



### **Roxane Cohen Silver**

#### **Award for Distinguished Senior Career Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest**

##### **Citation**

"Roxane Cohen Silver is an internationally known expert in psychological responses to trauma. Her exceptional research has examined adjustment to an array of crises, including sudden loss, war, natural disasters, community violence, and the 9/11 attacks. As an advisor to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and in testimony to Congress, she has shaped policy concerning psychosocial dimensions of disaster preparedness and response. Through her service on the Board of Directors of Psychology Beyond Borders, she has addressed community health effects of terror and disasters. Her warmth, humor, and scholarship are truly inspiring, and she embodies the values this award was created to honor."

##### **Biography**

Roxane Cohen Silver grew up in Skokie, Illinois, at the time the home of the largest number of concentration camp survivors in the world outside of Israel. Although no one from her family was personally affected by the Holocaust, her worldview was nonetheless shaped at an early age by watching men with numbers etched into their arms scooping coleslaw at the local deli. The oldest daughter of an electrical engineer and a homemaker (who went to night school when she was a little girl to become an interior designer), Silver asked existential questions at an early age. Whether demanding an explanation from her mother of the purpose of life when her grandfather died or puzzling over

the draw of Pentecostal churches in the suburbs of Chicago (which she visited with her born-again high school friends who thought they might successfully convert her to Christianity), Silver was always questioning the validity of what she was told and was never satisfied with the answers she received. Her mother tried to get her interested in ballet classes, piano lessons, and playing the flute. But she was far more interested in practicing long division problems (which she learned from her father), debating her parents about stereotypes, analyzing social situations, and making friends with children who were very different from her. Indeed, she was a budding social psychologist before she knew the name for it.

Silver was also very interested in politics as an adolescent. She thought she could make a difference by participating in student council and serving as class president in high school. She took a challenging academic curriculum but, at the urging of her mother, also enrolled in typing and shorthand classes so she would always have something "to fall back on." She spent her lunch hour in the high school counseling office for a year reading about all the colleges and universities that she might consider attending. Having dreamed about going to the West Coast or the East Coast, it was perhaps surprising that she attended college 20 minutes from her parents' home at Northwestern University, where she was a political science major and "pre-law" student. But she changed her career path during spring quarter of her freshman year, when a young, attractive faculty member (who drove a sports car) entered the room, introduced herself as Dr. Gurwitz, and said she was going to teach the class about social psychology. Instantaneously, Silver knew she wanted to become a psychology professor. She dove in to the material (driving her sorority sisters crazy talking about cognitive dissonance theory) and never looked back.

While an undergraduate at Northwestern, Silver was inspired to find answers to her questions with four young psychology faculty members with whom she enrolled in independent study starting in her sophomore year. She studied stereotyping with Sharon Gurwitz, designed experiments on jury decision making with Camille Wortman, investigated violated expectations with Philip Brickman, and examined restrained eating with C. Peter Herman. She was lucky that these faculty allowed her to stay at Northwestern for graduate school, a very exciting time when Donald Campbell and Tom Cook were preparing their classic *Quasi-Experimentation: Design and Analysis Issues for Field Settings* (which she still has in preprint). Students were encouraged always to keep in mind the relevance of their research findings in the "real world," and Brickman proudly kept his issues of *People Magazine* on his shelf next to his pile of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* issues so that students would never forget what was *really* important to study. During graduate school, Sil-

ver was mentored closely by Wortman and Brickman, and she shared a tiny office with Christine Dunkel-Schetter, which would be the start of a close friendship that has continued for three decades.

There were many reasons why Silver began to focus quite early on studying how individuals cope with traumatic life experiences. A close high school friend lost her father to a rapidly advancing brain tumor, and she did not know how to help her. She wanted to understand how Holocaust survivors were able to be such productive members of her community. She saved an article from a newspaper advice column about parents who lost their apparently healthy infants without warning to sudden infant death syndrome and were blamed by outsiders (and sometimes themselves) for a loss for which they bore no responsibility. After Silver's first year in graduate school, Gurwitz left Northwestern to go into business; in her second year of graduate school, Herman left to go to the University of Toronto. Shortly thereafter, Brickman left for the University of Michigan, and within months, Wortman followed Brickman to Ann Arbor. It was at that point that Silver was convinced that she really wanted to focus her career on how individuals cope with negative events that they can neither predict nor control.

While in graduate school, and encouraged by Camille Wortman (who was formulating her early work on coping with uncontrollable outcomes), Silver began a review of the literature on Kübler-Ross's stages of dying. As in her childhood when she was reluctant to accept what she was told just because others said it was true, Silver continued to look unsuccessfully for research evidence to support the stage theory. Three years later in 1980, Silver and Wortman's chapter "Coping With Undesirable Life Events" was published, a paper that they would revise and update three times over the next two decades. In this chapter they challenged existing views of a one-size-fits-all model of how individuals cope with stressful life events. They questioned the view that there is one, universal response to adversity. They argued against an orderly sequence of stages of emotional response. They maintained that it is a myth that distress is inevitable following negative events and that failure to experience distress is indicative of pathology. They asserted that one should not expect "recovery" according to a specific timetable.

In 1981, Silver moved to Ontario, Canada, to be an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo. Nothing could have prepared her for the culture shock. Her first classroom burst into laughter when she introduced herself as Dr. Silver (admittedly, she was a young-looking 26-year-old), and they never understood her Chicago accent. Although it was a very different environment than she was used to, she joined an exciting group of social psychologists that included Michael Ross, Mark Zanna, John Holmes, and Melvin Lerner, and she shared an office

with Donald Meichenbaum. She worked with many excellent undergraduates (Cheryl Boon, Mary Stones, Tracy Herbert) and graduate students (Rosemary Tait, Janice Gray, John Ellard) and took great pride in her role as a teacher.

In 1988, following a year-long sabbatical at the University of Michigan (where she worked with Darrin Lehman, Geraldine Downey, and Daniel McIntosh, who would become a long-term collaborator), her former officemate Dunkel-Schetter convinced Silver to move to the University of California, Los Angeles for a visiting year. Unexpectedly, she loved the West Coast. In 1989, she joined the Program in Social Ecology at the University of California, Irvine—an environment with many of the same values found at Northwestern—and she has remained there for over 20 years. During that time she has helped build the thriving Department of Psychology and Social Behavior along with dedicated colleagues Ellen Greenberger, Ray Novaco, Karen Rook, Daniel Stokols, and Peter Ditto, among others, and has worked and published with superb graduate and postdoctoral students, including Stephen Lepore, E. Alison Holman (who has become a long-term collaborator), Virginia Elderkin-Thompson, Lee Westmaas, Nikki Hawkins, Virginia Gil-Rivas, Michael Poulin, Judith Pizarro Andersen, Heidi Wayment, John Updegraff, Mark Seery, Thomas Wicke, Marnie Brow, and most recently Scott Blum, Edwin Tan, Suman Lam, Dana Garfin, and Vanessa Juth. She has also moved beyond the confines of her university to edit a volume on health psychology with Howard Friedman of the University of California, Riverside and to write unsuccessful grant applications with Baruch Fischhoff of Carnegie-Mellon University.

Over the decades, Silver's work on coping with stressful life events has taken an interdisciplinary approach, drawing primarily from social, health, and clinical psychology as well as from related areas such as personality and developmental psychology, sociology, psychiatry, and medicine. From the early mentorship of the faculty at Northwestern, she has always placed importance on conducting theory-based research with applicability to real-world problems. In addition, rather than drawing from any single victimized population, she believes that our general theoretical understanding of the process of coping with negative life events can be maximized by examining the differences, as well as similarities, across disparate outcomes. She rarely studies samples of "convenience." Instead, one might reasonably argue that she selects samples of "inconvenience"—adult survivors of childhood incest experiences, spinal-cord-injured patients, the recently bereaved, both partners of recently divorced couples, and so forth. Living in Southern California provided her with exceptional opportunities to study how individuals cope with unpredictable and uncontrollable natural disasters. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were a turning point for Silver as they brought

the long-standing focus of her work into the public eye. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Public Health Service.

Because she believes that people's willingness to provide support to distressed individuals is intimately tied to their assumptions about the coping process, Silver has always wanted to share the findings from her program of research with as broad an audience as possible. Although discouraged by Wortman from her original desire to write for outlets that might be read while waiting in line at the grocery store, she has taken her research to the public via lectures, writing for educated audiences, and speaking to journalists and to high school classrooms. She has also returned to her early interest in politics and travels frequently to Washington, DC. In December 2003, Silver was appointed by U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Tom Ridge to the Academe and Policy Research Senior Advisory Committee of the Homeland Security Advisory Council; in 2006 she was appointed by DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff to the Secure Borders and Open Doors Advisory Committee; and in 2010 she was appointed to DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano's Community Resilience Task Force. In these roles she has provided advice to the Department of Homeland Security and its component agencies on the psychological impact of disasters and terrorism. In 2006, she joined Pam Ryan as a member of the founding Board of Directors of Psychology Beyond Borders, an international nonprofit organization that facilitates research, intervention, and policy development in prevention, preparedness, and response to terror attacks, armed conflict, and natural disasters across the world.

For almost 20 years, Silver has been married to Moe Farsheed, an entrepreneur in the software industry, who has supported and tolerated her passion and commitment to her academic scholarship. She is also a dedicated parent of her stepdaughter Mackenzi and her son Adam. When she is not working or sitting on an airplane, she spends her free time as a spectator on sports fields, watching her son play football, soccer, and baseball (with her cell phone or Blackberry in hand).

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