

**Report for the Executive Committee of the *European Health Psychology Society*  
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## I. Introduction.

As I'm writing these words, employees of the municipal authority of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Israel, are busy taking down the tents and clearing the ground from the flyers left behind as evidence to Israel's most extensive and prolonged show of democracy: a large scale *civic* protest overpressing social and economic issues. These include the unprecedented prevalence of poverty, the sky-rocketing costs of food and housing, the outrageously high salaries paid for CEO in public and private sectors (which are often incompatible with these CEO's fiduciary ethical obligations and responsibilities in the face of bankruptcy), and – last but not least --- mounting evidence of financial misconduct (at best) and downright corruption (at worst) on the part of some key parliament and government figures in Israel. This protest, which constituted the most dramatic wave of demonstrations taking place across the country, brought out hundreds of thousands of Israelis to the streets (e.g., 400,000 people at the last demonstration on Saturday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011). Protesters in these demonstrations represented a wide range of ages and trades: Adolescents, young and older adults, the elderly, parents accompanied by their children, students and professors, blue collar workers, physicians, psychologists and computer scientists, all stood together, chanting "The people demands social justice. Unfazed by objective and quantitative evidence of Israel's economic strength, protesters, alongside public figures from all fields, have refused to ignore the discrepancy between this evidence and the hardship experienced by large segments of the public. It is time, all concluded, for the public to take an active stance on their economic future.

Arguably, the ostensibly non-violent, non-partisan nature of this protest movement (leaving aside a few acrimoniously partisan gestures), accounted for the strong sense of solidarity it has inspired. It also had a tangible bottom line. Prof. Manuel Trachtenberg, a consensually esteemed social economist, was appointed by the Government to head a committee of experts who are about to submit, in the very near future, specific recommendations for reforming the Israeli economy and reprioritizing its budgetary resources in an attempt to alleviate some of the economic pain felt by the public.

Why am I opening this report with the aforementioned description? Because the Israeli protest, echoing others protest movements across the world (e.g., in Spain, Senegal, and of course in the Arab world), epitomizes the overarching theme of the Bonn Conference on *Sustainable Societies and Responsive Citizens*, in which I served as a delegate on behalf of the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS). The theme of the conference was that of *active, civic participation of citizens in the quest of bettering their environment, society, economy, and health*. During the conference in Bonn, in which a myriad of topics were discussed, a repeated call was made for civilians to actively pursue their interests and agendas, thereby shaping their own futures. As I will argue below, such a call made by the world's political leaders is highly compatible, with not only the emerging consensus in psychological science as

to the intentional, forward looking nature of the human mind, but also – and most importantly – with EHPS's key assets and interests.

## II. Main themes and principles.

I am, by training, a clinical-health psychologist who is quite well versed in the field of psychopathology, psychosomatics, chronic physical illness, and health behavior. At the same time, my knowledge and understanding of economics, ecology, and political science is quite superficial. Nevertheless, it has been incumbent on me, as an EHPS delegate to the Bonn conference, to absorb a wealth of information regarding the latter issues so as to envision their connection to the former ones, a task I have embarked upon with great fascination. While processing the vast amounts of information presented at the conference, I am coming to the conclusion that it can be summarized in the following glossary:

**Activism:** A stance taken by citizens of all nations to fight, in a democratic fashion, for issues of common interest: democracy, economy, ecology, sustainability and health (see Voluntarism).

**Civic Society:** A society comprised of free, volitional, active individuals who work together to pursue their interests and well being, as opposed to a society in which civilians leave their fate in the hands of their leaders, elected or not.

**Climate Change:** A long-term change in weather conditions due to numerous processes including floods, global warming, volcanism, etc.

**Connecting the Dots:** A central theme of the Bonn Conference is the concern with global problems such as pollution, hunger, poverty, economic inequality, illiteracy, population dynamics, and human rights infringements. These problems are all interconnected, hence must be dealt with by active participants in the fight for pursuing civil rights.

**Department of Public Information (DPI):** serves as the public voice of the United Nations (UN), in charge of promoting global awareness for the UN's work. DPI also works closely with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to assist them in pursuing their causes. DPI is headed by Under-Secretary-General *Kiyo Akasaka*, who was a key figure in the Bonn Conference (see <http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/whoWeAre/aboutDPI/index.asp> and NGOs and Volunteerism, below).

**Green Economy:** An economic system which is concerned not only with fiscal growth and prosperity but also with the ecosystem, social equity and well-being. Green economy is a core value advocated by the United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP; <http://www.unep.org/>). Interestingly, UNEP emphasizes the fact that the words *eco*-nomy and *eco*-system both include "eco", designating "home", thereby highlighting the need to integrate, rather than divide (and conquer) economic and ecological considerations.

**Illiteracy:** The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) defines literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." Illiteracy pertains to the lack of these skills, and is highly prevalent globally. Illiteracy adversely affect individuals' civil participation and volunteerism, and, in turn, their ability to address problems such as poverty, hunger, breaches to the ecosystem, escalating population growth, human rights infringements, etc.

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** Organizations founded by individuals or institutions operating independently from governments, which are working in the interest of the common good. They are the epitome of active participation and volunteerism, and so were the focus of the Bonn Conference .

**Pollution on ecosystems:** An introduction to the toxic materials (contaminants) that harm the natural environment in various ways. Pollution causes formidable health problems, including respiratory and cardiovascular disease, rashes, birth defects, neurological symptoms, and cancer.

**Poverty and Hunger:** The lack of material possessions, particularly money, which are quintessential for human survival. The exact definition, and quantification, of poverty is highly contested, but it is estimated that over a billion people around the world are poor, and that every year, millions around the world die from poverty-related causes. Hunger is a drastic manifestation of poverty. Many children around the world are suffering from malnutrition, and this adversely irrevocably affects their physical and psychological development.

**Rio +20:** This upcoming UN conference will focus on sustainable development and will be held in Brazil on June 4-6, 2012 to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Rio+20 has been referred to in many of the Bonn panels, and is much anticipated, the reason being that many of the principles and plans for action laid out at the 1992 conference have not been implemented.

**Sustainable Development:** pertains to a pattern of resource use which takes into account the need to preserve the environment. This is a forward looking term that emphasizes the need to address present human needs while ensuring the abundance of resources and preserving the environment for the benefit of future generations.

**Voluntarism:** Individuals' tendency and capacity to act on behalf of themselves, others, and the common good, without getting paid. It is a key manifestation of active civil participation, and a crucial vehicle for sustainable development.

## III. Highlights from events and presentations.

**Friday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011**

Both Alden and I have arrived in Bonn a day prior to the commencement of the conference. We were delighted to discover numerous mutual areas of interest touching upon health psychology and public health. These include coping with chronic physical illness, public health policy, disaster preparedness and management, human stress, and the role of culture in health. I learned a lot from Alden about the academic and health systems in Singapore and Japan, and was able to relate to him my experience on the equivalent systems in Israel and the US. We exchanged manuscripts of interests, planned our attendance to the conference, and stayed in touch throughout the conference. We are currently exploring the possibility of research collaboration.

**Saturday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011**

An impressive *opening ceremony* has launched the conference. **Mr. Akasaka**, the UN Under-Secretary-General and DPI Director spoke about the "50-50-50 Challenge", according to which, by 2050, the world population will increase by 50% (9 billion people), requiring a 50% cut in gas emission by that year. He stressed the importance of voluntarism for meeting this challenge. **Mr. Nimptsch**, the Bonn Mayor, emphasized Bonn's unique characteristics as a UN city, as well as the city of Beethoven and Schiller, and discussed Bonn's commitment to sustainable development. UN Secretary General **Mr. Ban Ki Moon**, gave a video-recorded speech, in which he emphasized the UN's commitment to foster sustainable development throughout the world. Other speakers followed suit with greetings.

Two keynote speakers gave highly inspiring talks. **Dr. Vandana Shiva**, a physicist, eco-feminist, and Director of Navdanya International (<http://www.navdanya.org/>), gave an impassioned speech in which she criticized corporates' lack of consideration for ecological issues, noting how worse things have become, in that 60% of the ecosystem is already unable to renew itself. She contrasted values of economic gain and growth with ecological values, and argued against the artificial separation of sustainability and poverty/hunger. Becoming ecological, she maintained, is crucial to eradicating hunger, because agriculture might provide some sustainable solutions to the latter problem. She then highlighted the importance of democracy and freedom in the pursuit of ecological values and objectives. **Dr. Grace Aguilung-Dalisay**, a developmental psychologist and ecologist from the Philippines elucidated the developmental context of civil participation, espousing a life-span approach. She noted that healthy psychological development is paramount for sustainability, because healthy people – particularly youth – are more likely to participate and volunteer. She then mentioned two Philippine terms for sustainability: *Kapoa*, meaning "self in relationships with others", and *Laora*, meaning "inner self inner peace". I believe that it is in EHPS' best interest to form ties with Dr. **Aguilung-Dalisay** by way of strengthening the dialogue between health psychology, the Society, and the ecological movement.

Several opening remarks were then made by various dignitaries. I was awed by the one made by Achim Steiner, Director of the United Nations Ecological Programme (UNEP), who noted that economy is often used to divide ecology and

poverty so as to rule, but also cautioned against an anti-industry sentiment, highlighting the need to work with industrial sectors to find solutions to population growth, poverty, and ecological challenges.

Next came Saturday's workshops. I attended one entitled "*On Becoming a DPI/NGO: How you and your NGO can benefit from association with the Department of Public Information*". Apparently, that was not a very successful decision, because it focused on how to found an NGO and then align it with DPI, whereas EHPS is already an NGO with strong ties to DPI. I did, however, learn that the new chair of NGO/DPI executive committee is a Professor of Sociology named **Charles Hitchcock** ([Hitchcock.Charles@gmail.com](mailto:Hitchcock.Charles@gmail.com)). I engaged in a brief discussion with him, presented EHPS, and asked whether an EHPS representative could contact him to explore ways to further strengthen the ties with his committee. He was very forthcoming about this prospect.

An extensive roundtable session came next, focusing on sustainable consumption and production. **Ms. Tauli-Corpuz** from the Indigenous Peoples' International Center for Policy Research and Education presented a chilling photograph of poor children playing soccer alongside a gas implant because their homes had no electricity, arguing that a lack of access to energy is linked to poverty. She has also warned against Industry Bashing, noting that the industry is crucial for finding solutions for pollution and poverty and that the international community must (?) instill a sense of responsibility into the industry. Such responsibility was demonstrated by **Daniel Bena** from PepsiCo, who described at length the company's extensive investment in environmental programs and voluntarism.

### **Sunday, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

The roundtable on Sunday morning focused on the links between green economy on the one hand, and poverty and its eradication on the other. The various topics discussed pertained to workers' occupational health at nuclear implants (**Surveyor Efik** from the Nigerian National Inter-Ministerial Committee on Climate Change), the need to create an international paradigm for combining? economy and ecology (**Daniel Mittler**, Greenpeace), and the importance of monitoring and enforcing a green policy by civilians (**Constanza Martinez**, International Union for Conservation of Nature).

I then attended a workshop of great interest to EHPS, entitled "*Population Dynamics, Reproductive Health and Rights and Sustainability*". In this workshop, I learned that population growth is highly correlated with women's reproductive health illiteracy, which might, in turn, hinder efforts to adopt sustainable agriculture practices, because women in rapidly growing societies, who are in charge of sustainable agriculture, find it difficult to address these issues while giving birth and taking care of many children. Interestingly, **Elisa Msiyaphazi Zulu** from the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEPO), who participated in this workshop, referred to empirical research on reproductive health and policy implementation, and noted the ingrained mistrust between researchers and policy makers. **Borth Chhoun** from Khmer Youth and Social Development highlighted the need to educate and empower young women as to their civil rights in matters of reproduction and health, and that the efforts must be based upon volunteer programs.

I did not attend the next workshop because I felt somewhat ill, but I did attend the afternoon roundtable session, which focused on the role of civic engagement and voluntary action for achieving sustainability. The themes discussed in this roundtable session were similar to the ones discussed in earlier workshops, although I had the opportunity to learn more about the European Environmental Bureau (EEB; <http://www.eeb.org/>), which was represented in this roundtable by Jeremy Wates. EEB is Europe's largest environmental organization; a federation of 140 member organization linked to 15 million European citizens. EEB works towards developing, monitoring, and securing environmental policies, and their officers include scientists, so I believe that EEB might be of great interest to EHPS. I would be happy to initiate contact with EEB on behalf of EHPS, if requested.

Mr. Wates discussed Rio Principle 10, which is summarized below:

*"Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided."*

(<http://www.gdrc.org/decision/principle-10.html>)

I highlighted the parts attesting to the shared responsibility of citizens and states. While citizens are expected to actively participate and engage in attaining information regarding (threats to) the environment, states must make this information publicly accessible.

### **Monday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

This was a short day for me because I had to rush to the airport to catch my flight back to Israel. Nevertheless, it was an informative day, commencing with a roundtable session on sustainable development and governance. I was particularly moved by a presentation given by **Thierno Kane** of the *Open Society Initiative for West Africa*. Mr. Kane described in vivid terms a civic protest eerily paralleling the one taking place in Israel, only that the latter focused on educational issues. Particularly similar was both protests emphasis on non-violence and solidarity, and their actual impact on government policies. Similar processes taking place in Morocco were alluded to by **Ms. Farah Cherif d'Ouezzan** from the *Thaqafat Association*. **Mr. Geri Lau** from the *Red Cross* referred to the field of Disaster Preparedness, which is close to my heart as I am involved in disaster preparedness programs in Israel. He highlighted the need to establish volunteering programs before, during, and after disasters take place, and the importance of involving youth in such civic processes. In my opinion, the Red Cross is another NGO of interest to EHPS, and we should actively pursue ties with this institution.



Right before leaving Bonn I attended another workshop focusing on the links between NGO work and research. Obviously, given EHPS's emphasis on empirical research in health and illness, I anticipated that this workshop would be of considerable relevance to my role as an EHPS delegate. This assumption proved to be correct. Interesting research has been presented there in the fields of agriculture, ecology, and technology. The overarching theme was the construal of research as a cultural endeavor marred with political interests: an emphasis was made on the inherent tensions between researchers and the local population?, and on how research teams should be prepared for mistrust and hostility, and sensitive to local cultural codes. Finally, I learned about the *Center for Development Research (ZEF; <http://www.zef.de/>)* which conducts interdisciplinary research on sustainable development in a cultural-political context. ZEF hosts graduate students for a one-year internship, and this should be of great relevance for EHPS members and their graduate students. I'd be happy to initiate a formal contact with ZEF, if requested.

#### IV. Conclusions and recommendations.

This section concludes the report, consisting of three conclusions and the recommendations drawn from them.

My *first conclusion* is that health psychology is intimately tied to public health, public policy, and politics. Specifically, health psychology's competitive edge within the health sciences is twofold: (1) its focus on psychological processes and the (2) emphasis it puts on the importance of these processes by employing research methods commonly used in psychological science. However, researchers in psychology (including myself) have the tendency to be so much engrossed with the elegance of their concepts and methods that they tend to overlook other disciplines (Taylor, 2009). Health psychology does not have this luxury, and the Bonn conference highlighted this very strongly not only with respect to the link between health psychology and medical research and policy, but also with respect to fields such as ecology, economics, and political science. Thus, I believe that it is high time for health psychology in general and EHPS in particular, to actively pursue knowledge and initiate contacts with experts in these fields. From the point of view of forging ties, I strongly recommend to strengthen EHPS's ties with the UN, and especially the UNEP, as well as actively pursuing connections with EEB and ZEF. Regarding knowledge dissemination, I recommend that the links between health psychology, sustainability, ecology and poverty be reflected in EHPS' two key publications, *Psychology & Health* and *Health Psychology Review*.

Highly related to this conclusion/recommendation is the international-global nature of fields such as sustainability, ecology, and economics. Given the international-global nature of the work done by the UN, it is of no surprise that the Bonn conference assumed just this nature. However, EHPS should follow suit, broadening their reach beyond Europe and into the Far East (as reflected in Alden's importance participation) and North America. Canada might be a promising candidate for collaboration with EHPS, given its socialized medicine system which parallels most health systems in Europe (including Israel). Obviously, EHPS is a European society and so the major thrust of its operation will, and should, be in Europe. Nevertheless, broadening EHPS's reach will allow a more rapid transfer of knowledge, more extensive opportunities for research collaborations, and a greater influence on the part of EHPS on policy-related matters.

A *third conclusion* pertains to basic psychological science. One of the most intriguing themes emerging from diverse psychological disciplines such as neuro-cognitive, developmental, social, and personality psychology is the theme of agency. Exciting research in various domains depict individuals as forward looking, goal-oriented, and intentional (e.g., Amati & Shallice, 2007; Austin & Vancouver, 1996), a theme that is reflected in my own work on psychotherapy integration (Shahar, 2010; Shahar & Davidson, 2009). This very construal of the individual is highly compatible with the major themes advanced at the Bonn conference, namely of civic participation and volunteerism. Embracing this theme of agency should enable health psychology – and EHPS – to position itself as a natural bridge between basic (neuro)psychological sciences and public policy.

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