

Stanford SPARQ Sparks Change

February 28, 2014

When Nalini Ambady joined the Stanford University Department of Psychology in 2011, she successfully lobbied for seed funding to start a new center. She wanted not just a think tank, but a “do tank” that would help policymakers, educators, and nonprofit leaders apply social psychology’s insights and methods to their work. She enlisted social psychologists and APS Fellows Hazel Rose Markus and Jennifer Eberhardt as her associate directors, and hired me to guide strategy and communications.

For a year, we worked with Stanford’s Social Area faculty to hone our mission, vision, and goals and to prototype our programs. We initially called the project The Lewin Center, after social psychology pioneer Kurt Lewin, but then crafted a more straightforward moniker: [Social Psychological Answers to Real-World Questions](#), or SPARQ.

And then, tragedy struck. After 8 years in remission from leukemia, Nalini was diagnosed with a recurrence of the blood cancer. As she struggled with her treatments, though, she did not waver in her commitment to SPARQ. She cooked curries for our meetings in her office. When she could no longer travel to Stanford, she hosted us in her home. And when she was confined to the hospital, she met with us via Skype, generating idea after idea for how social psychologists could improve the experiences of all cancer patients.

On October 28, 2013, we lost Nalini. Although we are still devastated by the passing of our leader, colleague, and friend, we pressed ahead with the official launch of SPARQ in February 2014. SPARQ will continue to honor Nalini’s legacy by pursuing our mission of creating and sharing social psychological innovations with people working to improve society.

“Many social psychologists join the field because they want to address issues like racism, poverty, and war,” notes Eberhardt, now SPARQ faculty codirector. “But then they discover that most of social psychology’s insights remain locked in journals and conferences. SPARQ is figuring out how to get those insights into the hands of the people who need them most.”

SPARQ also aims to increase the flow of information from practitioners to social psychologists. “Many social psychologists do not have firsthand experience working in the fields whose problems they are trying to solve,” says SPARQ faculty codirector Markus. “SPARQ fosters meaningful collaborations between social psychologists and practitioners, to the benefit of both.”

SPARQ at a Glance

Igniting Change

Mission: To create and share social psychological innovations with people working to improve society

Vision: A world where people understand their behaviors both reflect and reinforce their environments, and where people use this understanding to promote justice, peace, and well-being

Values:

- Compassion
- Empiricism
- Inclusion
- Optimism
- Practice-driven theory
- Theory-driven practice

Goals:

- Help policymakers, educators, and nonprofit leaders apply social psychology's insights and methods to their work
- Improve social psychological theories and methods by applying them to real-world issues
- Train a new generation of social psychologists to bridge basic and applied research
- Work with media to identify and explain the social psychological forces driving this century's most pressing problems

Programs:

- Special Projects, which match practitioners to social psychologists for year-long consulting engagements
- Research Clinics, which convene practitioners and social psychologists in bimonthly, 2-hour explorations of a target problem
- The Solutions Catalog, which offers practitioners at all levels of scientific literacy an online searchable database of social psychological interventions for social and environmental problems
- Advanced Training, which prepares a new generation of social psychologists to bridge theory and practice

Founder: Nalini Ambady

Faculty Co-Directors: Jennifer Eberhardt and Hazel Rose Markus

Executive Director: Alana Conner

Be the Donor

One of SPARQ's first projects grew out of the inability of Nalini's doctors to locate a bone marrow donor. Bone marrow transplants have saved the lives of thousands of cancer patients. But donors and recipients must "match" on several genetic markers for the transplant to succeed. Because too few people of color register to become bone marrow donors, South Asian cancer patients like Nalini (who hailed from Kerala, India) often have difficulty getting matched.

In addition, Nalini learned, the process of converting mere matches to actual donors is not always smooth. She identified many areas where donor centers could improve this process by applying social psychological principles and techniques.

Through a SPARQ Special Project called “Be the Donor,” we are now testing these and other ideas to increase the recruitment, retention, and conversion of ethnically diverse bone marrow donors. Special Projects unite SPARQ affiliates with nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies for year-long consulting engagements. Our partners for “Be the Donor” are [Delete Blood Cancer](#), the world’s largest donor center, and the Stanford Law and Policy Lab, which ensures the legality and ethicality of our proposed interventions.

“Working with SPARQ is an exciting opportunity to better understand how to motivate behavior and encourage engagement,” says Chris Kuthan, chief executive officer of Delete Blood Cancer. “SPARQ’s commitment to helping us reach our goals has fostered a true partnership, and I trust their guidance to help us recruit more diverse donors and save more lives.”

Social psychologists also benefit from these partnerships, notes Geoff Cohen, a Stanford social psychologist and research director for Be the Donor: “This is a vehicle for getting the science into the real world and getting the real world into the science.”

Research Clinics

To discover and meet the needs of practitioners in our community, SPARQ also hosts a Research Clinic series. Research Clinics are bimonthly, 2-hour forums where SPARQ affiliates help a nonprofit leader, educator, or policymaker apply social psychological insights to his or her organization’s problem.

SPARQ’s inaugural Research Clinic hosted the Prison University Project (PUP), the State of California’s only on-site, degree-granting college program for prison inmates. Like many nonprofits, PUP wants to evaluate its methods and results so that it can increase its impact, attract new funding, and scale to other prisons. But also like many nonprofits, PUP lacks the expertise to undertake such an evaluation. SPARQ affiliates first helped clarify PUP’s logic model, offered evaluation design ideas, and suggested new interventions. Because PUP’s goals dovetailed with the research interests of several faculty, SPARQ later took on PUP’s evaluation as a Special Project.

“Criminological approaches to prison education view the criminal as a kind of hazardous waste that must be changed from bad to good,” says Jody Lewen, executive director of PUP. “SPARQ has given us a better way to think about, measure, and improve the subjective experiences of our students. We can now conceptualize success in a much more ambitious and humane way.”

The Solutions Catalog

Special Projects and Research Clinics are admittedly small-batch, high-touch programs with big impacts but limited reach. To take social psychology to a much larger audience, SPARQ has created a searchable online database of proven-effective social psychological interventions in seven areas: education, health, law and justice, peace and conflict, the environment, parenting, and relationships. Our goals are first to answer the questions practitioners already have in clear, engaging, and jargon-free language. We then aim to offer a deeper understanding of social psychology by explaining when, how, and why these interventions work.

“The Solutions Catalog demonstrates the power of basic psychological processes to address socially important problems and the need for a distinctly psychological account of those problems,” says Greg Walton, a key adviser to the project. “In an environment in which many have questioned the value and replicability of our science, these findings are a breath of fresh air.”

The Solutions Catalog also benefits social psychologists by providing a new platform for distributing their findings to both the public and their colleagues. Researchers can use a short submissions form quickly and easily to share the results of their published or in-press randomized controlled trials. We are also developing a taxonomy of social psychological processes that will help practitioners find related interventions and drive social psychologists to make clearer theoretical connections.

“We hope the Solutions Catalog will bring social psychologists and practitioners together to solve problems *and* advance science,” adds Walton.

Advanced Training

Another way SPARQ is igniting change is by training undergraduates, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows not only to apply theory to practice, but also to apply practice to theory. SPARQ fellows receive heads-on and hands-on training by conducting research for Special Projects clients, contributing to Research Clinics, and writing entries for the Solutions Catalog.

SPARQ faculty affiliates are also training each other.

“I went into social psychology because I wanted to understand and deal with important social issues,” says Stanford social psychologist and APS William James Fellow Lee Ross. “But I increasingly found that my colleagues and I could do much more than write articles for *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. We are steadily learning how better to collaborate to produce positive social change.”