

# Interview with Merry Bullock, Secretary General for the International Council of Psychologists

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Merry lived in several countries (U.S., Canada, Germany, and Estonia) and worked in various universities, a research institution (Max Planck Institute in Munich, Germany), and for

professional associations (APA, head of International office) and policy/funding organizations (e.g., Estonian Academy of Sciences, National Science Foundation (US)). Her work spanned teaching, research, program development, and policy advice in social and behavioral sciences and science in general, in national organization and international organizations.

## Where has psychology managed to make a difference, that is, affected international public policy?

There are some good instances where Psychology has made a difference in how we think about issues or how we address them. Some that come to mind with health implications are:

1. Disaster management/response now includes mental health and psycho-social elements included among WHO guidelines (see [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/emergencies/IASC\\_MHPSS\\_M\\_E\\_30.03.2017.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/IASC_MHPSS_M_E_30.03.2017.pdf?ua=1); [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/publications/guide\\_field\\_workers/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/)) that cover issues from

Psychological First Aid to longer term recovery and resilience. The gradual inclusion of psycho-social elements evolved over several decades, with major events such as the Tsunami in Asia having a large effect.

2. One important change in the revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) was to pay attention to the behavior of medical practitioners in applying health classification codes – or the “clinical utility.” Along with others, psychologists have been very involved in testing how the revised codes work in practice (field trials) to maximize diagnostic utility. The International Union of Psychological Science (the accredited international organization in psychology to WHO) has helped to foster the impact of psychological science to this process. The revision process for mental health and substance abuse chapter has been led by a psychologist.

3. Gender and sex identity - Psychological knowledge and psychology's stance with the LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) community gradually affected other scientific associations and societies so that all or most include 'sex and gender identity' as a characteristic on which scientists should be protected. This has been a ten year process of bringing psychological/behavioral perspectives into the administration and proceedings of most scientific organizations. It started with the APA's office of gender identity which initiated raising LGBT issues around the world and culminated with overall acceptance in most global scientific organizations.

4. Psychological contributions in the prevention and treatment to HIV/AIDS. From the beginning of the epidemic it became obvious that the prevention and treatment (issues such as stigma, gender roles, and adherence) should also be guided by behavioral and not only medical knowledge. The programs became very soon multi-disciplinary and inter-professional training evolved.

## Could you identify international bodies we (an NGO in the health domain) would want to influence?

- The WHO in Geneva and Vienna.
- The International Council for Science. There is an urban health initiative worth exploring – see <https://council.science/what-we-do/research-programmes/thematic-organizations/urban-health-wellbeing>
- The United Nations. There is a coalition of psychology organizations at the UN headquarters in New York (see PCUN- <https://psychologycoalitionun.org/>)

## How can we - a small NGO - access the international bodies and attempt to influence their policies? What would be potential effective strategies of influence?

1. Identify multiple stakeholders, possible **partnerships, build coalitions**. Finding partners is important for impact. For example, the International Union of Psychological Sciences (IUPsyS), of which EHPA is an affiliate organization, has formal relations with WHO and the UN.

EHPA (the European Federation of Psychological Associations), is also connected with the WHO; Others include health related organizations in

other countries, such as the APA Division 38; Society of Behavioral Medicine.

Other directions are multi-level government organizations, e.g., the EU, or international foundations, such as the Gates foundation.

2. Frame and address **psychology's role through our impact on challenges important to the citizenry**. It is important to illustrate to decision makers that we have ways of addressing the problems of their constituents. It is therefore important to identify the priorities of decision makers and the problems/issues with which their audiences grapple. The focus should be on the problems of the people and how psychology can contribute rather than issues in psychology (legislation, training, jobs). A good example of successful advocacy in this model was the activity of the Norwegian Psych Association who teamed up with the medical establishment in forging lobbying and legislation in addressing health problems of the public.

3. Demonstrate the **effectiveness of programs in terms of outcome and economics**. A good example of this was the demonstration that incorporating behavioral techniques for pre-mature babies (e.g. handling and other psychosocial considerations) led to better outcomes, shortened hospital time and saved money.

## What do you think are key priorities at this moment? Priorities for knowledge and action?

### Knowledge priorities

1) Incorporating public health perspectives into our research and theories. For psychology to have an impact, we need to provide information that

decision makers find necessary for their choices – information on scalability of health interventions, cost, and feasibility, for example.

2) What are the problems decision makers need to solve? We need to incorporate psychological indicators/words into the outcomes of decision makers.

## Action priorities

1) Diversity & health, and cultural competency in healthcare to diverse populations.

a. At a policy level it addresses training of the workforce, licensing, and regulating.

b. Building Mental Health systems in countries that do not have them. How to teach, regulate, involve para-professionals in order to provide services to needy populations.

2) Immigration, migration and displacement – growing preoccupation in many countries, both developed and developing countries.

3) Gerontology.

4) Chronic diseases. Exercise.

## Do you know of any opportunities for international funding applications?

The big foundations – Gates, Rockefeller, MacArthur, have large scale health programs. We, as psychology, need to tell them a compelling science-to-practice story. Still, we should not overlook smaller organizations that can connect behavioral science researchers and on-the-ground NGOs.

As part of our efforts to disseminate our science and inform policy and practice and by this increasing the potential for impact we now actively participate in the Psychology Coalition of the United Nations monthly meetings. We have also initiated efforts to strengthen our ties with EFPA

(European Federation of Psychology Associations) given their active role with the UN World Health Organization (WHO). With this we hope to increase the visibility of our scientific field of Health Psychology and our society.

As a society we will start asking those submitting abstracts for our well attended conferences (around 1000 conference attendees a year) to select where their work fits considering the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We are also pondering on how to increase the possibilities for dissemination, impact and legacy in each of the countries where we organise our yearly conferences by engaging local policy, practice and community partners. We are currently reconsidering the grants offered by our society and plan to consider offering a grant that will aim at supporting the development of impact cases. Making the case for the contributions our scientific field can bring to practice is part of our goals.



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