

Sula (Sulammith) Wolff

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Although she was 85 years old, the death last year of the child psychiatrist Sula Wolff (on 21 September 2009) still came as a shock to many because her vigour and lively presence had seemed undiminished. Born in 1924 in Berlin, treatment of a

thumb injury as a 5-year-old child by a woman doctor determined her to become one herself. Sula's Jewish family moved to the safety of London and escaped Nazi persecution. Once here, she quickly learned English, excelled at school, and went on to Oxford to study medicine. She qualified BM, BCh in 1947. She then became an outstanding member of a new generation of child psychiatrists who began to transform psychiatric practice in the UK during the 1960s. Her interest in the individual experience of children was a singular preoccupation, and a professional achievement – evidenced by original research and many publications including two well-known books.

Her postgraduate training was in London. She was elected FRCP (Lond) in 1972. She then worked in South Africa (its first child psychiatrist) and the USA before settling in Edinburgh with her husband Henry Walton, who had been appointed to a chair in psychiatry at the University of Edinburgh. From Edinburgh she undertook original research, based not in the university but from a busy full-time National Health Service (NHS) post, a challenge that could have been daunting but instead proved striking evidence of her tenacity. Two of her books brought attention from far beyond the confines of child psychiatry. The first of these, *Children Under Stress* (1969), a UK best seller, became almost compulsory reading for anyone entering teaching or social work at the time, as well as read by those training to be psychologists or psychiatrists. *Loners*, the last of her books, was published in 1995 during the decade of a university fellowship that she held after formally retiring from the NHS. The carefully observed longitudinal work that led to this succinct and elegantly written book contributed to the international understanding of pervasive developmental disorders

Throughout this long period of work she was supported by her husband, together with whom she still found time to establish a strong social network, and to share his love of fine art, supporting promising artists as well as established ones, and buying antiques. Their many superb examples richly decorated the elegant home of a woman whose interior life had been equally rich. Sula had met Henry during her postgraduate training at the Institute of Psychiatry (passed MRCPsych in 1957 and elected FRCPsych in 1972) where she

established the first of several life-long professional affiliations, and an empirical tradition that remained undiminished during her subsequent career. She then left with Henry for Cape Town on his return to head the University Department of Psychiatry but, like many others, decided that they could not remain under apartheid. They returned to the UK after a period in New York where Sula's interest in the importance of individual differences between children was fostered by working with Stella Chess, whose pioneering work with Alex Thomas on children's individual temperament inspired many others too.

These origins are clear in the work Sula subsequently undertook in Edinburgh – not only in how children individually experience stress, but in her studies of patients whose temperamental traits seemed to isolate them from others, unable to share the 'lived experiences' of most of their peers. Colleagues remember too her lively interest in their own children, her capacity to engage with each of those she met, the searching selfless interest she took in her patients, and in how her trainees and colleagues were getting on. She was a warm person with an enquiring mind; her genuine interest in her colleagues ('And you? How are you doing?') meant that a short social answer was never being sought, and that follow-up questions were highly probable.

Sula took these attributes to her writing, which was precise and lively, pushing the boundaries of what was understood. She was a clear thinker, and that in combination with her wide knowledge made her a highly valued early member of the Child Psychiatry Research Society. She brought the same attributes to her studies of children with schizoid personality disorder. Published in 1997, *Loners* was a highly readable account of this work and, like *Children Under Stress* before, was read internationally, leading to invitations to speak across the globe. New links were also forged with those exploring the genotype of such disorders because of the clarity of clinical description of a particular phenotype. Delineating the core difficulties, her work both anticipated and contributed to the now rapidly expanding international work investigating non-shared family environment factors, unarguably one of the most important frontiers in child and adolescent mental health research. Sula also emphasised the importance of not just understanding an affected individual's disposition but respecting it, recognising that many as adults do find a niche that suits their disposition, in contrast to when schoolchildren feeling that they had been shoe-horned into what others had deemed was necessary for their good. In a foreword to the book, Leon Eisenberg (one of the 20th century's greatest child psychiatrist) wrote, 'I wish I had had *Loners* to read when I began my career', believing that it was 'destined to be a clinical classic'. Sula too was a classic.

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