H. B. M. MURPHY (1915—1987):
A KEY FIGURE IN TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY

A Memorial Review by Ellen Corin and Gilles Bibeau

HUMANIST AND SCIENTIST

In a recent article, Dr. H. B. M. Murphy (1986) reminds us that transcultural psychiatry can be traced back to early Greek and Arabic physicians' books. He mentions that one of the earliest explicit texts which he had encountered on this topic was that of Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab social historian. A few years before his death, he was invited to lead working sessions on the relationships between culture and clinical practice organized by Essedik Jeddi, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Tunis and director of the Ibn Rushd and Pinel clinical wards at the Tunis Razi Hospital. He took this opportunity to deepen his knowledge of the Islamic tradition and to read intensively in Ibn Khaldun's work and the Koran. This illustrates the commitment to knowledge which he retained until his last days of life as well as his personal involvement in transcultural contacts.

Dr. H. B. M. Murphy passed away on July 30, 1987. With his death, we lost one of the key figures in transcultural psychiatry. While remaining in the background and appearing very seldom at the forefront of public events and international meetings, he played a central role in the development of the field. At a theoretical level, he drew the psychiatric community's attention to the essential contribution that comparative psychiatry has to offer for the development of theories and explanations in psychiatry. In 1973, he wrote: "The term transcultural psychiatry has been of general use for only about ten years, and although its application has expanded greatly, its relevance to the rest of psychiatry is not well understood. Its aim of improving psychiatry in countries and cultures other than those in which the specialty originates is well recognized but its functions of testing existing assumptions and developing new theories is not" (1973a: 711). In his introduction to Comparative Psychiatry (1982a), he stresses the fact that Kraepelin intended to use psychiatric comparative data to help further the process of building a really "scientific" psychiatry, and he viewed his own work in the same perspective.

At an empirical level, Dr. Murphy brought together an enormous
amount of epidemiological and cultural data which he scrutinized critically and put into a general frame; he also personally collected original data in various parts of the world. At an international level, he worked very hard to persuade international agencies to take cultural dimensions into account when planning mental health services, and he committed himself to defending this orientation in international studies, consultations and contacts. For H. B. M. Murphy, transcultural psychiatry was never confined to a purely academic discipline. He perceived transcultural psychiatry as being at a crossroads in various senses. At the crossroads between various disciplines, transcultural psychiatry has to build on a good knowledge of social processes to increase our understanding of the multidimensionality of psychiatric problems. It is perceived as offering ways of testing prevalent assumptions and strengthening theories in the field of general psychiatry; it also helps address the needs of developing countries, especially for clinicians working in societies with cultures very different from those in which psychiatry has developed. At the crossroads between theory, diagnosis and clinical practice, transcultural psychiatry was conceived by H. B. M. Murphy as a discipline which requires rigorous thinking, creativity, commitment and humanity.

Two books which he published, one at the beginning of his transcultural career (Flight and Resettlement, 1955) and the other at the end of his academic life (Comparative Psychiatry, 1982a) have been key contributions to the field of transcultural psychiatry and remain invaluable sources of information, insights and knowledge. In all, he published more than one hundred articles which lay down paths which we will doubtless be following for a considerable time.

BIOGRAPHICAL LANDMARKS

Dr. Murphy, known as Brian to his family and by the three initials H. B. M. by the international scientific community, was born, raised and educated in Edinburgh, Scotland. His father had a doctorate in classic languages and was a teacher in a secondary school. It was from him that Dr. Murphy received the gift of linguistic precision and his introduction to the great classics. He grew up a Scottish Presbyterian but was soon introduced by his parents to a critical and evaluative attitude regarding everything, including religion. The lifestyle in the family was that of a secondary school teacher's, but Scotland as a country in the 1920s faced difficult economic problems. Many conversations with Dr. Murphy convinced us that the intellectual atmosphere at home, the cultural environment of Scottish values, and the general economic context framed his personality