



## Michael J. Mahoney. In memoriam

For most of the psychologists of our generation Michael Mahoney was a living legend. We had to wait till 1987 to know the men behind the legend. Since then we both had the luck of collaborating closely with Michael, and learn to appreciate that the men and the legend were two sides of the same golden coin.

Michael Mahoney was probably one of the first psychologists, educated in the behavioral tradition, that dare to challenge the mainstream establishment and the «First Commandment of right-wing behaviorism: “Thou shall not infer» (p. 24, *Cognition and Behavior Modification*). In fact, in early 70s, Michael Mahoney was a young and energetic graduate student at Stanford University working under the supervision of the men who is probably the most well known living legend in psychology - Albert Bandura. With Bandura, Michael Mahoney was learning the first instruments of methodological behaviorism but, at the same time, he was growing aware of the limits of not considering the individual as a complex knowing system. We believe that Bandura was instrumental in modeling in Mike the three attitudes that were going to become central landmarks in his career: the openness of mind; the constant search for change; a warm and caring human being. The life and work of Mike have been so rich and enriching that it would take a full book to acknowledge the scope of his work. For the sake of brevity we'll focus on what we believe were the three central qualities of Michael Mahoney's work: Openness of mind; mover and shaker; warm and caring human being.

### Openness of mind

His openness of mind is well illustrated, first of all, by his courage to open behaviorism to both the cognitive revolution and the power of self-regulating systems. Overall, he created the foundations of what came to be referred as the «thinking behaviorist». He was still a «young kid in the block» when he published, in 1974, the two books that were going to turn him into a living legend for a new generation of psychologists. «Cognition and Behavior Modification» and «Behavioral Self-Control» were the «new bibles» of the emerging cognitivism. But Mahoney always refused the

temptation of becoming the new «evangelic (thinking) behaviorist». His openness of mind was the motor pulling him forward in the continuous search for new bridges with philosophy and the sciences. Example of this ability to rethink psychology within the broader context is the publication in 1976 of another landmark book - «Scientist as the Subject». With this book, Mahoney proposes to re-center the science enterprise in the figure of the scientist as a person - «*Relative to the last century - or even the last decade - today's scientists know quite a bit about virtually everything on our planet - with one ironic exception. The exception, of course, is the scientist. He remains a mysteriously unexamined inhabitant of our planet. In his relentless analysis of everything under (and including) the sun, he has remained curiously self-exempt from the scrutiny which is the creed of his vocation. This book is an invitation to remove that exemption*» (p. xi).

Since those early times, Mahoney explored new lands and fields refusing the temptation to come up with the algorithmic formula for the final and definitive truth. As is well illustrated in his most recent «Human Change Processes» (1991), his work is a constant search for connecting psychological knowledge with philosophy, anthropology, literary criticism and evolutionary biology. This attitude of openness was not only present in his writing, but also, in his interaction with students and colleagues. He gave constant support and encouragement to the emergence of new ideas, a process that frequently originates creative communities of scholars.

### **Mover and Shaker**

Michael Mahoney's openness of mind was associated with a constant search for change and development. It would have been easy for Mahoney to stay in the comfortable realm of the cognitive revolution enjoying all the credits he deserved. But he was always a mover and a shaker and in early 80's he edited a book challenging some of the rationalist assumptions of cognitivism - «*Psychotherapy process: Current issues and future directions (1980)*». In a courageous attitude, Mahoney ventured a chapter questioning some of the foundational paths he has traveled himself: «*Before I proceed to my remarks, I would like to preface them with few comments that may place them in perspective. When I began my psychological education, I started from a familiar point - psychoanalysis. My interest and enthusiasm for dynamic approaches was short-lived, however, and I was soon swept up in operant psychology. My respect for the empirical and applied commitments of behavior modifiers has been enduring, and it was further reinforced when I moved into a social-learning framework. The role of cognitive processes in human adjustment and distress became my primary interest, and for the past several years I have been wearing the uniform of a «cognitive behavior modifier» or «cognitive therapist». Beliefs have a way of changing, however, and this chapter represents my first formal discussion about any real concerns about the conceptual adequacy of current cognitive social-learning approaches*» (p. 158).

This was the first published statement of what came later to be considered as the second revolution within the cognitive revolution. A few years later, in two edited

books - «Cognitive Psychotherapies» (1984) and «Cognition and Psychotherapy» (1985) - Mahoney puts together an impressive international group laying the foundations of a constructivist approach to psychotherapy. Probably for the first time since the cognitive revolution, the European tradition joined the North-American one. The result was a more complex understanding of the human knowing processes. Common to all the contributions was the *«willingness to transcend the polarity levels of analysis in favor of a more comprehensive and complex models of human adaptation and development»* (p. ix). The 80's were, for Mahoney, a decade of search and development. He traveled all over the world enriching and opening himself to other psychology traditions - Northern/Southern Europe and South America were constant spots of exploration and search. But Mahoney was not there for the, so called, «scientific tourism» he was there for inspiring other colleagues and learning from them. The result was an international group of scholars joining efforts for a «new psychology», and the book «Human Change Processes» (1991), the new bible for the 90's, but a bible that soon will be deconstruct by the very author. In the epilog to this 10 year long project the author opened the door to its own deconstruction - *«As I move to the closure of this book, it should be apparent that its narrative journey has been more than a simple accounting of the scientific foundations of psychotherapy. One of its central messages has, in fact, been inescapability of complexity and interpretation in human knowing, and hence the pervasiveness of personal meanings in all attempts to share or apply knowledge»* (p. 376).

The years of 1995 and 1996 were marked by the publication of two new edited books presenting already the richness and diversity of the constructivist approaches - «Constructivism in Psychotherapy» (1995), «Cognitive and Constructive Psychotherapies» (1996). And most recently, «Constructive Psychotherapy: A Practical Guide» (2003) a book that was described by Albert Bandura as *“a treasure trove of insights that are both theoretically provocative and clinically illuminating.”*

### **A Warm and Caring Human Being**

But what was most impressive in Mike was the ability to conciliate all his intellectual elaboration and prolix writing with a warm and caring attitude. As we said before, till the 1986 Michael was for us a living legend. In the summer of 1987, we met Mike in New York. One of us (OFG) was interviewing for a position at the University of California in Santa Barbara, and interviewer was Michael Mahoney. The other (PPM) was interviewing for graduate programs in the US. Finally the students were meeting the legend! We learned from our first interactions that Michael was a humble, warm and caring human being. Óscar got the position and spent the next two years working next door to him and sharing the secrets of his personal library. Paulo was accepted, a year later, as a doctoral student at UCSB in the academic year of 1989/90. The memories of the work with Michael are amongst the most stimulating and rewarding moments of our academic lives. We cherish those memories as we cherish Mike. But life, as we learned from him, is like a dance, a never ending process of movement and change, and we all split into different geographical directions. Michael went to Texas,

Óscar, returned to Europe, and Paulo stayed in California a couple of years more, before returning to the old continent.

Since then, our paths crossed several times in conferences, meetings, emails, or just in a word carried by a mutual friend. Now, we're left with cheerful memories of multiple encounters and an incredible sense of privilege of being able to have met the man behind the legend.

Óscar F. Gonçalves  
Paulo P. P. Machado  
*University of Minho, Portugal*