

Remembering Nalini Ambady

February 28, 2014



Nalini Ambady is remembered for her inspiring mentorship and her groundbreaking research on nonverbal behavior and interpersonal judgments. (Photo credit: Harry Bahlman)

Nalini Ambady, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, passed away on October 28, 2013, after a recurrence of the leukemia she had recovered from 9 years earlier. Nalini was a social psychologist and world-renowned scholar of nonverbal behavior whose groundbreaking work focused on the accuracy of social, emotional, and perceptual judgments from social psychological, sociocultural, and neuropsychological perspectives. Her extraordinary research and inspiring mentorship earned her top accolades in the field and the adoration of students and colleagues wherever she went.

Read about [Stanford's SPARQ center](#), founded by Nalini Ambady.

Nalini hailed from Kerala in Southern India and during her childhood moved frequently around the country, learning new languages and cultivating friendships in each location. After graduating from Delhi University, she earned an MA from the College of William and Mary and a PhD from Harvard University in 1991. She first taught at College of the Holy Cross, and then served as assistant professor and John and Ruth Hazel Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard, where we had the good fortune to begin our careers alongside her. She became Professor and Neubauer Faculty Fellow at Tufts University in 2004 and joined the Stanford faculty in 2011.

Nalini was best known for her work on “thin slices,” which demonstrated the surprising accuracy and potency of interpersonal judgments based on brief segments of nonverbal behavior, and became the focus of Malcolm Gladwell’s popular 2005 book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. Using a range of creative methods, Nalini and her students showed that quick, intuitive impressions based on just a few seconds or milliseconds of observation could predict longer-term judgments of phenomena as far ranging as teaching ratings, patients’ satisfaction with their doctors, judgments of sexual orientation and political affiliation, and the company profits of CEOs. Nalini had a voracious appetite for interesting questions in social psychology, and her research made important contributions to our understanding of many other topics as well, including stereotypes, identity and acculturation, emotion recognition, and the neuropsychological underpinnings of interpersonal judgment. In the last 2 years of her life, Nalini founded SPARQ, Social Psychological Answers to Real-World Questions, a center at Stanford that will remain an ongoing tribute to her desire to use research in social psychology to make the world a better place.

Nalini’s many honors included a Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers in 1998 from then-President Bill Clinton. She was an APS Fellow and a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences from 2009–2010. She was also the 2013 recipient of the Carol and Ed Diener Award in Social Psychology from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the field. She won mentoring awards at both Harvard and Tufts and won the Geoffrey Marshall Mentoring Award from the Northeastern Association of Graduate Schools in 2008. She was a nurturing mentor who held her students to high standards that brought out the best of their abilities, and she was proud to see them succeed.

The return of Nalini’s leukemia in late 2012 inspired a widely publicized international effort to find her a bone marrow donor. Nalini’s plight brought attention to the underrepresentation of South Asians and other minority populations in bone marrow registries and to the cultural barriers preventing donation. As a result of the efforts of Nalini’s wide network of family, students, colleagues, and friends, who held bone marrow drives on her behalf, thousands of people registered for the first time, and several matches were made. Although no match was finalized for Nalini, she was comforted by the knowledge that others’ lives had been saved.

Nalini believed that life should be a celebration. She loved literature and flowers and her home was filled with both. She was a devoted mother whose greatest joys were her daughters, Maya and Leena, and her husband, Raj. Her enthusiasm for social psychology inspired her colleagues and spurred a new generation of students on to creativity and excellence. We will always remember her quiet wisdom, unfailing kindness, and radiant smile. œ

-Michelle D. Leichtman, *University of New Hampshire*, and **Patricia J. Deldin**, *University of Michigan*

Reginald Adams

Pennsylvania State University

In 2002, I met with Nalini at a Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference in Savannah, Georgia, to discuss the possibility of writing a postdoctoral National Research Service Award (NRSA)

proposal to work with her. The meeting lasted maybe 5 minutes, leaving me to wonder if it had really gone well. I later discovered that most of her trainees had similar experiences of very brief, yet seemingly positive, initial encounters that ultimately led to them joining the ranks of “Team Ambady.” Nalini is, of course, well known for her work on thin slices of nonverbal perception. Those who have worked with her are well aware that she also applied thin slices in practice.

When I found out my NRSA was being funded, I got my first critical career guidance from her. Before me was a fully funded postdoctoral position to work with Nalini at one of the premier universities in the country. Yet I was considering instead another offer to respecialize in clinical psychology. Nalini did not judge me for my ambivalence. Instead, she talked me through it, and without much convincing led me to realize I should give the NRSA training a chance. Soon, I concluded what I suspect she already knew: that social psychology was where I belonged, that it was my intellectual home. In a sense, she rescued me, and as a result I owe her much for the career I now enjoy.

I worked with Nalini for 2 years before she was diagnosed with leukemia the first time. She had moved to a new university and we were still unpacking and setting up the new lab. Despite uncertainty surrounding her prognosis, she welcomed visits from her students and invited opportunities to work on studies and papers from her hospital bed. We even worked on a grant proposal during this time. Her calm and positive resolve kept her lab members feeling a sense of normalcy. Ironically, this chaotic time resulted in one of my richest training experiences, as she guided me through the daily operations of setting up and running her lab. I think what was most remarkable about this period is that her lab did not just stay afloat; It excelled. Her productivity spiked, reaching and remaining at a new, remarkably high level.

Nalini was known for seeing in students what others sometimes did not, and often what we did not see in ourselves, thereby helping to shape some of the best up-and-coming researchers in the field. What she got in return was great loyalty, gratitude, and a lab full of students who worked tirelessly to meet her high expectations. What we received was a new sense of confidence to excel and a lasting allegiance to a community of close friends and colleagues. I am profoundly grateful to Nalini for choosing me to join the ranks of such an auspicious group. I strive now to transmit such confidence and sense of community to my own students.

Herbert Kelman

Harvard University

Nalini entered the doctoral program in social psychology at Harvard in 1985, after completing her MA at the College of William and Mary. I don’t remember whether she first contacted me before or after arriving at Harvard; in those days students were admitted to the program without necessarily committing to a particular lab and advisor. Whether it was before or after she came, she asked me to be her advisor. She turned to me because, at William and Mary, she had worked with Kelly Shaver on attribution of responsibility, and she knew about my work with Lee Hamilton — another Shaver student — on attribution of responsibility for crimes of obedience (like the My Lai massacre in Vietnam). I am sure I explained to Nalini that I was no longer working in this area and, in fact, did not have an active experimental program. The major focus of my attention had shifted to the development of interactive

problem solving — an academically based approach to the analysis and resolution of international conflict — and its application to the Israeli-Palestinian case. I told Nalini that I would be happy to serve as her academic advisor and to supervise her research efforts, even if they were not in my own areas of specialization (a pattern that was not as uncommon then as it is today).

Nalini did take an interest in our conflict resolution work even though it was not the primary focus of her own efforts. She took my seminar on “International Conflict: Social-Psychological Approaches,” which included an Israeli-Palestinian problem-solving workshop. She was one of the very rare students over the many years that I taught this seminar who did an empirical study for her final paper. It was based on a content analysis of the near-verbatim notes of the workshop, in which she identified the different phases that characterized workshop interactions. Nalini joined a group of my students who met regularly to discuss their work and common interests in the area of conflict resolution, which became the nucleus of PICAR — our Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution. With other members of this group, Nalini participated in a one-day workshop at the meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, at which she gave a presentation based on the conflict between India and Pakistan. She was a valued and respected member of the group over the years and her colleagues in PICAR remember her warmly.

I always understood, however, that this was not the kind of work to which Nalini wanted to devote her career. It increasingly became clear to me that Nalini needed something that I was unable to offer her: an active lab, with a systematic experimental program, a shared research paradigm, and a group of colleagues pursuing a shared research agenda. As I recall, she worked on one research project or another with one member of the faculty or another. I don’t remember at what point she began to work with Bob Rosenthal’s lab in nonverbal communication. But I soon realized that she had found the experimental laboratory and the research paradigm that she had been searching for. In 1989, when Nalini was about to embark on her doctoral research and I was about to go to Washington for a year’s leave, I encouraged Nalini to work with Bob on her dissertation. I feel that “letting go” at that point was the best thing I could have done for Nalini. It may well be that she would have made that decision on her own, but switching advisers is always difficult for a doctoral student, especially someone with Nalini’s strong sense of loyalty. My encouragement made that move easier and more conflict-free for her.

When I returned from my leave in 1990, I found that Nalini was well on the way to completing a brilliant doctoral dissertation. She had clearly found her niche and had truly blossomed. The rest, of course, is history. Nalini, I might add, asked me to be a reader on her dissertation, and in the years that followed she treated me as one of her mentors — a role that I proudly accepted.

There is a footnote to this story in which Nalini appears in a different role. A few years after Nalini completed her doctorate, a new student — named Jennifer Richeson — arrived at Harvard and asked me to be her advisor. I liked her ideas and gave her much encouragement and — I like to believe — some good advice. But, once again, I soon realized that she needed something I could not offer: an active experimental lab and a research paradigm. Accordingly, I encouraged her to work with another member of the faculty who met these requirements: none other than my young colleague, Nalini Ambady.

Ken Nakayama

Harvard University

The discipline of social psychology has prided itself on finding so many counterintuitive findings, showing how humans are subject to so many foibles and errors. What distinguished Nalini Ambady's work, and what establishes her as a seminal figure, is that she had the vision, the talent, and the courage to go against this established grain, and by a series of very straightforward demonstrations revealed to us that the human mind can make accurate and speedy social judgments. Two decades ago, this was revolutionary. Now, most of this is accepted as commonplace. We are in the era of the social brain; we acknowledge that much of our mind and brain is exquisitely well tuned and evolved for social interaction. However, let's remember those who were the true revolutionaries and pioneers. Revolutionaries can be serious and hardened souls. Not Nalini. She was warm, friendly, noncompetitive, collegial, and supportive of her students. For me, it was such a pleasure to do a course together, to edit a book, or just to have a relaxing chat. A friend, a beautiful soul, and sadly one whose time with us was far too brief.

Sohee Park

Vanderbilt University

Nalini and I met in September of 1985 as first-year psychology graduate students at Harvard. My first impression of her was that she was incredibly well read, well spoken and brilliant, a natural star. Our entering class was a close-knit group of diverse personalities and interests: Nalini Ambady, Leticia Albaran, Doreen Arcus, Sue Field, Ellen Herbener, Kris Kirby, Ken Kreshtool, Kwang-Ryang Park, Ric Ricard, Anne Sereno, Doug Sherman, Michael Van Kleeck, and me. Together, we braved mysterious "daily specials" in the William James cafeteria and battled the complexities of statistics. Nalini was a serious student, totally committed to her intellectual pursuits, but she always made time for her friends. From the beginning, she was at the center of all our social activities, and she managed to organize us with effortless ease. We roamed Harvard Square and occasionally ventured out to the slightly sleazy (and therefore infinitely more glamorous) Central Square. We got to discover, love, and hate Boston together. Orchestrated by Nalini, we wrote silly rhymes and limericks about our professors, which thankfully never fell into their hands! We had lots and lots parties, often on the roof of the William James Hall. Someone (who shall remain nameless) discovered that you could go up to the very top, above the 15th floor seminar room. This was undoubtedly rather reckless, but we were young and absolutely thrilled to be on top of the world to feast our eyes on gorgeous views of Cambridge and Boston at night. I have a blurry photo of Nalini on the roof from this era, wind in her hair, exuberant and happy. Sometimes, we would just lounge about in Nalini and Raj's apartment and tackle the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle. She was wickedly good at getting the long clues while casually dispensing nuggets of wisdom or making up very silly rhymes. If I close my eyes, I can go back to those moments and laugh again. I miss her very much.

During the two decades after our class graduated and went separate ways, Nalini's influence on the field of social psychology grew exponentially until those "thin slices" became one of the essential concepts in psychology. Just as she had supported and encouraged her friends throughout graduate school, she tirelessly championed her students, whose talents were cherished and nurtured until their brilliance could carry them to their independent careers. For Nalini, being a good scientist was synonymous with being a

good human being. Her spectacular success as a scientist cannot be separated from the fact that she was a truly generous, wise, empathic, and courageous person. Nalini had a vast capacity for knowledge, laughter, kindness, grit, and hope that permeated all aspects of her life and swept those around her to a higher level. She showed us that we must always strive to be so much more than the sum of our papers and impact factors — that to become great professors, we must first learn to reach beyond the obvious, past the “thin slices” toward a deeper understanding of our students.

After Nalini recovered from leukemia the first time, she came to give a colloquium at Vanderbilt. I was excited and proud to introduce my eminent friend when suddenly toward the end of my short speech, as I began to talk about her immense determination and gift for turning life’s most difficult challenges into rich opportunities, I felt a big lump in my throat, and to my horror of horrors, I was in tears in front of students, colleagues, and strangers. I looked at her desperately for a rescue. Her eyes were a little moist too but she immediately got up, her nose tilted up ever so slightly in that distinct Nalini-esque way. Then she strolled up leisurely, a warm smile lighting up her face as if we were about to go for lunch in Harvard Square, thanked me for introducing her, and proceeded to deliver her talk, flawlessly.

In these past few months, I have been asking myself, where would we be without Nalini? Many of us would never have met one another. Some students may never have become psychologists. Without her, all these close circles of friends and colleagues would never have existed. One beautiful human being, Nalini Ambady, brought hundreds of lives together and set thousands of ideas and events in motion. We owe it to her to continue what she started for us.

Jennifer Richeson

Northwestern University

Nalini joined the faculty at Harvard at the beginning of my second year in the PhD program. Although I was doing well in my classes, I had not really found my way in terms of research; I was getting discouraged.

Yet Nalini turned things around for me. At a department party, she reached out to me and asked me how I was doing. I told her the truth — well, at least as much of the truth as I would have told any faculty member at that time. Somehow I just knew that she was safe. That she would have some advice for me. Little did I know that she would invite me to join her lab. Rather than steer clear of a relatively lost student, she embraced me. She told me that she liked my research ideas and that she would help me to develop them into viable projects.

That conversation saved me. It changed the entire trajectory of my graduate school experience and, in turn, my entire academic career.

Not only did Nalini teach me the tricks of the trade of experimental social psychology, but she also served as both a coach and role model, providing direction in the navigation of the often choppy waters in pursuit of a scientific career as a woman of color.

Moreover, Nalini always had the right response to the ebbs and flows of graduate school. I remember

during one period filled with rejection letters from journals, I declared that maybe I'd leave academia and become a science writer, perhaps for a women's magazine like *Self* or *Glamour*. Nalini immediately and emphatically said, "No, Jenn, our field needs your voice." To be honest, it hadn't occurred to me that I had a voice, much less one that was needed!

But she had that kind of vision for her students. She believed (often long before we did) that we could make substantive scientific contributions to science and society. As a mentor, she wanted to help us find and tune our own voices, rather than simply echo or amplify hers.

I am honored to be a part of her legacy and do my best to model her strength, compassion, and wisdom with my own graduate students.

Robert Rosenthal

University of California, Riverside

The world has lost a leading scholar and scientist; psychology has lost one of its most original, creative, and productive researchers; and we have all lost a kind and loving family member, friend, teacher, mentor, colleague, and inspiring fellow human being. She did so much for so many, all the while remaining so modest, so quiet, and so unfailingly cheerful and upbeat.

Nalini was all about family. The wonderful family she was lucky enough to be born into, the family of Vijayalaxmi, Shanker, and Govind, and the wonderful family she created with Raj for their children Maya and Leena, and for themselves. Already in family mode as a graduate student, Nalini was first a big sister to younger graduate students, then a family member to colleagueships that have lasted for years — and, of course, she became the center of her own wonderful family of her students over the years.

All of these families are missing Nalini enormously right now and will continue to miss her even with the passage of time. Perhaps we can imagine what Nalini might say about our sadness:

"I'm glad to know you all cared so deeply, but if you want to honor me and celebrate my life, then please pass along what we learned together as families to your own families of origin, your own families of life partners, your own families of colleagues, and your own families of students."

Nalini would be grateful that we cared so deeply for her, and we are grateful that we were privileged to know her.

Nicholas O. Rule

University of Toronto

Nalini was more than a mentor to me — she was family. It is not hyperbole to say that she transformed the way that I think about the world. As a scientist, she armed me with the skills and knowledge that I needed to identify interesting questions, construct tests for them, and interpret the answers. As a person,

she did much more. Aside from other professional skills like time management, running a lab, or mentoring students, she taught me how to exist in a world that was foreign to me. As a first-generation college student from an economically deprived background, I often felt out of place in academia. Nalini taught me how to survive. Her dedication to her students was second only to her husband and daughters. Sometimes, I thought we might have even gotten more attention than they did, although that's probably only because I had never seen anyone who could take on as much as Nalini. She would regularly call from her daughter's soccer game, her daughter's dance recital, or a family vacation because she had an idea about which she was too excited to wait to share. During my latter years in her lab, her daughters had made a rule that she couldn't leave the dinner table to call us anymore; yet she would still sneak away sometimes and I would hear them getting angry with her in the background. Nalini loved her work and it was that love that she engendered in her students. She taught us to seek out our passions, whatever they may be, and was supportive even of those who chose to leave academia.

If life may be measured in time, Nalini gave hers to psychological science. She saw science as an artistic and creative process and was always exploring new ideas and new areas of research as well as trying new methods to tackle her questions. Her spirit of curiosity and innovation filled her with an infectious enthusiasm. Through both her positive approach to research and her kindness and warmth as a person, she was a counterweight against the cynicism and negativity that can sometimes invade the scientific process. No matter how glum I might have been, just a brief phone call from Nalini had a magical ability to lift my spirits like nothing else could.

The world is certainly a smaller and darker place without Nalini. But she would never accept it staying that way. Her memory lives on as an example of how hope, kindness, and optimism need never be lost. She came to us in psychology to avoid an arranged marriage, discovered the power of thin slices nearly by accident, endured challenges that would make most people give up, and changed the way that both scientists and nonscientists think about the mind, the brain, and behavior. She was the best of us, and nothing would have pleased her more than to see us all to go on exploring, creating, and discovering with the same kindness, openness, and cheerfulness that she did.

Margaret Shih

University of California, Los Angeles

Debi Laplante

Harvard University

Heather Gray

Harvard University

We had the good fortune to be members of Nalini Ambady's Interpersonal Perception and Communication lab at Harvard University during the late 1990s and early 2000s. We remember Nalini's lab as a happy and productive one, full of laughter, friendship, and exciting new projects always in the

works. Nalini set this tone herself. Her door was always open to graduate students like ourselves as well as to the “army” of undergraduates she always seemed to attract, fascinated by the topics we were exploring. We students flocked to Nalini because she was a constant source of warm support, enthusiastically guiding us in our latest scientific ventures and encouraging us to launch the next study, write up the latest results, and present at the next conference. She believed in us, and as a result, over time, we began to believe in ourselves. Nalini was generous in her personal guidance as well as her professional support. She was open with all of us about the struggles inherent in juggling both academic and family life. She would laughingly tell us about her white-knuckle drives across Cambridge traffic to pick up her children at daycare by closing time. With bleary eyes, she told us about her late nights caring for a sick baby while preparing the next day’s stats lecture. Her office was cheerfully decorated with her kids’ latest artwork, and she invited us all into her home for festive holiday parties. As a direct result of Nalini’s example, we all embarked on our own careers as both academics and mothers with realistic expectations and an ability to laugh at ourselves. Nalini left a mark on each of us, and though we miss her terribly, we will always be grateful to have benefited from our time with her.

Sam Sommers

Tufts University

I saw Nalini several months before I actually met her. I was a research fellow from the University of Michigan setting up for my job talk at Tufts in 2003 when, out of the corner of my eye, in the seat closest to the front of the seminar room, I could’ve sworn I saw Nalini Ambady. Strange, I thought, given that she wasn’t on the faculty at Tufts. I would later learn that the department was recruiting her. In fact, it would be at our first actual meeting weeks later, when she was visiting to give a talk at Michigan, that I first learned I might get the job. I still remember vividly our conversation in the hallway in which she informed me that she had heard my talk was well-received and that I should expect a phone call. Vintage Nalini: Not only did she know everything that was going on in the field the moment it occurred, but many of us were also convinced that she knew of every development *before* it actually happened.

So literally from its very beginning, my career as a faculty member was intertwined with having Nalini as a mentor. Indeed, as highly regarded as she was for her research, she was just as well-known throughout the field for her dedication to mentoring students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty (like me). She received mentoring awards from Tufts, Harvard, and the Northeastern Association of Graduate Schools. Her former graduate students and postdocs now populate the faculty of psychology departments including Dartmouth, Northwestern, UCLA, Georgetown, Chicago, Hawaii, MIT, Penn State, Indiana, Denver, Stony Brook, and Toronto.

Nalini was one of the brightest people and most productive research psychologists I have ever met. But she was never too busy to read over a paper for you, offer input for a new study design you were working on, or simply open her office door to talk about anything that was on your mind. Her trademark tenacity — which contributed to her rise through the ranks to become the first Indian-American woman to teach psychology at Harvard, Tufts, and Stanford, and was the hallmark of her battle over the years with AML — was balanced by a generosity of spirit that manifested itself in annual pumpkin carving parties at her house for graduate students and a fiercely loyal cadre of collaborators, coauthors, and protégés.

Those of us who knew her best, though terribly saddened by her passing, remain buoyed by the happy memories of our highly decorated colleague in less guarded moments, whether confessing with a laugh to her fear of driving on the streets of Boston or conquering an even greater phobia by singing karaoke at the tenure celebration of a junior colleague (alas, per her instruction, no video documentation remains). Ultimately, the extensive efforts to find a bone marrow donor for Nalini could not save her life, but all of us who worked on that effort are gratified by the knowledge that at least five other individuals were successfully matched with donors as a direct result of drives inspired by Nalini's fight to draw attention to the underrepresentation of individuals of South Asian descent in marrow donor registries.

Nalini Ambady will be greatly missed. Not just by her colleagues from Harvard, Tufts, and Stanford, and not just by the dozens of students and psychologists she mentored in a career cut too short. Her mark on the field of psychology will remain a deep- and wide-ranging one. We at Tufts were fortunate to work alongside her for 8 years, and are all better scientists, colleagues, and mentors for having known her and called her a friend. As profound as her loss is for the field, our deepest sorrow stems from her loss as a mother and devoted spouse. But we are comforted by the knowledge that her family will benefit from the strength, tenacity, and courage that Nalini displayed throughout her life.