© The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Autumn, 1983, Volume 4, Number 4
Pages 569-574
ISSN 0271-0137

Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland. Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 245 pages, $9.95 paper.

Reviewed by Steven E. Connelly, Indiana State University

First published in 1979, Nancy Scheper-Hughes's *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* won the Margaret Mead Award in 1981 as a work that "interprets anthropological data and principles in ways that make them meaningful to a broadly concerned public." To be sure, accessibility is precedent among the many virtues of this small masterpiece, for accessibility is the hub from which its virtues radiate. By her own declaration, Scheper-Hughes is committed to writing for "the public" rather than for a "scientific elite," and this commitment is realized: she writes gracefully, lucidly, and with a minimum of jargon. Indeed, her very rare lapses into jargon occur only when she feels it necessary to appeal to established authority in support of her thesis. Generally her prose is so clear that not only the non-specialist but the average reader can comprehend her arguments and understand the issues she raises. Certainly her subjects grasped the implications of this study; one of the pleasures of this first paperback edition is Scheper-Hughes's new preface, which speaks to the ethical dilemma of publicly exploring the lives of people who become one's friends, people capable of reading and understanding such a public examination of their lives. The reactions of the residents of her pseudonymous parish of Ballybran underscore a fundamental question applicable to all such studies, a question that many researchers avoid completely, but that Scheper-Hughes, to her credit, asks: *Cui bonum?*

For whose good did she apply the precepts of psychological anthropology to the people of Ballybran? The effects upon the villagers themselves were certainly ambiguous at best, especially given the traditional Irish attitude toward print. "There is quite a difference," one Ballybran resident told Scheper-Hughes during a return visit, "between whispering something beside a fire or across a counter and seeing it printed for the world to see. It becomes a public shame." As the rest of civilization succumbed to the authority of print, Ireland remained a predominantly oral culture, and to be trapped on the printed page for all eternity (e.g., Oliver St. John Gogarty's resentment of his portrait in *Ulysses*) remains a fate worse by far than being the mocking subject of a tale or a ballad. For print sets up like poured concrete, while a tale's truth remains flexible—easily bent in a new direction by the whims of successive tellers. So even those villagers who admit the truth of Scheper-Hughes's observations characteristically resent their publication. It is by no means a literary accident that Ireland's greatest books turn the very notion of the authority of print upon itself: *Ulysses, At Swim-Two-Birds, Gulliver's Travels, Tristram Shandy, Deoraíocht.*

Scheper-Hughes demonstrates a keen awareness of Irish literature, oral and written: she integrates folklore, myth, poetry, and fiction into her text. And she discusses the problems inherent in studying a people who are masters of the put-on, devoting

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven E. Connelly, Ph.D., Department of English, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809.

attention to the practice of "codding," of which the overly serious researcher must be especially aware. She probably knows the people she studies as well as an "outsider" could, and realizing its implications for herself and her discipline, she thus leaves the final answer to *Cui bonum*? to her subjects and to her readers.

In her "Preface to the Paperback Edition," Scheper-Hughes provides the reader with appropriate references: The controversy surrounding her "ethical dilemma" as it erupted in *The Irish Times* can be followed if the reader so desires; she made her prose accessible and so, too, she makes the negative implications of *Cui bonum* accessible. Indeed, Scheper-Hughes is a proponent of openness. Her thesis is explicitly presented and the personal, and often "subjective" nature of her discourse—attacked by a few early reviewers—assures an honesty that is refreshing in the face of the often ludicrous attempts to make behavioral studies "scientific" and "objective." Neutral prose, sterile scientific language—shot through with quantification and formulas—merely masquerades as "objectivity"; it is a subtle form of dishonesty that pretends removing "subjective" adverbs and adjectives can miraculously transform a study from the realm of opinion to the plateau of truth. Such a writer as Scheper-Hughes, who declares her intentions, who makes no effort to hide her suppositions, who, in fact, openly presents her "feelings" (about her subjects, about the possible effects of her study, about her discipline) generates trust. Consequently, the reader need not enter the fantasy world of jargonry supposedly established for denotative purposes; indeed the reader is made comfortably aware that Scheper-Hughes understands the connotations of words and that when she uses highly connotative language, it is intentional. Her attitude is essential to the study of a people for whom *blas* (defined by the author as "skill with words") is a cultural characteristic.

Scheper-Hughes's thesis has, understandably, aroused some controversy. Starting with the statistic that "the Republic of Ireland has the highest hospitalization rate for mental illness in the world," she notes that "schizophrenia is the core problem," and she declares that her year of fieldwork in the representative parish of Ballybran led her to a "broad cultural diagnosis": schizophrenia is "the translation of social ills into private troubles," and for Ballybran—and much of rural western Ireland—an inadequate and demoralized rural culture in conjunction with a demanding "austere and stressful lifestyle" is the chief cause of schizophrenia. Disintegrating institutions have produced anomie in a dying culture; the traditional culture cannot adapt, but it has not yet been replaced. Scheper-Hughes's diagnosis places her at odds with most previous studies of the rural Irish, most notably Conrad Arsenberg's *The Irish Countryman*, though John Messenger's *Inis Beag* clearly anticipates her view.

Scheper-Hughes performed a difficult task with her painstaking application of the tenets of "psychological anthropoplogy" to the rural Irish, but she is yet more ambitious and thorough, for she transcends Ireland. In her "Concluding Observations" she integrates her study of Ballybran "with other epidemiological studies in order to pull together the various strands representing a sociocultural perspective on schizophrenia." With Foucault, she sees the pathogenesis as a societal disorder, and she points to the parallels between the rural Irish and such various groups as the residents of rural communities in Nova Scotia, the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard, "the Nesilik Eskimo, Midtown Manhattanites, urbanizing Yoruba, Ojibwa Indians, migrants and immigrants throughout the world." Indeed, she strikes a metaphoric parallel between the spread of diseases by the Western colonizing nations of the 16th century and the increasing mental disorder in 20th century rural backwaters as a result of expanding technology.

Dangerous inductive leaps hold no fear for Scheper-Hughes. Undaunted, confident, she vaults theoretical obstacles and attains heights that would make lesser scholars tremble. Because *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* is a paradigm of good organization, the reader follows her arguments with ease: just as one well-written sentence leads into

another, so one superbly constructed paragraph perpares for the next. And her chapters, all individually first rate, dovetail tightly to form a work that is a smoothly crafted, unified whole.

Scheper-Hughes's first chapter provides a foundation at once sturdy, intriguing, and appropriate to her cultural psychoanalysis. She presents an ethnohistory, the history of the parish not as recorded by historians, but as the villagers perceive it: the ways in which villagers attempt to validate themselves in terms of a "corrected" and "rewritten" past." She locates the people, as her chapter title indicates, "In Space and In Time." Her description of the local landscape communicates "the highly personalized world of the villager" by including place name history and local legends: "Beside the river Abha Mac Feinne is a huge boulder which the folk hero Fionn MacCumhail is said to have hurled from Conor Pass to kill a giant that was terrifying the people of Ballybran." Scheper-Hughes deftly weaves folktales, legends, local gossip, and the odd buoyant detail, such as the fact that in the bay of the central village is the "last remaining *naomhóg* in a state of melancholy disrepair and tied idly to the quay." At least one early reviewer resented her purple prose, but the connotations inherent in her description—"melancholy despair," "tied idly"—capture the sense of western Ireland as pages of "objective" prose could not. In a footnote, she tells the reader that a *naomhóg* is "the lath and tarred canvas canoe traditionally used by fishermen of the Great Blasket Islands and their mainland neighbors. *Curach* is the term used elsewhere in western Ireland." Such a note inspires confidence, for it conveys a concern for accuracy of detail, it indicates meticulous research, and it provides assurance that her "purple prose" is rooted in precision. Certainly this first chapter demonstrates how thoroughly Scheper-Hughes did her preliminary research: she displays an extensive knowledge of Irish literature, folklore, history, and customs.

The solid foundation in chapter one is followed in chapter two by a description of the current state of Ballybran: the quality of its social life, its economic situation, the general background of its decline. It is not a happy picture: "The combined effect of the steady erosion of the community through childlessness and emigration, the disintegration of traditional values and familism, the constriction of village social life and institutions, and the national policy to retire even young and able-bodied farmers can be observed in the contagious spread of a spirit of despair and anomie in Ballybran." Scheper-Hughes sees alcohol, sexual devitalization, and mental illness as products of the anomie. Once again she inspires confidence—discussing a major theme of the Thematic Apperception Test she administered, she rejects a "psychoanalytically oriented" interpretation of one response, and rather than seeing "the broken violin image" as "an indication of severe castration anxiety among rural Irish males," she places the violin image in the cultural context it would have on the *conscious* level for a rural Irish person. Thus the violin is an apt symbol for a dying way of life since it is a powerful symbol of traditional Celtic music (not only is it a chief instrument of traditional music, but it also figures prominently in the songs themselves; e.g., the Paddy Tunney collection, "The Stone Fiddle," or a Scots song of a broken fiddle, "McPherson's Lament," a favorite of Liam Clancy). The definite cultural implication might have been overlooked by a less sympathetic and less perceptive researcher.

In chapter three Scheper-Hughes presents "an epidemiological profile of mental illness in the rural west." Typically, she does not rely upon statistics, nor does she merely present an abstract of community definitions of normal and abnormal. Rather she lets the people speak for themselves, and she describes local "characters" such as Old Ned who, startled by the sound of a car motor, will refuse the car passage on the public road. Through such character sketches, through the presentation of the villagers' discourse, she very effectively delineates the attitudes of the rural Irish—real, perceived, and the gap between—toward the mentally ill. One may disagree with Scheper-Hughes's conclusions, but it is difficult not to admire and enjoy the lively and

learned presentation which puts her investigation on a personal level. One can never forget that she is dealing with real people—never those shadow beings populating so many "scientific" studies: "subjects."

Chapters four and five must certainly have created the most controversy among the Ballybran residents. Four traces the relationship between celibacy and mental illness and presents what Scheper-Hughes obviously thinks is an unhealthy attitude toward sex, a crippling relationship between the sexes that is a legacy of traditions that no longer work. Chapter five interprets their child-rearing practices as repressive and probably conducive to mental illness. Certainly it is distressing to most educated Americans to witness what they see as unenlightened and harmful behavior, such as a rural Irish mother smacking the hand of her infant son when it wanders toward his genital area and admonishing him that this is nasty. Yet most Irish children exhibit an admirable balance of high spirits and restraint. Scheper-Hughes may be correct in her observations and diagnoses; but the small doubt that nags at the reader who is familiar with Ireland grows as one proceeds through the book: could it be that her own negative diagnoses, accurate as they may have originally been, avalanched until she was predisposed to see the negative aspect of virtually any behavior?

Chapter six distinguishes the "vulnerable" children from the "less vulnerable" in terms of "the differential treatment of daughters and sons of later- to earlier-born siblings." Doubtless there is a great deal of truth in this chapter, but surely some things Scheper-Hughes sees as cultural are not. For example, the tendency of Irish males to "crack" one another verbally, to "cut each other down," is not so much "a tendency among rural Irish males" as it is a tendency among males almost everywhere. And though Scheper-Hughes sees it as "a thinly disguised form of hostile ridicule," it is as often a thinly disguised form of affection. It may seem unpleasant to the outsider, but context is crucial to the overtones of a "cutdown." Athletes, for examples, know that the hilarity generated by cutdowns contributes to a feeling of "family," though on a losing team—or certain subjects on any team—cutdowns can indeed become seriously hostile. Finally, in a brief conclusion, Scheper-Hughes makes her analysis of Ballybran cross-cultural, geographically and historically, with some deft and incisive comparisons.

Scheper-Hughes's conclusions will hardly be accepted whole hog, even by sympathetic admirers. Indeed, she ignores a very basic question in her analysis of Ballybran: could it be that the high rate of schizophrenia is a beneficial cultural trade-off, as it were? Though mental illness is to be regretted, perhaps the notion that everything possible should be done to correct it is a dangerous one. For example, if it were discovered that schizophrenia among the rural Irish would, indeed, decrease dramatically if they were taught to direct agressions outward rather than inward, should wide-spread therapy be initiated? Heed: one of the pleasures of travel in rural Ireland is security—reflected in the old tale of the beautiful young woman who undertakes a journey across Ireland, bejewelled and alone. Yet "no attempt was made on her honor," nor was she robbed. The Republic of Ireland has an exceedingly low incidence of violent crime: murder and rape are rare occurences. And though crimes against property are increasing slowly, it is still not unusual to see what is usually startling to the American visitor, front doors with keys left in the locks when residents have stepped out—in case friends or relatives drop by during the inhabitant's absence. Who would be foolish to try such a thing in the United States, even in a correspondingly rural area such as southern Indiana? Indeed, as I was reading Scheper-Hughes's book, a fifteen-year-old girl was raped and killed in rural Indiana, beaten, shot, and stabbed; a mother who saw her four sons killed in a cold-blooded, apparently motiveless shotgun execution—she herself survived only because the killers mistook the wig blown off her head for her own scalp—was on television discussing victim's rights and criminal sentences; barely forty miles away, in rural

Illinois, a young mother was on trial for the stabbing deaths of her own infant children. This was merely the *local* news. It would be a rare day in the Republic of Ireland that one such crime—let alone three—would be in the news. One of the small joys of travel in Ireland is watching small children hitchhiking to and from school; indeed, it is a pleasure to hitchhike oneself, with never a thought that the next driver could be an Irish version of Perry Smith, or Gacy, or Corona, or the L.A. slasher—or any one of the endless list of American mass murderers.

If the choice is between violent death and schizophrenia, who will choose the former? Perhaps the tradition of Jansenist Catholicism that Scheper-Hughes portrays as debilitating does have a positive side. Surely it is better, if one must choose, to have a population with a high incidence of sexually confused males displaying the characteristics of schizophrenia than to have a frighteningly large number of rapists, such as one finds in the more "progressive" culture of the United States. I would certainly agree with Scheper-Hughes that the rural Irish—in the west of Ireland—are demoralized, but I am not certain I would agree that they are any more depressed than the general population of the United States.

Readers and critics will have plenty to quibble with: Scheper-Hughes's definition of schizophrenia, the mechanics—choice of subjects, for example—of her use of the TAT, the relationship of the "double bind" to schizophrenia, the opinion, however well supported, that the rural Irish suffer from anomie, the tendency to see only the negative aspects of Irish Catholicism. Her reference to St. Brendan, for example, as a psychotic suffering from delusions will not upset her Catholic friends, but it is contrary to the evidence Tim Severin presents in his magnificent book, *The Brendan Voyage*, an account of his duplication of St. Brendan's voyage to the new world with logical explanations for St. Brendan's supposed delusions: e.g., Brendan's Crystal Islands are surely icebergs. Behavior that Scheper-Hughes sees as eccentric may be culturally explicable: the old farmer who sits up conversing with his cows, for example, seems less odd in the context of the old Irish song "Bruimfhionn Donn Dilis." The cow, after all, occupies a very special place in Irish myth, history, and life; indeed, the national epic—*Táin Bó Cuailgne*—invites whimsical comparison to the *Iliad*, with a cow in Helen's role.

However well an outsider knows the Irish, and Scheper-Hughes knows them well, it is difficult not to be deceived at some point, for even the most obvious behavior may originate from a different source than one assumes. Perhaps the large number of admissions to mental institutions—historically true, and not just a recent phenomenon—reflect the charity of the Irish. Or the statistics may be inflated by the ease with which inmates depart—as Hugh Kenner has noted, all but the truly incompetent "get bussed out to vote in national elections." If getting out is so easy, it may well be that casual discharges and readmissions swell the figures.

Whatever the reader finds with which to disagree, the honesty, the depth of research, the detailed and sympathetic portrayal of the land and its people must be acknowledged. Scheper-Hughes is aware of the moral implications of her study, and she is not afraid to spark controversy. The study never pretends to be something it is not. Scheper-Hughes does not hide her feelings behind a mask of "objectivity"; she never pretends that she is not concerned with her subjects' feelings. Consequently, the reader is able to adjust for her subjectivity much more easily than in those less honest works which pretend that all human feeling, all sympathy and aversion, have been somehow precipitated out. The reader never loses sight of the fact that these "subjects" are complete people, with a life outside this book. Thus *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* is a satisfying and rewarding book, and above all it is a moral book, something that for all their pretense scholars rarely, very rarely, produce.

Call for papers

The British Journal of Social Psychology

Special issue, November 1984 on Intergroup Processes

Guest Editor: Rupert Brown (University of Kent)

The study of intergroup relations has enjoyed a considerable revival as a research area over the last two decades. On both sides of the Atlantic there have been several important theoretical advances as well as an expansion of empirical research. In response to these developments the Journal will devote a whole issue to the social psychology of intergroup processes. Theoretical and empirical papers on any aspect of intergroup relations are invited for this Special Issue, and contributions from Europe and North America will be most welcome. Contributions should be addressed to Dr R. J. Brown, Social Psychology Research Unit, University of Kent, Beverley Farm, Canterbury, Kent, UK.

Deadline for submissions: 1 November 1983

Papers not accepted for the special issue will be considered for publication in the journal in the normal way.

The British Journal of Social Psychology, volume 22 (1983), price £30.00 (US$64.50).

Foreign affiliates of the Society are entitled to purchase journals at a special rate of £5.00 per volume. Further details from and subscriptions to:.

The British Psychological Society

The Distribution Centre, Blackhorse Road, Letchworth SG6 1HN, UK

British Journal of Clinical Psychology

Editor: D. A. Shapiro (MRC/SSRC SAPU, The University, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK)

Volume 22 (1983) (4 parts) £30.00 (US$64.50)

Contents of Part 1 1983

B. Strauss et al. Autonomic reactivity in the premenstrual phase
N. Heather et al. A comparison of objective and subjective measure of alcohol dependence as predictors of relapse following treatment
V. Rippere. Food additives and hyperactive children
J. Hogg. Sensory and social reinforcement of head-turning in a profoundly multiply handicapped child
P. H. Bornstein et al. Behavioural-communications treatment of marital interaction: Negative behaviours
C. J. S. Nekanda-Trepka. Hopelessness and depression
K. McFarland. Syndrome analysis in clinical neuropsychology
R. M. Turner et al. Agoraphobics

Behavioural Medicine Special Issue

Part 4 1982 of the journal was also issued as a casebound book. Pp. 124. Price £5.95 (US$11.95)

Special issue contents

P. Ley. Satisfaction, compliance and communication
M. Johnston. Recognition of patients' worries by nurses and by other patients
C. Brewin & C. Bradley. Perceived control and the experience of childbirth
V. Ridgeway & A. Mathews. Psychological preparation for surgery
D. W. Johnston. Behavioural treatment in the reduction of coronary risk factors
H.-D. Basler et al. Psychological group treatment of essential hypertension in general practice
A. Steptoe et al. Essential hypertension and psychological functions
W. E. Fordyce. A behavioural perspective on chronic pain
S. J. Linton. A Critical review of behavioural treatments for chronic benign pain other than headache
A. E. Reading et al. The McGill pain questionnaire
W. H. Redd. Behavioural analysis and control of psychosomatic symptoms of patients receiving intensive cancer treatment

British Journal of Medical Psychology

Editor: Sidney Crown (Department of Psychiatry, The London Hospital, Whitechapel, London E1 1BB, UK)

Volume 56 (1983) (4 parts) £42.00 (US$90.50)

Papers are invited in those aspects of psychology applicable to medicine and related clinical disciplines, including the psychotherapies. Two copies should be sent to the editor at the above address.

Selected contents of volume 56 (1983)

R. Penman et al. Synchrony in mother–infant interaction: A possible neuropsychological base
M. Radford. Psychoanalysis and the science of problem-solving man
D. Hill. The changing role of psychiatry in medicine and society
A. Hall & L. B. Brown. A comparison of the attitudes of young anorexia nervosa patients and non-patients with those of their mothers
M. W. Ross et al. Locus of control in obesity: Predictors of success in a jaw-wiring programme
M. W. P. Carney & J. P. Brown. Clinical features and motives among 42 artifactual illness patients
R. Littlewood. The Antinomian Hasid
D. A. Winter. Logical inconsistency in construct relationships: Conflict or complexity?
S. Bloch et al. Humour in group psychotherapy
R. Hetherington. Communication between doctors and psychologists
F. N. Watts. Strategies of clinical listening
S. A. Griggs & D. W. Green. How to make a good cup of tea: Exploring the scripts of thought-disordered and non-thought-disordered patients
M. Norris. Changes in patients during treatment at the Henderson Hospital therapeutic community during 1977–1981
W Vandereycken & R. Pierloot. Drop-out during in-patient treatment of anorexia nervosa: A clinical study of 133 patients
J. Owusu-Bembah & D. L. Howitt. Self-modelling and weight control
J. Bicknall. The psychopathology of handicap
A. Furnham and J. Pendred. Attitudes towards the mentally and physically disabled
Book reviews