



SRC Center Survey



Eleanor's Obituary

by Roger Tourangeau

Eleanor Singer died on June 3, 2017. She was 87.

She was a research professor emerita at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, which is part of the Institute for Social Research (ISR). She had a long and distinguished career at the University of Michigan, at Columbia University, and elsewhere.

Eleanor was very active in the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). She was AAPOR president from 1987-88, and also served as conference chair, standards chair, and twice as counselor-at-large. In 1996, she received the AAPOR Award for Lifetime Achievement. Eleanor joined ISR in 1994.

"Eleanor was a major figure in the field of survey methodology and she will be greatly missed by all who knew her," said ISR Director David Lam. "We are fortunate



that she spent the last decades of her illustrious career at ISR, where she made major contributions to research, training, and the intellectual life of the Institute."

Among her many accomplishments was her decade-long editorship at *Public Opinion Quarterly*, a role that



elevated survey methodology as an academic discipline, according to University of Michigan political scientist and past AAPOR president Michael Traugott. “Eleanor was editor of *Public Opinion Quarterly* at a time when survey research and public opinion research became established in the university setting,” said Traugott. “By her selection of content and manuscripts, she — in a very important but subtle way — promoted and encouraged the study of academic survey methods...”

Stanley Presser, another past president of AAPOR, who also edited *POQ*, had this to say about Eleanor: “For nearly half a century, Eleanor Singer had a profound influence on both AAPOR (no one comes close to her tenure as *POQ* editor) and research on public opinion and survey methods more generally. She worked on big problems in rigorous and imaginative ways and found joy in doing so—joy that she shared with 74 co-authors. She leaves us a rich legacy.”

According to another past AAPOR president, Bob Groves, “Eleanor was one of those productive scientists who was also an incredible magnet for collaboration. She ended up collaborating with half of the people in the building, was known as a wonderful mentor, and an exquisite writer. Whenever I would get back articles I submitted to her that she had rewritten, I realized she

made my pieces better. As a collaborator you would discover that again and again.”

In 2016, she received the Monroe G. Sirken Award in Interdisciplinary Survey Methods Research for “significant contributions in our understanding of survey participation, sources of nonresponse bias, and factors affecting survey responses; for pioneering research on the use and effects of incentives; and for leadership in developing awareness and understanding of ethical issues in survey research.”

Her work continues to play an important role in the study of survey methodology.

“Some people who don’t understand survey methodology as a scientific enterprise think that in a period of declining response rates and possibility of bias in samples that the quality of public opinion is on a kind of slippery slope of decline. What they don’t understand is that it’s actually a very vibrant and dynamic field, and research like Eleanor’s is conducted continuously to improve the quality of data collected,” says Traugott.

Singer was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1930. When she was 8 years old, her family fled the rise of Nazi Germany in Europe and settled in Astoria, New York. She completed a BA in English at Queens College in 1951, where

she met her late husband Alan Singer. In her early career, Singer worked as a book editor at various publishing houses, and increasingly specialized in books about social science. She remained a superb editor throughout her career.

In 1959, Eleanor decided to pursue graduate school at Columbia University. She earned a PhD in sociology in 1966. There, she met and worked with illustrious mentors including Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, and her dissertation sponsor Herbert H. Hyman, who introduced her to public opinion research and survey methodology. She went on to conduct research at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

In 2011, Eleanor, along with five co-authors of the textbook *Survey Methodology*, donated an estimated \$60,000 in royalties to benefit graduate student education and research in survey methodology at ISR.

Eleanor touched my own career in a number of ways. She was the editor of *Public Opinion Quarterly* who

accepted my first methodological paper. We went on to collaborate on six papers and a book. I agree with Bob Groves that she was a superb writer. Bad prose went in and good prose came out. Eleanor described herself as a contrarian and I can attest that she could sometimes be prickly, but these qualities made her warmth and kindness all the sweeter. I'm one of the many people who will miss her sorely.

Eleanor is survived by her children, Emily and Lawrence, and her grandchildren. Eleanor and her family request that memorial donations be made to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), the [Survey Research Center's Junior Faculty Fund at the U-M Institute for Social Research](#), or the [U-M Cancer Center](#).

ISR has a more detailed obituary (from which I borrowed liberally):

<http://home.isr.umich.edu/releases/survey-researcher-eleanor-singer-dies/>

— Roger Tourangeau, AAPOR Past President



Remembrances of Eleanor



NSF/Sandy Schaeffer Photography.

Eleanor Singer joined ISR after a very successful career at Columbia University. Among her achievements that occurred during that time was the editorship of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, a flagship journal in survey methodology and attitude measurement. We were attracted to her coming to Michigan because of her broad network of collaborators, including several in Germany, investigating the social and cognitive mechanisms of decisions to participate in survey research. She also was widely known as a superb mentor of younger scholars, an important feature as we knew we were hiring young researchers within the Survey Methodology Program. We probably underestimated that attribute of her because she ended up mentoring both junior and senior researchers, in very productive ways. At that time, she had also established herself as an extraordinary collaborator, able to communicate and work with scholars from very different fields. She continued that in her time at Michigan; her curriculum vitae documents a wide variety of colleagues. None of this, however, reflects a deep humanity that she brought to her day-to-day work. Eleanor was, above all, a very decent person, centered by a set of life principles that infected all who worked with her. It was that trait, in my opinion, that also

made her a leader in a research community. Her moral authority guided the work of teams that surrounded her. Finally, for all of the reasons above, it was just fun to work with Eleanor, to argue with her, and to together try to extract insights out of the data at hand. She was lovable and loved. I miss her.

— Bob Groves





We'd like to share this picture with Eleanor and Tuba from one of Eleanor's favorite restaurants in Ann Arbor, Ayse's, from October last year. We had a nice time talking about health, life and, then- upcoming presidential election. We met up one more time near the holidays when she was excitedly waiting for a time with her family. We will miss her greatly.

—Sunghee Lee &
Tuba Suzer Gurtekin



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— Roger Tourangeau

What I remember fondly about Eleanor is her steadfast dedication to the importance of careful scholarly research. Every time that I published a paper or presented a talk, she always asked good questions about considering other perspectives or mentioned other directly relevant work that I had not seen before. She very much wanted to make sure that we kept the history of our methodological pursuits in mind, and that all previously discovered results were not forgotten about. For this I am quite grateful to have known her.

— Brady West





Eleanor was a kind, generous and supportive colleague. My favorite memory of her is that she had cookies in her desk drawer. She would get them out to share while we discussed a paper we were writing together.

— Megan Patrick



I came to ISR near the time that Eleanor "retired." I put "retired" in quotes because, for Eleanor, it appeared that retirement was a chance to not get paid while continuing to do the work that she loved so much. Even though I didn't collaborate closely with her and don't have as many recollections as some others do, it was clear to me shortly after I arrived that she had been one of the key founders of the field of survey methodology, pulling together her deep understanding of sociology and psychology to formalize how to understand measuring human populations with respect to social, political, economic and health issues. Her impact on social science and public policy will be profound for decades to come. But on a purely personal note, Eleanor was so friendly and welcoming to me when I first moved out from the University of Pennsylvania and was experiencing the sense of personal and professional dislocation that inevitably accompanies such relocation. She drew on her own experiences with such moves to reassure me that such feelings were natural and would pass quickly, as they did. That was a small taste, I've come to understand, of the mentoring that she provided to generations of students and colleagues, mentoring that was likely as important to her impact on creating the field as her actual papers that she authored. We'll all miss her very much.

— Mike Elliott

Eleanor and I joined SRC the same year (1994) and had offices next to each other in the basement. We became very close during the years. Our relationship took on different dimensions. She was a friend, colleague, mentor and even a mother. Eleanor was just one year younger than my mother. So many times I had a mother at home and also in the office. I will miss her very, very much.

— Trivellore Raghunathan





My memories of Eleanor go back to the mid-1980s, when she was a visiting professor at ZUMA, the Center for Surveys, Methods and Analyses in Mannheim, Germany. Hans-Jürgen Hippler, Fritz Strack and I had just begun applying principles of cognitive psychology to issues of survey methods and Eleanor was a rather skeptical observer—open minded, but quick to tell us that small experiments can't answer much of anything. As a student of Lazarsfeld and Hyman, Eleanor had a strong grounding in sociological social psychology and cognitive social psychology's emphasis on inside-the-head processes and laboratory experiments was not her favorite kind of thing. But she could be convinced and eventually accepted one of our papers on what respondents learn from frequency scales for POQ. During a later visit we also conducted several studies together, asking what respondents learn from assurances of confidentiality. Eleanor took issues of confidentiality very seriously and assumed that assurances of confidentiality would help alleviate respondents' concerns. In contrast, our respondents were the more worried the more we told them how well we'd protect their data—if there weren't good reasons to worry, why would we see a need to tell them about confidentiality?

For us, Eleanor was a major source of insight into the world of survey methodology. She was even more skeptical than our primary collaborator, Seymour Sudman, and taught us what it takes to convince a traditional survey methodologist that experimental mind games can be of value. Eleanor also went out of her way to connect us with other survey methodologists at AAPOR conferences, helping junior colleagues from Europe to figure out the who's who in American survey research. Her excellent command of Austrian German, acquired during her childhood, allowed her to brief us in confidential ways, making cocktail hours with Eleanor an educational pleasure. About a decade later, Eleanor moved from Columbia University to SRC, where I had arrived a couple years earlier. This provided new opportunities for friendship and collaboration and I have fond memories of working with Eleanor on a variety of self-report issues, often including Bob Belli and Bärbel Knäuper as members of the team. I also have fond memories of evenings at the Bird of Paradise, where Eleanor's husband Alan sometimes played his sax. There as well, Austrian German came in handy as a secret code. Eleanor was a wonderful friend and colleague and a true mensch. She will be missed.

— Norbert Schwarz



My initial encounters with Eleanor in Fall 2006 were while waiting for the 4th floor Wing 1 elevator. These interactions quickly evolved into longer conversations and regular office visit exchanges to discuss politics in SRC, science and society. In my quest to find connections between survey methodology, sociology and psychology, I read her 1990 chapter “Reference Groups and Social Evaluations” in a book edited by Rosenberg and Turner. Her thoughts in this chapter, together with her oral history about the background for this book and links to survey design laid the foundation for the bridge I needed. In the years since, we enjoyed

together many UMS chamber music and symphonic concerts, films and broadcasts at Michigan and State theaters, performances at Arthur Miller Theater, dinners and telephone calls filled with lengthy discussions about books, family and life. Eleanor gave me much wise work-related and personal advice which I treasured and now miss, but continue to remember.

-- Jacqui Smith



I can only smile at the thought of Eleanor and then be sad at our loss. Eleanor and I bonded over being New Yorkers. Although she was several years older (she used to call me a youngster) we shared a New York childhood, adolescence and university experience. For us, it was special. We also shared a love of science, intellectual curiosity and perspective on how science should be conducted. When Eleanor learned that I had been on Francis Collins’ Genetic Ethics Committee years earlier, she asked if I would be interested in jointly pursuing research in this area. Of course I was, and for many years

Eleanor and I worked on projects related to the ethics of and attitudes of genetics and genetic testing. Externally funded for several years, we presented papers at professional meetings, hosted a conference with national experts in the field and published several papers including a monograph on the topic. I think it is fair to say we were proud of this work and thought we offered some important empirical insights in this area. In addition, it was fun working with Eleanor. We could be serious, work hard on things we thought were important, and enjoy what we were doing at the same time.

Later when Eleanor retired and stopped doing empirical research we would meet for lunch, dinner or to just go for a walk. Our conversations were all stimulating and interesting. We discussed science, recipes, books, music, theater, local and world politics. When I first learned that I would be in New York this year, I envisioned that we would spend time together in NY enjoying plays, museums, dinners and what not. But she told me quite firmly: I think not, Toni. I don’t think I’ll do much traveling this year. So I made a point of visiting her when I came back to Ann Arbor each month and I am so glad I did. Eleanor faced increasing health challenges head on, approaching them somewhat like a research endeavor. She researched the symptoms, illness, possible treatments and likely outcomes. While I am quite sure she would never call herself brave, she was quite brave as she faced this final challenge. She was a good friend and I will miss her.

— Toni Antonucci



Eleanor was an important part of my ISR experience. When we first moved to Ann Arbor, my wife had a temporary job in SRC and worked with Eleanor on SRC's Diversity Committee. She learned a lot from Eleanor about taking on difficult topics whose time had not really come and a lot about how to manage such a project. Susan and I still talk about lessons she learned from her experience with Eleanor.

For my part, I knew her in many different roles. Memorably, I staffed Eleanor on the Charles Cannell Fund in Survey Methodology committee when it was first established and was given the task of drafting correspondence for her to award seekers and recipients. I still celebrate the time she told me that one of my letters was well written and that she particularly liked one sentence. From Eleanor, this was high praise.

—Patrick Shields



"I did a postdoc in the SMP and Eleanor took me under her wing. She knew how fragile female research careers could be and was invested in preventing young (female) researchers from making stupid professional and personal decisions.

My most vivid recent memory of Eleanor is when she and her husband visited our newly purchased house in Montreal around 10 years ago and she insisted that we should put window seats into the bay windows in the living room. We still do not have the window seats (it'll happen one day!), but I think of Eleanor so often when looking out of those windows, remembering the clarity of her opinion and vision."

— Barbel Knauper





Because I have so many positive and fond memories and feelings about Eleanor, it was a pleasant surprise to be asked to say a few words on this occasion honoring her formal retirement from SRC, ISR, and UM. I have included some of those remarks below, and all that I said then remained true and/or came to pass between now and then. Only death could finally retire Eleanor. I would only add that Eleanor was one of the real pioneers of modern survey research and of the entry of women into our field and the social sciences. Many will see farther and clearer from the shoulders of this physically diminutive but intellectually and spiritually towering giant of social research.

— Jim House

Eleanor is a superb social scientist, a graceful and spare writer and editor, and a wonderful human being of great strength, integrity, warmth and decency, leavened with a wry sense of humor. As a sociological social psychologist I knew and valued Eleanor's pioneering work with Herbert Hyman at Columbia on the nature and influence of what they and hence we have come to term "reference groups." I then got to know her as a fine editor of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, with whom I was fortunate to publish the first of my few small contributions to survey methodology. Then I met her in person when during my term as SRC Director we were trying to build a formal Survey Methodology Program in SRC and ISR. As we sought to continue SRC's tradition of excellence in research on the survey interview, Bob Groves and others proposed that we try to recruit Eleanor from Columbia. This was the beginning of my belief that Eleanor was unlike most mere mortals essentially immune to the state of being retired. I thought Eleanor would be a great person for SRC, ISR and Michigan, but also thought she must already be retired or about to be so, as her initial contributions to sociology and social science dated back several decades even then. But getting to know her during her visit, I discovered that although Eleanor was eminently deserving of retirement at that point, she was in no way ready for it; and we were able to convince her that she should come to Michigan and Ann Arbor to close out her career, in what we and she estimated to be another five or so years.

As you know or will soon learn from others, Eleanor's already substantial research and scholarly accomplishments rose to even greater heights here, contributing immeasurably to the overall development of the SMP and SRC and ISR more broadly in the 1990s. As I entered my second term as SRC Director, I felt that I and the Center needed an Associate Director to help ensure that the Director's Office could better handle and stay on top of the growing collective demands and needs of SRC. This was near to the next ETR or estimated time of retirement for Eleanor, but I and others thought she would be perfect for the new role and she graciously agreed to be SRC's first Associate Director. Her acumen as a researcher and scholar, her graceful and incisive writing and editorial skills, and her invariably good-humored and wise judgment and counsel contributed immeasurably to all aspects of the Center's life, ranging from avoiding many stylistic infelicities and outright malapropisms in all that we said and wrote, to maintenance of my own mental health and ability to endure the end of an over 10.5 year term, and to improving our Center Survey Newsletter, SRC Research Seminar Series and our activities with and on behalf of our professional, administrative, and clerical staff. Perhaps most notably Eleanor pioneered efforts to enhance the climate for and practice of diversity in SRC and ISR, leading the committee and team that completed the first systematic assessment of the state of SRC and ISR in these regards and authored the first reports and recommendations for improvement. All that has happened since in developing a climate and agenda for greater diversity in SRC and ISR has built upon the foundation that Eleanor laid.

Even though her time commitment was only half of mine, she became increasingly a full partner in most of our activities. Another that I'd especially like to note is the development and final publication of the Telescope on Society volume documenting the contributions and development of survey research, arguably the single largest and most important development in the methods of the 20th century, to the broader development of social science in SRC, ISR, UM and the wider world of social sciences and society. Eleanor's scientific acumen, editorial skill, and optimistic energy were essential to bringing the volume to a successful conclusion and publication.

Eleanor's ability to go beyond any ETR for her showed once again as she played a very important role in transitioning from my directorship to Bob's by continuing as Associate Director during his first year, while of course all the time maintaining and enhancing her research program.

Having watched Eleanor go well beyond her ETR several times already, I can believe that she may be about to retire in the eyes of the IRS and HR in SRC, ISR and UM, and even perhaps some funding agencies, and that she is about to have more freedom and time to enjoy with Alan travel, opera, New York City, children, grandchildren friends, and much but I still don't really believe that she can or will be retiring in terms of her contributions to research on survey methodology and related substantive issues or her wise, judicious, probing and unswervingly ethical advice and counsel on the major operational and strategic issues facing SRC, IRS, and the broader academic and social science communities. I, like all of us, look forward to her continued collegueship and friendship in these and other ways for many years to come.

— Jim House remarks from Eleanor's Retirement Celebration

Eleanor's fierce intellect and principled commitments placed her in a tradition of scholars whose research was not a "job." Supported by Alan, she organized her long professional life around what she wanted to do. This organizing thread led to fewer distractions, sustaining collaborations and long-lasting accomplishments. She was path breaking, exemplary and something of a throwback to an earlier time—all at the same time and for the same reasons.

— Nora Cate Schaeffer





AAPOR

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

In October 2015, the American Association for Public Opinion Research conducted a heritage interview of Eleanor. You may watch the entire interview on the [AAPOR YouTube channel](#). Eleanor discusses a broad range of topics in this 28 minute interview.

You may also read Eleanor's 1988 AAPOR presidential address, "[Pushing Back the Limits to Surveys](#)," on the AAPOR website.

Memorial Donations

Eleanor and her family request that memorial donations be made to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), the [Survey Research Center's Junior Faculty Fund at the U-M Institute for Social Research](#) or the [U-M Cancer Center](#).



A Celebration of Eleanor Singer's Career and Life

A celebration of Eleanor Singer's career and life will be held on Friday, **September 22 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. in the Michigan League Hussey Room**. A reception will follow. The memorial will include comments from Eleanor's academic colleagues as well as members of her family.

Here is a link to a story about Eleanor from the ISR website: <http://home.isr.umich.edu/releases/survey-researcher-eleanor-singer-dies/>

If you have any stories about Eleanor that you want included in a memory book for the family, please send them to Jennifer Puckett at jjblanch@umich.edu.