

Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Independent Practice: Sam J. Tsemberis

The Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Independent Practice is intended to recognize outstanding independent practitioners in psychology. The award is given to a psychologist working in an area of clinical specialization, health services provision, or consulting, and services provided to any patient population or professional clientele in an independent setting. The 2016 recipient is Sam J. Tsemberis, who “has applied the best of psychological practice and science to address the complex social, health, and economic factors involved in chronic homelessness among persons diagnosed with mental illness and addictions.” Tsemberis’s award citation, biography, and bibliography are presented here.

Citation

“For over 25 years, Sam Tsemberis has applied the best of psychological practice and science to address the complex social, health, and economic factors involved in chronic homelessness among persons diagnosed with mental illness and addictions. His once radical concept of “Housing First” (housing and supports without preconditions) is now considered a best practice, having been implemented across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Communities now have a proven intervention to address chronic homelessness of vulnerable individuals, once considered an intractable health and social problem. Dr. Tsemberis’s evidence-based model of psychological practice has had a significant global impact.”

Biography

Sam J. Tsemberis is a clinical–community psychologist. However, his professional career did not follow a linear path. For that matter, neither did his life. He was born in Skoura, a small village in southern Greece, at a time before the houses had running water or electricity and when the remedy for an ear ache was breastmilk applied directly into the ear and the cure for almost every other ailment was a visit to the village elder who silently prayed in order to exorcise the evil eye. He and his family moved to Montréal, Québec, Canada, in the winter of 1956. He was 7 years old, and this was his first encounter with snow, ice skating, and the English language—all of which he still loves today.

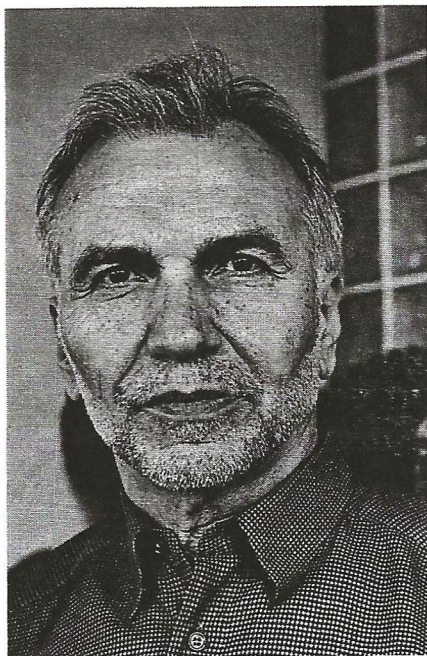
His undergraduate degree, with a major in English literature and psychology, is from Concordia University (1970) in Montréal. After college, he spent 3 years teaching at various middle schools and high schools. He returned to graduate school to study psychology after spending a year working as a special education teacher. He wanted to learn better ways to help his students. In 1973, he enrolled in the master’s program in psychology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City, New

York. It was there that he studied with Mary Henle, an academic Gestalt psychologist who had worked with Kohler and Kofka. Henle was a remarkable teacher and inspired Tsemberis to continue his studies in psychology after completing his master’s program.

After earning his master’s degree in psychology, Tsemberis was accepted to New York University’s Program in Social and Personality Psychology. Two years later, his interests in working directly with people, rather than through lab experiments, led him to transfer to clinical and community psychology. He completed his internship in clinical psychology at New York University Bellevue Hospital and was awarded a chief intern fellowship to remain at Bellevue for a second year. It was there that he conducted the research for his doctoral dissertation: the effects of social support on individuals with mild and moderate Alzheimer’s disease.

Learning to work as a clinical psychologist is, in many ways, like the apprenticeship system of the old guilds. Much is learned by mentorship and imitation. When reflecting back and trying to describe one’s influences, memories appear as vignettes. For Tsemberis, an early formative memory is his experience with Moshe Varde, his clinical supervisor during a 1-year externship at Bronx State Psychiatric Hospital. Trying to learn what to do in the new role of psychology extern began by watching others and then, like many immigrants do, imitating the behaviors that seem adaptive. Taking careful notes about what patients say was one such highly imitated ritual. So Tsemberis took copious notes and dutifully reported them during his supervision with Dr. Varde.

One afternoon, like many others, Tsemberis was recounting what he and his patient (as people hospitalized in an inpatient service were then called), we’ll call him Edward, had spoken about. Edward had grown up in the Bronx in New York, had not finished high school, and got a job as a shoe salesperson at a chain store for athletic footwear in his neighborhood. Moshe had questions: Why did he not finish



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high school? How did he get the job? How did he like the job? Where was he living at this time? Tsemberis would go back to Edward, ask the questions and report back. And so it went. Each week, Tsemberis brought in more information about Edward and Moshe had more questions: What was his relationship with his parents like? What about siblings? Who was he closest to? Did he have friends? How did he end up in this hospital?

Tsemberis was becoming exasperated. "Moshe, more and more questions," he complained. "Where are we going here? What is the point?" Moshe, not at all shaken, in a very calm voice, explained,

We are trying to get a complete picture of Edward's life. That way we can understand how he feels and how he experiences the life he is living. And the reason we want to understand is that understanding is the first step to knowledge, and knowledge is the first step to love.

That same year, he learned another valuable lesson at Bronx State: Some of the things that matter most to patients are never written in their charts, and healing can take many forms. One of his patients was an attractive and talented musician who had recently been dumped by a young man from another ward. She was very upset and angry. During her weekly sessions with Tsemberis, she began by asking if they could walk outside around the grounds while they talked. She directed the course of their walk and led them right past the bench where the young man was sitting. The patient chatted breezily and never looked in the young man's direction. After this pass-through, she felt somewhat vindicated and was in a better frame of mind.

During his internship at Bellevue, and for several years after that, Tsemberis became very interested in systems theory and family therapy. His supervisor at NYU was Linda Carter who had studied with Jay Haley. Tsemberis went on to study with Salvadore Minuchin, first at the Child Guidance Clinic in Philadelphia and then for 3 years in New York City. Family systems presented an intriguing alternative to individual psychopathology and engaged the positive resources of family members in the treatment of the individual. There was something appealing about family systems, perhaps it harkened back to Gestalt psychology's dictum that the whole was different (greater than) the sum of its parts.

In the late 1980s, homelessness was becoming a national public health issue as it reached heights that had not been seen since the Great Depression. It was impossible to walk the streets of any American city without encountering individuals who were literally living on the streets and who had diagnosable mental health problems. At this time, Tsemberis was working at Columbia University Medical Center on an HIV/AIDS prevention research demonstration program for runaway and homeless youth, and he was recruited to run New York City's Project HELP (Homeless Emergency Liaison Project). The HELP program had been initiated by Mayor Ed Koch after the highly publicized death of a 62-year-old woman who was homeless and froze to death while sleeping in her cardboard box.

This mission of Project HELP was to prevent the homeless from dying on the streets. The program consisted of a mobile interdisciplinary team consisting of a psychiatrist, a nurse, and a social worker who were empowered to hospitalize individuals, involuntarily if necessary, if they presented a danger to themselves or others because of their mental illness.

After seeing hundreds upon hundreds return to the streets after their hospitalization, Tsemberis was determined to try another approach. He collaborated with the renowned psychologists Bill Anthony and Mikal Cohen to introduce a consumer-driven psychiatric rehabilitation approach to helping individuals experiencing homelessness and mental illness. This quickly led to his founding Pathways to Housing, a nonprofit agency in which he developed the Housing First approach. Housing First is a complex clinical intervention that offers consumers immediate access to housing without requiring treatment and sobriety as preconditions. This approach challenged the conventional wisdom of approaches that mandated treatment and sobriety before housing as a means of achieving "housing readiness."

Housing First also challenged long-standing illusory correlations concerning the relationship between the severity of psychiatric diagnosis and one's ability to function. Individuals who may be experiencing some delusional thinking or are in the throes of addiction are also capable of making choices and managing some of the

tasks of everyday life. The success of Housing First was well-documented because Tsemberis took pains to study the program and compare it to “treatment then housing” approaches. He demonstrated that the program can be replicated outside New York City by starting Pathways programs in Washington, DC; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Burlington, Vermont. Organizations in hundreds of other cities soon followed suit, replicated the program, and achieved the same remarkable 80%–90% success in getting and keeping people housed.

Today, Housing First is listed on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (SAMHSA.gov) and has been replicated across the United States, Canada, the European Union, Australia, and New Zealand. It is an integral component of the national policy for ending homelessness in many countries and was recently tested in a national research demonstration project across Canada (Mental Health Commission of Canada/AtHome/ChezSoi). Tsemberis is currently the director of the Pathways Housing First Institute and provides training to communities throughout the globe on ending homelessness, implementing Housing First, and aligning services with consumer choice and recovery. He also teaches in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center and is involved in research on homelessness, mental illness, addiction, community integration, and recovery.

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