JOSEPH ZUBIN—An Intellectual Biography

When a famous pianist was asked, after performing a piece of music, to explain its meaning, he is said to have sat down and played it again. The meaning of a man’s intellectual history is no easier to explain. Perhaps here too we should seek the meaning by sitting down and “playing it again.” With that in mind, we thought we could honor Joseph Zubin most appropriately by a book of this kind.

Joseph Zubin has taken on many roles in his career (he still adds a few each year)—teacher but also student, writer but also reader in wide-ranging areas of the literature, researcher but also constructive critic of research, stimulator of new ideas but also their consumer and adapter. The common concern that characterizes all of these roles stands out clearly: it is an emphasis on the importance of evaluation. This emphasis was apparent in his earliest publications on the validity of tests of intelligence and personality, and has continued to manifest itself in his appraisal of handwriting analysis and the projective techniques, particularly the Rorschach test, in his weighing of the worth of various kinds of therapy, in his evaluation of screening procedures for the emotionally maladjusted, in his appraisal of the success of psychoanalytic training, and in his critical examination of the phenomena of subliminal and dermo-optical perception. In fact, it was his creative concern with evaluation that brought him, in 1968, the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene Distinguished Service Citation for Research.

But Joseph Zubin’s critical analyses have always been followed by constructive or reconstructive work. The negative findings that he unearthed with respect to the Rorschach challenged him to construct scales for appropriate measurement and to examine more closely the nature of the interview. Results indicating the ineffectiveness of various somatotherapies spurred him to sift the literature more carefully for characteristics of patients, to determine whether assigning therapies more appropriate for each disorder would produce a greater rate of recovery. Here we find him using the rating scale to bring stability to Rorschach scoring and order to the
observation of patients' behavior on hospital wards. Here too we find him creating quantitative indices of prognosis. We see him working on the psychophysiology of the pupil of the eye and the evoked potential of the brain, applying his knowledge of verbal learning to analyze the effect of electroshock treatment on memory, joining behavior theory with developmental psychology to examine the genesis of speech in children. Although he feels most at home in experimental psychology, he does not hesitate to study the friendship patterns of the prepsychotic individual when he decides that these are important. Pursuing the fields of inquiry he believes to be germane to psychopathology, he is forever finding a new set of results that must be integrated into his armamentarium of tools and conceptualizations.

A field as much his own as psychology is statistics. He has contributed to it by designing new techniques, as in his pattern analysis and clustering techniques. He has also brought into psychology some of the statistical techniques that he thought psychologists should start using—for example, the analysis of covariance—even when their application has forced the abandonment of cherished hypotheses.

Since Joseph Zubin undertakes the kind of thorough evaluation which requires that the phenomena appraised be better organized, he is inevitably led to investigate the best models of conceptualizing and is thus brought to consider general questions of scientific theory. He has contributed to this area by taking diverse and seemingly unconnected accumulations of data and organizing them in ways that shed light on disorders as complex as schizophrenia. His paper on the power of scientific models brought into high relief their uses in the study of personality. The study of psychopathology, which has yielded everything from isolated facts to untestable theories, has also profited from his conceptualizations. Being partial to no single model, he has written many papers to show how various testable models can give meaning to data. He moves easily from the developmental to the learning model, from the internal environment to the sociocultural model, from the genetic to the ecological model.

Joseph Zubin's urge to make order out of the chaos of psychopathology has made him an ideal organizer of the yearly meetings of the American Psychopathological Association. All of these meetings, no matter how different from one year to the next, have borne his unmistakable stamp—the logical exposition of the problem, the new developments, and the significant controversies presented by the important figures in the field. The published proceedings of many of these meetings have become classics in their time. In recognition of his skills, the American Psychopathological Association made him its president and gave him one of its highest honors by having him deliver the first Paul H. Hoch Award lecture in 1968.

Because of his interest in organizing a field of knowledge, he is in great
demand as a journal editor. Thus he has served as associate editor on eight different journals dealing with both theory and practice in psychiatry and in experimental and abnormal psychology.

His skill in evaluation has also been utilized by various agencies of government concerned with the funding of research grants. Here is additional evidence of his range of interests, for he has sat on the Psychopharmacology Study Section of the National Institute of Mental Health and on the Section on Developmental Behavioral Sciences of the National Institutes of Health. He has also been called to serve on the Board of Professional Affairs of the American Psychological Association.

His zeal in teaching and his interest in students have always endeared him to them. At Columbia University, graduate students quickly learned that Professor Zubin was always willing to talk to them and to entertain fresh ideas. The number and variety of topics of the dissertations he sponsored constitute a tribute to his range of interests. Though now professor emeritus, he has made sure that he will continue to teach and to guide students by becoming a special lecturer in psychology and psychiatry at Columbia University and adjunct professor at Queens College of the City University of New York. He continues to lecture and is invited to speak all over the world. For a period of some 15 years, the Clinical Division of the American Psychological Association invited him to conduct his famous postdoctoral institute and, in 1968, gave him a special Certificate of Merit.

We have not yet mentioned his administrative duties and abilities or his significant role in getting the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene to provide for evaluation of new programs. The establishment of his Biometrics Research Unit is concrete evidence of his vision and of his unwillingness to be bound by the artificial borders erected by jealous departmental definition. In a single group he has gathered together investigators in such fields as anthropology, sociology, neurophysiology, psychiatry, statistics, linguistics—and, within psychology, psychophysics, conditioning, and psychomotor behavior; with his gentle administrative guidance, he has elicited the best from each of them. Although knowing when to change course in research and when to direct interest to new areas, he has never demanded a change in course from anyone working for him. Unafraid of large projects or of new areas of investigation, he accepted the challenge of doing a comparative cross-national study of diagnosis involving the coordination of research teams in the United States and the United Kingdom.

To all this we must add a word about Joseph Zubin the man. Perhaps most surprising on first encountering him is his direct expression of an overriding curiosity. When he fails to understand something, he asks about it, and no matter how naive the question may at first appear, it eventually turns out to be significant. Never hesitating to rediscover the obvious, he
nevertheless shapes that rediscovery into something new. Surely no friend of the shortened work week, he spends much of his currently reduced work time of 70 hours a week in self-education; he seeks knowledge from all around him, making inquiries with humor and humility. And as he accepts help, so he gives it: professor of psychology and psychiatry, chief of the Biometrics Research Unit, consultant to the Veterans Administration and the National Institutes of Health, editor of journals, organizer of meetings, writer of papers and books, researcher and integrator of research, he never closes his door to a student or staff member in need of advice or assistance, either professional or personal.

Happily this record of achievements is incomplete, for Joseph Zubin’s work continues as does the recognition that he receives. To mention but the latest honors, he was a member of the American Psychological Association Task Force to prepare for the 1971 White House Conference on Aging; in 1971 he was elected president of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology; in 1972 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doktor Honoris Causa of the Medical Faculty at Lund University in Sweden.

If there were a word that combined the areas of measurement, evaluation, anthropology, sociology, geriatrics, experimental psychology, learning and development, and others, it might describe the scope of Joseph Zubin.

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