

Re-thinking healthy lifestyles: an ecological approach to the psychological understanding of sustained physical activity and healthy nutrition

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), the proposed research project will focus on both individual and social-environmental factors related to sustained physical activity and healthy nutrition. In fact, the reciprocal influence occurring between changes in the social environment and changes in individuals has been often discussed and claimed for its effectiveness regarding health promotion interventions (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). Yet, dominant research approaches in the domain of sport and health psychology tend to focus either on individual (Penedo & Dahn, 2005) or social-environmental factors (Ball, Jeffery, Abbott, McNaughton, & Crawford, 2010). Therefore, to fill this gap, the main aim of the present research project is to understand the psychological antecedents and consequences related to the initiation, continuation and/or suspension of a healthy lifestyle, both at the individual and social-environmental level, and with a focus on their reciprocal transactions.

Following the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1999), healthy lifestyle is here defined as a way of living that: (1) lowers the risk of being seriously ill or dying early and improves your health; (2) helps individuals enjoy more aspect of their lives through greater physical, mental and social well-being; helps individuals' significant others through positive role modeling. A healthy lifestyle encompasses the cessation of smoking and drinking alcohol, and the adoption physical activity and healthy eating (Reeves & Rafferty, 2005; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1999). For the aims of the present project, here the focus will be on the adoption of positive behaviors. These behaviors (physical activity and healthy nutrition) will be studied through the application of the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the Social Identity Theory (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) to address respectively the individual and social-environmental factors related to the target behaviors. Furthermore, possible reciprocal transactions between these factors will be investigated as well.

The expected results of the proposed project can potentially have great positive applied impact on individuals and communities: for example, among other possible applications and beyond their theoretical implications, they could inform individuals, practitioners and policymakers to improve their own health, their clients' performances, and their communities resilience and well-being, respectively. Of course, by providing a model of healthy lifestyle adoption and continuation, the results will advance the theoretical understanding of why and how individuals can live better, healthier lives. As new patterns of physical activities emerge (see for example Crossfit.com) while chronic diseases continue to rise (WHO, 2017), the present project could provide a fundamental step toward the promotion of widespread healthy lifestyles.

To begin with the advancement toward such ambitious general goal, a series of 2 studies will be carried out in order to attain the specific aim of the project. First, an observational survey-based study (Study 1) will be used to assess individual and social factors related to the target behaviors and to define an ecological model of healthy lifestyle behaviors. Then, informed by these results, a longitudinal experimental intervention (Study 2) will be carried out to test for causal relationship among variables, confirming or developing the correlational model into a causal model. The two studies will be carried out in sequence, with the ICAP2018 occurring between the two: during the congress, the ARTS Seminar will serve as a moment of discussion and debate on results emerged from Study 1 and on the development and planning of Study 2. Here, the team involved in the project could present results of Study 1, define the design and procedure of Study 2, organize its implementation, and potentially discuss about future collaborations and international exchanges, for example related to the test of the model on the two negative behaviors related to an unhealthy lifestyle (tobacco and alcohol consumption). The team, composed of 4-5 students, will be perfect to conduct such a project, given the balance of activities and topics they would share: within the project, 4 sub-themes (2: individual vs. social-environmental; by 2: physical activity vs. healthy nutrition) and 2 phases (Study 1 and Study 2) can be identified and equally divided among the team members, which will be coordinated by the team leader.