

Empowering the Practice of Psychology in the Field of Health Promotion

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Empowering the Practice of Psychology in the Field of Health Promotion

Oral presentation - with powerpoint

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After the Second World War the health sectors in western societies underwent what is referred to as a series of public health revolutions. The main goals of the sectors partially shifted from treating disease and illness towards including the promotion of public health, disease prevention and general well-being of the public. Academically, critiques of the pathogenic orientation of the traditional health care system were followed by proposals for a new and systematic attendance to the phenomena of health and coping. Politically, principals for an international health policy were outlined by the WHO; drawing on broad social and environmental models of health. In the 1986 Ottawa Charter health was framed as more than an absence of disease or a state of well-being. It was identified with the capacities and resources of an individual or group to work, love and play in the social environments, communities and settings of everyday life. Following this logic, health promotion was heralded a new academic and practical discipline with a concept of 'empowerment' at its core.

What are the prospects for doing psychological research, theory and practice in a new and unsettled field of health promotion? The paper argues that psychological theory and practice is vital for an endeavour of health promotion, but that many challenges remains; challenges of building a psychological theory of empowerment from a legacy of mainstream psychology. Individualized models of causality; a clinical and pathogenic focus; 'expert' theories of the 'other'; and alternative and eclectic "wellness" psychologies in a private health goods market - all distance psychology from a theory of empowerment. However, traditions in psychology, outside the mainstream, offer a framework for a psychological theory of empowerment to build on. From critical psychology a conception of people conducting their lives in structures of social practice is a possible starting point.