An appreciation of recent advances in developmental and cognitive psychology, an understanding of basic brain mechanisms, knowledge about recent approaches to modeling in the cognitive neurosciences, an awareness of descriptive psychopathology are essential background for professionals who are working with children” (1, 2). This was the preface to the first edition of “Developmental Neuropsychiatry” (1, 2) in which James C. Harris laid the foundations for a new vision of child neuropsychiatry, in constant relationship with the progress of neurosciences and developmental studies.

Born Nov. 6, 1940, in Birmingham, Al, Harris was the son of the late James C.O. and Mary V. Respess Harris. He graduated from the University of Maryland and the George Washington School of Medicine and completed a residency and a fellowship in adult and in child and adolescent neuropsychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions (3).

Disciple of Leo Kanner (1894-1981), who published the first systematic description of early infantile autism, Harris continued to look at the child with his teacher’s style who asks “to study each individual child with his own unequalled profile, as we find him developmentally, somatically, intellectually, emotionally and in the framework of the centripetal (environmental) forces that may have contributed to the situation with which we are confronted” (4). Harris was professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Mental Hygiene and Pediatrics at John Hopkins University School of Medicine, Director of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and founding Director of the autism programs at Johns Hopkins and the Kennedy Krieger Center. The textbook that defined the field of developmental neuropsychiatry, won the Doody’s Medical Book of the Year Award in 1996. He served as a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Public Health Service from 1967-70 in Thailand. He and his wife Catherine DeAngelis, professor of Pediatrics, the first woman editor in chief of the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA), traveled to the seven continents where they advised, lectured and taught (5).

While psychiatry director at Kennedy Krieger, Harris favored the foundation of new department of developmental neuropsychiatry, and conducted research on self-injury among patients with Lesch-Nyhan syndrome and other disorders (6, 7). His many contributions to the field include serving as lead author of the DSM-5 criteria for intellectual disability. He was a passionate and inspiring advocate for people with developmental disabilities, and his many roles included serving on the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disability with Clinton administration (8). Based on this work, he served as a consultant to the American Psychiatric Association in the Supreme Court case of Hall v. Florida, which dealt with the use of IQ tests in determining eligibility for the death penalty of people with intellectual disabilities. The case resulted in Florida’s use of IQ testing for death penalty eligibility, being deemed unconstitutional (8).

Described as a polymath and a Renaissance man by his longtime friend and colleague Dr. Joseph Coyle (8), prof Harris served as section editor for the Ar-
chives of General Psychiatry’s Arts and Images in Psychiatry from 2002 to 2014. In this role, he chose paintings for the cover of the journal each month and wrote erudite essays that wove insight into the art together with reflections on the mind and mental illness (8). In October 2010, the cover was dedicated to Camillo Golgi, in relationship with the annual meeting of the Scientific Society for Behavioral Phenotype (SSBP) hosted that year by the Mondino Institute and the University of Pavia. In 2014, in prevision of the SSBP meeting hosted by the University of Siena, Harris published in the – JAMA Psychiatry a study about “Anorexia Nervosa and Anorexia Mirabilis,” this last inspired by Santa Caterina da Siena (9). In James Harris opinion, the most substantive clinical advance in Developmental Neuropsychiatry during the last years was the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) in 2013 (10). DSM-5 replaced the DSMIV section ‘Disorders usually first diagnosed in infancy, childhood, or adolescence’ with a new section, “Neurodevelopmental Disorders”. The new DSM-5 classification includes two new categories of brain dysfunction: neurodevelopmental disorders with onset in the developmental period and major neurocognitive disorders (e.g. Alzheimer’s Disease) with onset in later life. Moreover, a developmental focus is sustained throughout the DSM-5 Manual for each condition described (11). The Neurodevelopmental Disorders section of DSM-5 replaces the outmoded term mental retardation with intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) and defines levels of severity based on adaptive functioning and not IQ scores (11). Intellectual disability (ID) was one of the main interests of James Harris, who published a comprehensive textbook in 2006, aimed to clarify different aspects of ID (developmental, etiology, classification, evaluation and treatment) (12).

Professor Harris was a founder member of different scientific societies. One of us (AV) had the opportunity to collaborate with him as a member of the Scientific Society for Behavioral Phenotype (SSBP). Currently an honorary member of the SSBP, he was a representative of the United States in the scientific Committee for many years; very fond of photography, he took the task of personally photographing all official events of the Society. One of his distinctive traits was in fact the humility and immediacy of the human relationship, which allowed anyone to feel at ease with him. These talents were particularly remembered by his pupils of the John Hopkins medical school, many of whom have achieved prominent positions in the field of psychiatry.

The term behavioral phenotype - to describe outwardly observable behavior characteristic of children with genetic disorders - was first used by W. Nyhan, in his presidential address to the Society of Pediatric Research in 1971, to present the Lesch Nyhan disease (LND) (13). Compulsive self mutilation is the major behavioral manifestation of the LND, a rare X linked disease due to a defect of HPRT (hypoxanthine-guanine phosphoribosyltransferase) which is involved in the purine salvage pathway (6). Self-injurious behavior in LND, was so characteristic of children with this genetic disorder that its presence suggests the underlying genetic condition.

Such observations have led to greater emphasis on assessment of behavior in genetic disorders, and the recognition of behavioral phenotypes in some disorders has led to closer scrutiny of known neurodevelopmental conditions (14). Initially, the focus was on documenting the patterns of behavior, later the research focused about the extent to which it is possible to trace pathways from gene to cognition and complex behaviors (15). There is also growing interest in investigating the developmental trajectory of behaviors from infancy to adulthood and old age.

Prof Harris passed away April 5, 2021 but has completed in the last weeks of life the revision of his textbook on Developmental Neuropsychiatry, so we still expect suggestions and advises from his work.

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