitive and language development in her book Making Sense: The Acquisition of Shared Meaning (Academic Press 1985), and for the interdependency of language and cognitive development in Language in Cognitive Development: Emergence of the Mediated Mind (Cambridge 1998). While at CUNY, one of her most exciting collaborative projects involved the analysis, along with several colleagues, of recordings taken of one young child's "crib talk," known informally as "the Emily tapes." This material resulted in the book, Narratives from the Crib (Harvard 2006).

After retirement from active teaching, Katherine continued to write and lecture internationally. Her book Young Minds in Social Worlds: Experience, Meaning, and Memory (Harvard 2007) earned the prize for Most Important Developmental Psychology Book of the Year from Division 7 of the APA in 2008.

Katherine Nelson was a longtime Fellow of the American Psychological Association (and served a term as President of Division 7, the Developmental Psychology Division), the Jean Piaget Society, the Association for Psychological Science, and she served on the Executive Council of the SRCD. Her work was recognized with several distinguished awards, including the 1999 SRCD award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions to Child Development; the 2008 G. Stanley Hall award from Division 7 of the APA for a distinguished lifetime career; and the Jean Piaget Society's award for "distinguished lifetime contributions to developmental psychology" in 2017.