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### Health Psychology in Italy: a decade of developments

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*In September 2009 the Italian Health Psychology Society (Società Italiana di Psicologia della Salute, SIPSa) will participate in the organisation of the 23rd Annual Conference of the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) in Pisa, Italy. In this contribution we will briefly sketch the developments of Health Psychology in Italy, emphasising some aspects and the main issues that have been faced during the Society's ten years of existence, with particular reference to research, training and applications of the discipline to social- and health-related practice.*

#### The Italian Health Psychology Society (SIPSa)

The Italian Health Psychology Society was founded in 1997, thanks to the initiative of a group of psychologists, including academics and professionals from different areas. As reported in its Statute, its aims are "to promote and develop empirical and theoretical research in Health Psychology in Italy" and "to facilitate the exchange of information amongst its members and members of other national and international societies". Instruments for the achievement of such aims include the organization of biennial congresses, the publication of a journal and the promotion of exchanges and training initiatives.

Over the ten years of its existence, and under the Presidency of Mario Bertini (Rome), Giovanna Petrillo (Naples) and currently Pio Enrico Ricci Bitti (Bologna), the Society grew very rapidly and important objectives have been reached. At the end of 2008, the Society included 170 members, and, many more researchers and professionals attend Congresses and initiatives within health psychology and publish their work on the official Journal. Moreover, about 150 psychologists are currently receiving their training in Health Psychology. Several members of the Society have also contributed to international health psychology research.

#### Training in health psychology

In Italy, access to the specific training in health psychology is possible upon obtaining a degree in Psychology. Following 13 years of compulsory schooling (five years of primary school, three years of junior high school, and five years of secondary high school), the degree in Psychology may be obtained

after attending a three-year first degree course, followed by a two-year second degree in Psychology. By law, a State examination needs to be successfully passed (following a one-year period of supervised training) to become Chartered Psychologist (at present, they are about 70.000). At this point, in order to specialize in health psychology there is the possibility to attend one of the three existing Schools, run by the University of Rome, the University of Turin and the University of Bologna (all three have been established in late nineties). A recent law (D.M. 24.6.2006) aimed at reorganising the training within Schools of Specialisation in the Psychological domain, established that training in health psychology should last five years and that 70% of the training should be devoted to professionalising activities in order to acquire specific competences and abilities. All the three Schools, irrespective of their theoretical orientation, allow the possibility of registering as a Chartered Psychotherapist following positive evaluation of the training.

Other possibilities of obtaining some form of training in health psychology can be offered by post-degree courses lasting one or two years offered by some Universities. After the experience of a PhD programme in Health Psychology by the University of Florence in late nineties, at the moment health psychology is included as a curriculum within the PhD in Psychology offered by some Universities (e.g. Naples). Moreover, it is possible to do research in health issues within other PhD programmes (e.g. PhD in Social psychology, Clinical Psychology, etc.).

#### Congresses

Since 1998, every two years the Italian Health Psychology Society organizes its Congress, which attracts hundreds of participants, both members and non members, presenting their most significant research studies and intervention experiences. Congresses have had a central role in the development and growth of the discipline by fostering exchanges among researchers from neighbouring disciplines. Past Congresses have been hosted in Milan, Orvieto, Florence, Naples, Cesena, and have featured a steady increase of participants. The most recent (titled "Health as a shared social ►



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responsibility”) took place in 2008 in Rovigo from October 1st to 4th. Over five hundred participants attended the Congress; several issues were discussed, including substance abuse, immigration and health, health of children and elderly, work and health, health psychology and sport, family health, disability, emergency psychology, the architecture of health services, evaluation of health promotion interventions, etc.

More specific initiatives are also organised, focused on specific themes or issues; among the most recent of these, the University of Rome hosted (in June 2008) the International Conference on “Psychology and Economics of Happiness. Toward a change in political action” organised in honour of Daniel Kahneman, during which he was awarded an honorary degree in Psychology.

#### The Journal

“Health Psychology” (*Psicologia della Salute*), the official Journal of the Society, was first published in 1998, and edited by Mario Bertini (Rome), Saulo Sirigatti (Florence), Dario Romano (Milan) and Pio Enrico Ricci Bitti (Bologna) (since 2002 a fifth Director was added, Giovanna Petrillo, Naples). The Journal publishes different typologies of contributions (research, intervention experiences, discussions, etc.). To celebrate its tenth anniversary, the fourth issue of 2008 was devoted to a reflection on the status of Italian health psychology.

#### Current developments and significant achievements

In the Editorial of the special issue of the Journal, three important developments of Italian health psychology have been identified. Firstly, even though it has only recently been officially established and can be considered still a “young” discipline compared to European and North American health psychology (HP), a specific “Italian” perspective on health psychology can be identified, and its roots can be traced back both to scientific/academic developments that occurred in previous decades and to the organisation of health services (Ricci Bitti & Gremigni, 2008). The last decades of the twentieth century saw interests and practices in Italy converging to provide a contribution of psychology to health research and practice. From an academic point of view, Italian health psychology had two important precursors both with a solid tradition in theory and practice: medical psychology and psychosomatic medicine. During the seventies and eighties, Faculties of Medicine began to pay attention

to the contribution of psychology toward health practice and associated problems by introducing courses in medical psychology. These courses fostered and articulated interest toward several psychological aspects of health practice, such as training of professionals working within health services, understanding of organisational aspects of health intervention, attention toward the ill, understanding of interpersonal processes characterising doctor-patient relationship, etc. Thanks to the development of such areas of interest, a further specific disciplinary area developed: psychosomatic medicine. The approach of “behavioural medicine”, which flourished in other European and North American contexts and gave such an enormous impulse toward the establishment of the discipline on the international arena, attracted somewhat less interest.

A further important impulse to Italian health psychology was given by the introduction of the National Health Service (1978), which emphasised a preventative approach (besides treatment) and the integration and collaboration between different professionals (including psychologists) within decentralized local health services. This promoted a widespread and articulated presence of psychologists in different local health services and within hospitals. Psychologists could contribute to mental health services, in schools, in drug addiction services, in disability services, in preventative and public health services, in occupational medicine services, in hospitals, and in rehabilitation institutes. Over the years important contributions have been made by health psychology approaches to research and practice in contexts such as the school, the community, the workplace, the hospital.

Considering theoretical developments, clinical health psychology is still the more traditional and productive area, even though clinical psychologists are not always aware of their potential association to health psychology. Most significant contributions of Italian clinical health psychology focus on basic psychological and psycho-physiological mechanisms affecting health and well being, doctor-patient relationship, and quality of health care. Public health psychology is another area which has attracted contributions in Italy since the beginning, with issues such as communication in health, negotiation of health behaviors, participation and empowerment of citizens with respect to decisions concerning ►

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health, development and evaluation of health promotion interventions.

New perspectives are also growing in the Italian context; among these, community health psychology and occupational health psychology. During the last fifteen years, several social and community psychologists have developed a body of research (e.g., on psychosocial and contextual influences on health and illness) and approaches to prevention and health promotion that are consistent with community health psychology theories and methods (e.g., participatory action research). Among the most interesting areas of research is health promotion in educational and school contexts, where a strong emphasis has been put not only on the promotion of individual competences and skills (e.g., associated with adequate health behaviors) but also on the development of school policies in order to enhance the construction of health-promoting school environments. Moreover, an original area of intervention concerns the relationship with urban and community contexts, and strategies to promote urban planning approaches capable to enhance collective well-being in cities.

Finally, a “critical” tradition of health psychology can also be found in Italy, associated with the use of qualitative methods; many epistemological arguments and theoretical models typical of critical approaches have been widely discussed and adopted, even though less awareness seems to be present about the international developments of this area.

If we compare the Italian context with other European and North American contexts, we can conclude that Italian health psychologists show a reflexive attitude, and a great openness toward different methods and theories of reference. Over the years, attempts to translate theoretical models into interventions aimed at promoting health and well-being in different contexts have increased, including interventions in schools, in sport contexts, in the workplace, in health services, in the wider community.

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#### References

- Ricci Bitti, P.E. & Gremigni, P. (2008), Quadri teorici e modelli operativi. Lo stato della psicologia della salute italiana nell'orizzonte internazionale, *Psicologia della Salute*, 3, 21-31.

## Conference Announcement

### The South-east European Regional Conference of Psychology

30 October to 1 November 2009, Sofia, Bulgaria

The Regional Conference of Psychology – 2009 (SEERCP2009) “Southeastern Europe Looking Ahead: Paradigms, Schools, Needs and Achievements of Psychology in the Region” will allow us to demonstrate the achievements and enhance the capacity-building collaboration of the psychologists in the region and the world.

SEERCP2009 will help psychologists representing the countries in the region to share and increase their professional knowledge of what is going on in their countries, to learn about the paradigms, schools, needs and achievements of psychologists across the region and other parts of the world.

Conference Program includes:

- 2 Plenary sessions with Keynote addresses and brief country reports
- 8 Symposia with Paper and Poster Presentation sessions in the following areas:
  - ✓ Clinical and Counseling Psychology
  - ✓ Adolescents' Health Psychology
  - ✓ School and Educational Psychology
  - ✓ Organizational Psychology
  - ✓ Applied Social Psychology
  - ✓ Psychological Assessment
  - ✓ Disasters Management
  - ✓ Applied Psychology as a Profession

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For more information:

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