

CULTURE AND HEALTH

by Catterina Seia

Numerous epidemiological, observational and longitudinal scientific studies developed over the last thirty years on representative samples of the population have confirmed how active or passive cultural participation and the intelligent use of free time are associated with cognitive and relational development already from early childhood and with quality of life throughout our entire lifetimes.

Right from the perinatal period listening to reading aloud and music produces benefits in early learning. The Arts are a resource in primary prevention strategies, such as in the promotion of health; they make a great difference to mental health, to active ageing, to the treatment of chronic degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's, to post-surgery recovery and more generally to the sense of well-being perceived by individuals. Their effects have also been demonstrated on prolonging life expectancy.

There are countless cultural projects in healthcare facilities that promote Health. Experiences affect a wide range of targets, including both those being cared for and care providers, with different artistic languages and several disciplinary approaches. But they are still like dust particles.

New frontiers in scientific research promote the awareness of the contribution that Culture makes to the determinants of Health.

Neuroscience has identified the neural structures involved in the sensation of well-being and reward, demonstrating how they are stimulated by aesthetic pleasure, opening research to the influence of cultural experience on the connective activity, structure and biochemistry of the brain.

After decades, positive psychology has shifted its emphasis from the deficits to the potential of personal development and today it is clear that emotions play an important role in the cognitive elaboration processes to cope with stress, a phenomenon that has an effect on hormonal secretion.

The holistic approach is confirmed by PNEI - psychoneuroendocrinology, in which several scientific disciplines converge, demonstrating the correlation between systems (endocrine-immune-mental).

More recently, epigenetics has highlighted how lifestyles can contribute to modifying the behavior of genes that regulate the "concert of life".

In addition to all of this there is technological innovation, which is growing exponentially, and will change the medicine of the future, further enhancing our lives.

These are new and exciting fields that are moving towards a biopsychosocial approach to health, taking into consideration the outcome of the interdependence of a number of factors and focusing on salutogenesis, namely the search for factors that maintain and improve people's Health.

Back in 1948, in its constitution, the WHO defined Health as going well beyond the dichotomy between the existence or absence of disease or infirmity, and places an emphasis on well-being. Moving in this direction, in 1994, the term *life skills* introduced a range of basic cognitive, emotional and relational skills/abilities, which can be developed through learning, enabling people to resiliently deal with the challenges of everyday life and develop strength, self-confidence and faith in themselves.

From this perspective, the relationship between **Culture** and **Health** can become a **strategic alliance**. In fact, the WHO dedicated its 2019 report entitled *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67*, presented in Helsinki last November, to this subject. As a result of the positive outcome of this review (with the analysis of 900 studies that refer to more than 3000 products in the last 20 years in Russian and English, it is the broadest ever carried out on the subject), the organization has recommended policy-makers to create the conditions to develop studies, research, skills and policies in this direction.

Cultural crossovers, namely the systematic and systemic relationships between fields that until now have only been weakly interconnected, such as Culture and Health, are being taken into consideration more frequently as the pillars of health, social, civil and environmental policies that deal with the challenges of environmental, economic and social sustainability as expressed in the UN 2030 Agenda. These issues, the care economy and culture-based development were also treated as requirements for social sustainability in the 2020 edition of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The time has therefore come to outline new paradigms to meet the challenges of modern living. The psychosocial impact of Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of well-being and **the key contribution made by culture and art** to our mental health, our ability to be socially cohesive, and, in a nutshell, **the human blossoming**. If a large number of people had not had access to a wide range of cultural resources during these dramatic circumstances despite the wide range of digital content that was made available and if they hadn't independently taken the initiative with individual and group cultural actions, the immediate psychological and human cost of the pandemic would have been considerably higher. Nevertheless, for those living in disadvantaged or fragile social conditions that do not have access, the opportunity, resources and ability to take care of their own personal well-being and that of their loved ones, Covid-19 has meant a further deterioration in their condition.

In this scenario, human development issues, closely connected to Culture, will increasingly become an integral part of prevention, care and promotion of Health strategies, combining the construction of shared meanings with the sense of social belonging. And they will involve public and private stakeholders and players, **with a multi-disciplinary, multi-level and cross-sector approach**. As the WHO stated in the opening of its seminar on the subject, "*authors, artists, creative talents, experts in human and social science can help us to reflect on human emotions so that we can understand the state of well-being of people, a community and even a country. And help us to improve it*". As a pre-requisite of social and economic development.

Catterina Seia

Co-Founder and Vice-President of the Fitzcarraldo Foundation; Vice-President of the "Medicina a Misura di Donna" Foundation. Member of the Advisory Board of the IBSA Foundation for scientific research

Lugano, May 11, 2020