



Commentary

NEXT-GENERATION RESEARCHERS URGED TO SHAPE A NEW HOLISTIC EUROPEAN PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH AGENDA

Friederike Schwarzkopf¹, Arjan van der Star², Giuseppina Lo Moro³

1. *Psychologist (M.Sc.), Psychotherapist, Berlin, Germany*

2. *PhD, Division of Psychology, Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet, Sweden*

3. *Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Torino, Torino, Italy*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 November 2020

Revised 10 December 2020

Accepted 15 December 2020

Keywords:

Mental health, Health Equity, Health Promotion, Climate Change, Telemedicine

ABSTRACT

As the current COVID-19 crisis reminds us, public mental health may still lack full recognition in public health, despite numerous European public health agendas that underline the importance of mental health within the public health domain. We examine the position of public mental health in European public health and how it is represented in current research. Moreover, we explore how public mental health could play a key role in both seizing present-day opportunities (e.g. telemedicine advancements) and tackling future challenges (e.g. climate change and the risk for widening health inequities) in public health. To further population health in an equitable manner, an inclusive and holistic approach to health is needed to sustain resilient people in healthy environments. As next-generation researchers, we call on our peers to amplify their voices and reshape the public health research agenda by further prioritizing public mental health research.

© EuroMediterranean Biomedical Journal 2020 - SARS-CoV-2/COVID 19 Special Issue

1. Commentary

Since 2019, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19) has been continuously spreading across countries and continents, leading to the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020.^{1,2}

To date, more than 67 million COVID-19 cases and over 1.5 million deaths due to COVID-19 have been reported worldwide.³

As current developments around COVID-19 unfold, we see increases in anxiety, depression, neurological symptoms, risk behaviours, and domestic violence, with already vulnerable groups being disproportionately affected.⁴

It seems evident that every health crisis poses risks of a co-occurring mental health crisis and must be treated in a holistic and inclusive manner. Despite current European public health frameworks and research agendas highlighting the importance of mental health within the public health domain, public mental health still lacks universal attention as a cross-cutting issue. In this commentary, we highlight the importance of public mental health, how it is underrepresented in public health, how it poses current and future opportunities and challenges for public health researchers, and the role next-generation researchers could play to strengthen the position of public mental health.

The right time is now: whilst COVID-19 re-emphasizes urgent public mental health matters and exposes mental health care systems shortcomings (e.g. delayed telemedicine implementation), it could simultaneously serve as an accelerator for new developments.⁵

In the light of current and future health challenges (e.g. climate change and the risk for widening health inequities), we, as next-generation researchers, could be drivers of change to make public health more comprehensive by further foregrounding public mental health research.

In the WHO's European Region, mental health disorders represent the third-largest group of causes contributing to the overall disease burden as measured in disability-adjusted life years lost.⁶

Illness-specific prevalences range from 15% of mental and substance abuse disorders to 50% when neurological disorders are included.⁶ Mental health disorders and their determinants are not equally distributed across Europe, e.g. higher frequencies were reported in Eastern Europe over the past decade.⁷

Mental health disorders have been linked to several health risk behaviours (e.g. self-harm, suicide, and substance use) and comorbidities cover a wide range of non-communicable diseases.⁸ Mental and physical health strongly influence each other, making mental health disorders possible life-threatening conditions.⁸

* Corresponding author: Arjan van der Star, arjan.van.der.star@ki.se

DOI: 10.3269/1970-5492.2020.15.50

All rights reserved. ISSN: 2279-7165 - Available on-line at www.embj.org

An interdisciplinary approach that sees public mental health inseparable from public health, as a potentially lifesaving investment, should be among the top priorities for Europe's health agenda.

While European frameworks (e.g. European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being 2008) advocate for European Union-wide implementation of socially cohesive public mental health policies, structural and financial challenges are responsible for differences between countries in unmet mental health treatment needs,⁸ also given that health is still strictly nationally coordinated.⁹

In 2014, the Roadmap for Mental Health Research in Europe (ROAMER) identified differences in public mental health research across European countries.¹⁰ ROAMER also reported that epidemiology dominated public mental health research, while other crucial topics such as mental health promotion, prevention, and policies were limited, highlighting the need for intensified research in these fields.¹⁰

In this context, we analysed, as proxy for latest European public health research, the titles and abstracts of the 12th European Public Health Conference 2019 programme. Overall, 285 presentations included mental health issues in title or abstract, representing 16% of all presentations. Works regarding life satisfaction, general health behaviours, cognition, and non-clinical psychological concepts were excluded.

Interestingly, more than half of mental health presentations were found in tracks on mental health and health of sexual, gender, and ethnic minorities; maternal, child, and adolescent health; migration; and solidarity, addressing important public mental health issues and correlates. Yet, less than 4% of mental health presentations were found in tracks about policies; health information and literacy; and health services, systems, and economics. We identified 41 topics across mental health presentations (up to three topics per presentation were considered). The most common were migrant mental health (11.9% of 285 presentations), depression (11.9%), and children, adolescents, and young adults' mental health (10.9%). Notably, mental health promotion (1.8%) and resilience (1.4%) were less represented, as well as other topics often identified as future public mental health challenges, e.g. digitalisation⁴ (2.8%) and environment¹¹ (1.1%). Finally, we considered the number of single abstract submissions per country. 19.5% of abstracts submitted by authors from Northern Europe included mental health issues, followed by Western (18.1%), Southern (9.0%), and Eastern Europe (1.5%).

Using those data as a heuristic mean to examine public mental health representation in European public health research, it seems that public mental health is still not a transversal theme across public health and Europe. Indeed, as described by ROAMER back in 2014, there might be an ongoing need for more mental health promotion and policy research and for increased public mental health attention in Southern and Eastern Europe.

Yet, next-generation public mental health researchers may play a pivotal role in changing the scope of current public health research for which several present-day opportunities exist.

On the one hand, researchers could focus on country-specific policy, health system, and economic research to strengthen health system performances by identifying barriers and facilitators.^{4,10,12} Those most in need for mental health services tend to experience increased barriers to such services, let alone preventive measures.^{8,12}

Digitalisation, when implemented inclusively, could potentially increase availability, proven by how phone- and internet-based telemedicine tools became essential during lockdowns.⁴

On the other hand, and as equally important, cross-national studies could help to establish European public mental health policy standards, such as for most effective use of low-barrier telemedicine tools.^{4,5} Such policy standards may aid to improve inclusivity and preparedness for the mental health consequences of future health crises. When approached holistically, next-generation public mental health researchers could use these opportunities to further the public health mission towards health justice and equity.

Looking into the future, post-pandemic and beyond, we see emerging multifaceted health challenges that necessitate integrative approaches, among them climate change and the risk for widening health inequities. Climate change constitutes one of the biggest threats to human health for now and the future and may also impact mental health both directly (e.g. extreme weather events) and indirectly (e.g. economic loss, forced migration) in addition to apparent somatic health costs of global warming and pollution.¹¹

Also, health crises may directly contribute to further widening mental health inequities by driving mental health disparities, as the COVID-19 outbreak has shown to disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups.^{4,12,13}

These health challenges warrant an integrative approach to health and mental health that includes their social determinants, e.g. exposure to conflict, stigma, discrimination, or violence.^{4,12,13}

Public health research in some areas, i.e. sexual, gender, and ethnic minority health, has started to adopt such a holistic approach, as also our findings suggest, while other areas may be lacking behind.

Some European research and policy recommendations^{7,13} advocate for a stronger focus on community-based research and interventions, aiming to include vulnerable populations and prevent institutionalisation of mental health patients.¹²

To tackle future public health challenges and further its mission towards health justice and equity, public health should focus on the promotion of protective mental health factors, reshaping its strategy into 'how to create healthy environments' and advancing knowledge on how social resources could boost resilience.^{4,5}

In sum, public mental health is still not positioned at the forefront of public health, while it is a cross-cutting issue and a potential driver for health inequities, particularly in times of crisis. With the current societal attention to public health, we see an opportunity to create 'a new, better normal' in public health research, in which mental health holds a more prominent position. Similar to young people's leadership in the climate movement, new-generation public mental health researchers could be potential facilitators of such change. We see two main actionable focal points in order to integrate public mental health into the field of public health.

Together with the entire public health community, we could (1) identify and further examine future-oriented public mental health research topics (i.e. environmental correlates, resilience, digitalisation, policy, and health systems).

To increase public mental health equity, we need to (2) keep focusing on social determinants of mental health through both community-based research and interventions. Overall, with the urgency as highlighted by the current COVID-19 crisis, further mainstreaming public mental health into public health in a multidisciplinary manner could serve as an opportunity for the entire public health research community in order to mitigate and, even more importantly, prevent future health challenges and health inequities in a holistic manner.

References

1. World Health Organization. WHO Coronavirus Disease Dashboard. Available online from: https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAiML-BRAAEiwAuWVggrN4PmJEkvcPhQFMBUrHFJd4SxTk1ZnYhnN87EeR2hwCOEfrSF0CxoCjLIQAvD_BwE. [Last accessed: 11th of December 2020]
2. Costantino C, Fiacchini D. Rationale of the WHO document on Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) readiness and response to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and of the Italian Decalogue for Prevention Departments. *J Prev Med Hyg.* 2020 Apr; 2;61(1):E1-E2.
3. Costantino C, Cannizzaro E, Alba D, Conforto A, Cimino L, Mazzucco W. Sars-Cov-2 Pandemic In The Mediterranean Area: Epidemiology And Perspectives. *EuroMediterranean Biomedical Journal.* 2020; 15 (25) 102–106.
4. Holmes EA, O'Connor RC, Perry VH, Tracey I, Wessely S, Arseneault L, et al. Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2020;7(6):547–60
5. Oroilidis J. COVID-19: The time for mental healthcare reform is now. Open Access Government. 9 June 2020. Available online from: <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/mental-healthcare-reform/88121/>. [Last accessed: 11th of December 2020]
6. Fact sheet – Mental health. World Health Organization. 8 June 2019. Available online from: https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/404851/MNH_FactSheet_ENG.pdf. [Last accessed: 11th of December 2020]
7. Lindert J, Bilsen J, Jakubauskiene M. Public mental health. *Eur J Public Health* 2017;27(4):32–35.
8. Champion J. Public mental health: key challenges and opportunities. *BJPsych Int* 2018;15(3):51-54.
9. Greer SL, Hervey TK, Mackenbach JP, McKee M. Health law and policy in the European Union. *Lancet* 2013;381:1135–44.
10. Forsman AK, Ventus DBJ, van der Feltz-Cornelis CM, Wahlbeck K, on behalf of the ROAMER project. Public mental health research in Europe: a systematic mapping for the ROAMER project. *Eur J Public Health* 2014;24(6):955–960.
11. Hayes K, Poland B. Addressing Mental Health in a Changing Climate: Incorporating Mental Health Indicators into Climate Change and Health Vulnerability and Adaptation Assessments. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2018;15:1806.
12. Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health. United Nations. 13 May 2020. Available online from: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/UN-Policy-Brief-COVID-19-and-mental-health.pdf>. [Last accessed: 29th of June 2020]
13. Burgess R. COVID-19 mental-health responses neglect social realities [published online ahead of print, 2020 May 4]. *Nature* 2020. Available online from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01313-9>. [Last accessed: 11th of December 2020]