



Introduction to the special issue “Clinic of democracy: The contribution of psychological science to the analysis, construction and development of democracies”

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The field of clinical psychology has historically been limited in its contribution to the understanding of social transformations and the development of models of democratic coexistence, due to the founding myth of the discipline, which has primarily focused on the individual psychic dimension.

Reflection on the analysis of life contexts and intervention for social change has led to the recognition that the theoretical foundations of clinical intervention are equally fundamental to the analysis and intervention of organizational and collective contexts (Mannarini & Arcidiacono, 2021). Furthermore, social change is achieved through stratified and multilevel settings, from properly clinical to community settings (Lavanco & Varveri, 2008).

The construction of the cultural meanings of civic experience is, in fact, realized in the forms of coexistence with the other. This places a shared structure of interactions between individuals and between individuals and institutions, which actively contribute to the formation of the meanings of interpersonal psychic experience.

In order to facilitate a social change that ensures responsible coexistence and psychological well-being, it is essential to engage in actions at both the individual and collective levels, integrating the

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psychic and social dimensions (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2022). This supports the necessity of advocating for models that facilitate the construction – or deconstruction – of interpretations of the social world, while simultaneously enabling the co-design of solutions to the real-life issues that arise from those very interpretations. In addressing the clinic of democracy, it is imperative not to overlook the experience of relationships in the external world and their organized political form that imbues them with meaning. Identities are regarded as emerging qualities of local and community settings, as well as the practices that are implemented in them.

In this theoretical framework, in the context of conditions that are adverse to the exercise of democracy, the processes that revitalize trust in the politics of rights and in civic coexistence become of particular importance. The system of shared rules is the one to which each citizen contributes a significant degree of subjective reality, wherein the concept of otherness serves as the organizing and affective principle guiding actions “with and between” others (Salvatore *et al.*, 2019).

In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the individual to experience a reality that is preparatory to the encounter with the other and that goes beyond the characterization of the primary affective relationship in which the relationship with one’s own similar person is privileged. The aggregate dimension can be instead assimilated to that of intermediate bodies. The vitality of democracy is contingent upon the well-being of the social structures that facilitate a middle ground between the private and public spheres, between the individual’s self-representation as a citizen and the institutional reality that governs them. These structures enable active engagement with the associated forms of social organization through which individuals can exert influence and contribute to the democratic process.

From associationism to movements created from below to the experiences of participatory democracy in community development programs, the individual plays a pivotal role in the democratic process by introducing a multifaceted reality. The narratives that are associated with it might remain unresolved – either in the chaos or rigidity of an absolute order – if there was no way to elaborate them democratically (Novara & Varveri, 2015; Salvatore *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, contributing to collective life with a democratic method includes processes of negotiation between instances, needs, desires, and even

conflicting ones. Furthermore, it includes the integration of divergent visions of the world, as the more democratic the system is, the more it requires the governance of the inherent complexity. If action is a function of the interpretative and value system that people use, it will be necessary to understand the meanings associated with democracy in contemporary democracies. This understanding should encompass how democracy is perceived, how it is acted upon, and how it is experienced by the collective and the individual. It is well established that living in a democracy has an impact on the health and psychological well-being of individuals and communities. However, studies and research that elucidate this intertwining are not always consistent (Wise & Sainsbury, 2007).

What role can clinical psychology play in the establishment and evolution of democratic systems? Furthermore, what role can clinical psychology play in the management of conflicts and pluralities that may impact an individual's sense of active citizenship? Has there been a shift in the representation and dissemination of democratic values among younger generations? (Foa & Mounk, 2016). How might psychology facilitate a reconciliation between the need for personal security and the need to belong to a multifaceted community? How might the inviolability of rights, of the individual, and of the community be reconciled with the multiplicity of a “quasi-stationary” process such as that of democratic discourse?

In response to these questions, the journal aims to present arguments – rather than solutions – that can help us understand how to engage, persist, and remain active in the democratic process, which, by its very nature, cannot be reduced to a single answer.

The maintenance of community bonds must be undertaken in advance, during periods of peace. However, it becomes a matter of urgency in times of war between peoples. This is in accordance with the observations of Freud, who wrote that the «limitations [...] which form what we call the law of nations» (Freud, 1915, p. 16) must be borne in mind.

Indeed, it is through the dialogic elaboration within the democratic process that the social bond with the other becomes possible. In a society devoid of social ties, it would be impossible to establish relationships of reciprocity or prosocial behaviors aimed at defending rights and differences. It is similarly unlikely that the use of cooperative methods, even at the transnational level, would be feasible without

denying the conflict and providing for the possibilities of government, which would exclude violence from the premises. The necessity to preserve the connections between individuals and communities makes it possible to maintain both the formalization of norms, which guarantees the viability of civic coexistence, and the representation of power as a power that is accountable to the people. Furthermore, beyond the confines of legalism, such acts can give rise to «innovative acts of jurisprudence» (Benasayag, 2016, p. 11), facilitate social change, and engender the possibility of alternative realities. It is thus imperative that the right to democracy be enshrined in the affective dynamics between members of a community who eschew archaic forms of violence or destructive impulses, redistributing the strength of the ties to a power that is “questionable”, in that it is not immobile and never given once and for all. The democratic process, which serves to regulate the potential chaos of individualism, must do so by maintaining an open and ongoing public discourse (Laurent, 2011).

This is the crucial issue that must be addressed in the development of democracies. We are confronted with a situation that is not fixed, but rather one that promises to satisfy the need for security and stability of shared norms. These norms are therefore predictable and, on occasion, cross and build upon the collective discourse. This issue of the Journal contains a collection of contributions within this framework. The work of De Fortuna *et al.* (this issue) puts forth a perspective that may initially appear unconventional regarding conspiracy theories. Despite their potential to foster anti-democratic outcomes, the authors elucidate these theories as a fundamental human tendency to construct meanings, driven by the aspiration to comprehend and comprehend the world. The definition of cultures and the determination of beliefs are not straightforward matters. In order to maintain a certain “productive cultural tension”, which is a fundamental aspect of democracy of knowledge, it is necessary to consider these issues in greater depth.

In this regard, the analysis presented by Bessone *et al.* (this issue) illustrates how clinical psychology can exemplify this democratic assumption, aligning its responses with the rights and needs of individuals, and addressing social inequalities. Expanding the potential for democratic participation entails contributing to the dialectical-creative process that fosters active engagement in community life.

The challenge, therefore, is to evaluate the impact of clinical

psychology on the broader social context, adopting an ecological and psychopolitical perspective. In this context, Francescato (this issue) discusses the potential contribution of psychology from the Global South to Western democracies. In particular, critical community psychology, like liberation community psychology, is concerned with addressing social injustices and promoting liberation from oppressive systems. This is achieved by fostering social consciousness with respect to systems of power. It is once again emphasized that meanings are constructed through social interactions and that these constructed realities have the potential to either increase or challenge oppression, demand greater equity or social justice, question the distribution of resources, or promote duties and rights. Among the most frequently occurring terms in democratic discourse is the concept of “reciprocity”, which is addressed in the latest research contribution by Novara *et al.* (this issue). In a complex structural model, the levels of beliefs, norms, and behaviors are interrelated. The concepts of reciprocity and prosocial behavior are regarded as facilitators of the democratic process and are associated with generalized trust, respect for norms, equity, sense of community, belief in a just world, and a vision of the world that is modifiable and subject to transformation. The results serve to reinforce the idea of democracy as a permanent creative act (Alberti, 2018, p. 62), in which the socio-affective bond between citizens must be renewed within a collective conversation of trust that is, nevertheless, strongly anchored to the ties of proximity in community life. This represents a challenge in which psychological science can make a significant contribution.

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