



Edith Silverglier Lisansky Gomberg

Psychologist who did pioneering research into alcoholism. Born on Jan 14, 1920, in Brooklyn, NY, USA, she died in her sleep at home in Ann Arbor, MI, USA, on Jan 9, 2005, aged 84 years.

Edith Silverglier Lisansky Gomberg was a prominent figure in clinical alcohol research, whose groundbreaking work focused attention on previously neglected population groups, including women, the elderly, and American minorities. Robert Zucker, director of the University of Michigan Addiction Research Center, Ann Arbor, MI, USA, first met Gomberg in the late 1960s, when he was working at the Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies in New Brunswick, NJ. She was a spirited woman who did not pull punches about her opinions, Zucker told *The Lancet*. She had a capacity for toughness that stood her in good stead as she worked in areas that no-one else cared about, he said, but the toughness was tempered by grace and wit. "She had a spark and a sense of humour, and a special knack to stay down-to-earth and connected with so many people with differing interests."

Gomberg earned her BA in psychology from Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY, in 1938, and 2 years later was awarded an MA from Columbia University, New York, NY. "I remember her saying with some hurt and some anger that her MA adviser at Columbia had discouraged her from seeking a PhD—because women didn't need to do that", said Zucker.

Gomberg disregarded that advice, and moved on to Yale University in New Haven, CT, for her doctoral work. She received her degree in 1949, and shortly thereafter completed her first paper on alcoholism in women, a Rorschach study on personality differences. "She was never a feminist and often was disdainful about that perspective, yet she was a staunch defender of the rights of women and had a lifelong interest in understanding and helping the plight of alcoholic women", Zucker said.

Her entry into alcohol research came at a time when it was just beginning to develop scientific respectability. "Edith was one of the earliest and most knowledgeable of the alcoholism researchers who began working in the field after the Second World War", said her collaborator Thomas Beresford. "Among other things, she did what I believe is the first prevalence study of alcoholism in the Veterans Affairs medical system in the US."

She became a staff member at the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies, the first academic centre on alcohol in the USA, and later moved with the centre when it relocated to Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, in the early 1960s. "Edith was . . . an important role model for all of us who worked in the women and alcohol research field", said Sharon Wilsnack, professor of neuroscience at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND. "She was truly the 'grandmother' of gender and alcohol research. When I decided in the late 1960s to do my doctoral dissertation at Harvard on women's drinking, I could find only six studies that included women drinkers or women alcoholics, and three of the six were authored by Edith Lisansky."

From 1968 to 1971 she and her second husband Henry Gomberg, lived in Puerto Rico, where Gomberg joined the University of Puerto Rico, and further developed an existing interest in ethnicity, which led to contributions on the drinking patterns of African Americans. Late in her career she turned to another neglected area, alcohol use and ageing. She was a founding member of the faculty for a new centre on ageing and alcohol established within the University of Michigan's Addiction Research Center. "She and Tom Beresford were instrumental in bringing the first National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Center on alcohol and ageing to the University", Zucker said.

She was one of the first to acknowledge that substance misuse can happen in later life or carry over from younger adulthood, Charmaine Spencer, from the department of gerontology at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada told *The Lancet*. "It is clearly evident from her work that she had a firm belief in gender and age equality—that people of any age are worth our effort, time, and social resources."

"Edith brought compassion and a quiet sense of humour to everything she did", said Beresford, now professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Denver. "But her most enduring quality was her patience. She knew that there would be no simple solutions to very complex problems and, from the perspective of clinical biology, she was exactly right. Rather than engage in struggles, she would pursue the areas that she regarded as important and wait for the rest of us to catch up."

She is survived by three children and two step-children.

Stephen Pincock

stephenpincock@blueyonder.co.uk