HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY DEFINED


Health Psychology is a winner on two counts: intrinsic worth and propitious timing. The established reputation of the chapter authors, the wide range of topics covered, and the high quality of most of the individual chapters are sufficient in themselves to make this volume an important addition to the growing literature on psychosocial aspects of illness and health care. What truly distinguishes the book, however, is that it is one of the first to address these familiar topics from a new perspective, that of health psychology. Health psychology, as recently defined by Stephen Weiss in his presidential address to Division 38 of APA (Weiss, Note 1), “is the scientific, educational and professional contribution of psychologists to the promotion of health, the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of illness, and the improvement of the health care system.”

It is not surprising that health psychologists have lacked a basic reference work until now, for the specialty itself is still in the process of being born. Although psychologists have been writing, teaching, and doing research on problems of physical health at least as long as our colleagues in the other behavioral and social sciences, we have not developed, until very recently, the professional identity and organizational structures characteristic of medical psychology, medical anthropology, or health economics. Rather than following a recognized career path, individual psychologists were likely to stumble into the no man’s land between psychology and medicine by the accident of a particular work setting or a specific clinical interest. Even then, there was often no obvious connection between these psychologists’ current activities and their previous training as psychologists.

The ambiguous status of psychologists interested in health has changed dramatically during the course of the last 10 years. Changing patterns of illness have produced new health problems not easily amenable...
to traditional pharmaceutical and surgical remedies. At the same time, psychologists have developed treatment techniques of particular relevance to these health problems, such as behavior therapy, various types of relaxation training, and biofeedback. Both these factors have led the medical world to increasingly recognize the importance of behavioral input, and to accept psychologists as full-fledged collaborators in research and service delivery. But concurrent with the growth of interdisciplinary activity has been a new interest in the separate identity and distinct contribution of health psychologists *qua psychologists*. Organizationally, the changing status of health psychology within the American Psychological Association is shown by its rapid transformation between 1974 and 1978 from the subject of a task force report, to a special-interest group within an existing division, to a full-fledged division. Educationally, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of the first graduate programs specializing in health psychology, a foremost example of which is the one at the University of California, San Francisco, the academic home of the three editors of this volume.

Changing patterns in disease occurrence and health care provide the motivation for developing a new subdiscipline, and organizational and educational structures provide the mechanisms, but every specialty area also requires a substantive content. Hence the importance of a volume like *Health Psychology*. Like all handbooks, it serves as a repository and convenient summary of the current knowledge in a given area. But because this volume appears at a formative moment in the development of health psychology, it also helps to delineate the boundaries of the area; by choosing to emphasize certain topics and ignoring others, it establishes, or at least suggests, where the proper terrain of health psychology lies. In addition, and most important of all, the timing of this book gives it a role in the development of a professional identity for the specialty area. The account of the past history, present concerns, and future possibilities of health psychology inevitably becomes a form of consciousness-raising, defining both the common purpose of this group and its distinctness from other professional groupings.

How well does *Health Psychology* fulfill its multiple purposes? The answer, not surprisingly, is sometimes better, sometimes worse. In its task of summarizing current knowledge, the book, on the whole, comes off very well. Particularly noteworthy are the chapter by Cohen on personality, stress, and illness, the one by Cohen and Lazarus on coping with the stresses of illness, and the two chapters by Kirsch and Rosenstock on determinants of seeking health care, and compliance. I used these four chapters as part of the readings for an undergraduate course on health psychology, and the students commented favorably on the completeness of treatment and clarity.