



The contribution of cultural neuroscience to cultural psychiatry

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The issue that our readers are about to read is a real source of pride for the Editorial Board, because it focuses on a fundamental topic for our discipline. Indeed, the aim of this issue is to underscore the centrality of cultural psychiatry as the branch of human science capable to create a specific synergy between neuroscience and psychiatry in order to set up a new epistemological toolbox for the study of mental health.

The hybridization between neuroscience, representing the most “scientific” hard core of technological civilizations, and cultural psychiatry, promoting a more “flexible” method based on comparisons, promises to hopefully connect data from these two different sources of knowledge: on the one hand the study of biological roots of brain functioning; the study of the cultural context promoting or enhancing psychic expressions, on the other one, no matter whether these are considered normative or pathological by the cultural community, the patient’s entourage, or the psychiatric nosography currently in use. This is the reason that the last World Congress has been entitled “Cultural brain and living societies”, and also that a plenary session, a thematic symposium and a video conference were devoted to the discipline of cultural neuroscience. Today’s issue offers some interventions presented at the conference, enriched by the latest knowledge and by more systematic and analytical data and references, in order to provide readers an overall conceptual basis with state of the art of several research fields in this domain.

The first contribution comes from the Italian group led by *Liborio Stuppia* in Chieti, and offers an essential overview of recent advance in the relationship between genetics and environment, and the development of some specific aspects of human mental functioning, including intelligence. Stuppia et al.’s paper is not only a valuable source of references and updated material for further study, but also promotes both an original resumption and an attempt to go beyond the ancient debate nature/nurture that has so animated scholars of the human mind, particularly cultural psychiatrists.

The second paper, by *Bruce Wexler*, is a brilliant compendium of current knowledge about neuronal plasticity, brain development and environmental events. Here is, in fact, described the state of the art of the experiments on early brain learning in relation to rearing environment, and expanded data are presented on learning capability and adaptability of the human brain with age. Finally, crucial examples of dyssynchrony between environmental change and adaptive capacity of mental resources are offered. Needless to say, the mention of migration and culture clash is of paramount value for scholars in cultural psychiatry.

The third article, from *Goffredo Bartocci*, is the first part of a passionate discourse that our Editor-in-Chief is developing with the readers of our journal. The subject is the difficult relationship between

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spirituality, culture and mental functioning, and the contribution from neuroscience is fundamental in this debate. Bartocci's competence on the subject of spirituality and mental health is well known, but in this case besides the thorough knowledge of the clinical phenomenon, the readers will find the accuracy and linearity of an epistemological dissertation.

Approaching the fourth essay, by *Bobby Cheon and coll.*, we enter fully into the experimental research in cultural neuroscience, particularly in the intriguing and challenging field represented by the study of empathy. The review from Cheon et al. takes into account the different dimensions of empathy, its cultural attunement, and its biological correlates: recent experimental evidences seem to draw a map of the biological events underlying the human capacity to perceive and share painful sensations, to approach other's physical and mental suffering and to understand this suffering at a cognitive level.

The contribution from *Thomas Stompe et al.* provides both a review of experimental evidences and a theoretical and cultural framework underlying the neuroscientific research on empathy. Alongside this detailed analysis, the authors issue a scientific challenge for an international collaboration and an innovative research project, confirming our journal's original mission to act as a vehicle for cultural exchange and sharing of experiences, and a meeting point for the projects and collaborations between scholars from all over the world.

In conclusion, the ultimate goal of this issue is to develop a common language between neuroscience and cultural psychiatry to promote a clinical practice that could be accurate, updated, culture-relevant and not inspired by prejudice. A better understanding of interpersonal and neurobiological bases of mind development may help clinicians to better treat their patients. The aim of the issue is not to mistake psychiatry and the brain, but to go in the opposite direction using the knowledge on the brain to a more precise psychiatry.

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