

Joseph Zubin, Ph.D., 1900–1990



Joseph Zubin (née Zubinsky), Founder of the Biometrics Research Department of New York State Psychiatric Institute, was born on Oct. 6, 1900, in Raseiniai, a small village in Lithuania. He was the eldest son and second of six children. When he was 9 years old he immigrated with his father to Baltimore, and at the insistence of an immigration officer the family name was shortened to Zubin. He received a Ph.D. in educational psychology from Columbia University in 1932 during the depression, when jobs were scarce. In 1956 he founded the Biometrics Research Unit for the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene with the goal of providing a comprehensive program of applying objective measurement procedures (biometrics) to understanding and evaluating psychiatric disorders. Under his guidance the Biometrics Unit at the New York State Psychiatric Institute increased from one section with two scientists and support staff to nine separate interdisciplinary sections and a total of 109 staff members in 1975.

In the 1960s, with his friend and colleague Morton Kramer, Zubin organized the U.S.-U.K. Project, which compared psychiatric diagnostic practices in New York and London. The study showed that the differences in the prevalence of schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness in the two cities was a function of different criteria for making the diagnoses in the two countries. A natural outgrowth of this finding was the work of Spitzer and En-

dicott, in Zubin's department, which led to the development of the Research Diagnostic Criteria in the 1970s, which, in turn, was a model for the inclusion of diagnostic criteria in DSM-III.

Following his forced retirement from the New York State system, Zubin moved to Pittsburgh, where he established a new Biometrics Research Program focusing on schizophrenia—a disorder that always fascinated him, perhaps related to the fact that he had a brother who suffered from the illness.

Zubin was president of many professional organizations, including the American Psychopathological Association and the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology. At meetings one could always be sure that Joe would be in the first row, asking a challenging question or presenting his own unique perspective on some issue central to psychopathology.

In listing his own accomplishments, Zubin was proud to note that he created a department in which DSM-III—with its “biometric” approach to operationalizing diagnostic concepts—was developed. A few weeks before his death from congestive heart failure, he wrote to a colleague about ideas he had regarding a study of the relationship between consciousness and cerebral function based on his observations of his own altered mental status during episodes of cerebral ischemia.

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