



Vanishing Point: Italian Psychologists between Today's and Tomorrow's Uncertainty

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Abstract

The profession of psychology in Italy is undergoing a period of rapid expansion that simultaneously threatens its very nature as we have known it until quite recently. The main critical issues are: (1) the limited level of professional practice-oriented education provided by university programs; (2) the trivialization of the profession's public image due to a consumerist use of social media; (3) the proliferation of pseudo-psychological support services offered by unqualified practitioners, such as counselors and coaches; (4) the challenge posed by online psychological counseling, which has opened the market to platforms with largely uncontrollable effects on new and unprecedented modes of service delivery; (5) the challenge of artificial intelligence (AI) applied to psychological services. These critical issues are examined from a historical, legal, and deontological perspective.

Keywords: Academic education, professional practice, public image, Artificial Intelligence.

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*Anche nella narrazione di una vicenda, come negli
orologi (che infatti narrano il tempo), qualche ruota
deve girare all'indietro.*
Leonardo Sinisgalli¹

*Present shadows, foreshadowing
deeper shadows to come.*
Herman Melville²

Overture

Professional psychology in Italy has never been as popular as it is today. Paradoxically – and precisely for the same reasons underlying this popularity – it has also never been so close to the risk of self-extinction. We are facing the undesirable prospect of a slow and gradual implosion which, sooner than we might hope, could lead to the collapse and dissolution of the profession itself into the diffuse, undifferentiated landscape of various helping practices and promotional activities promising a vague and longed-for “well-being”, based on linguistic exchange and/or bodily training. (“Well-being”: a term perhaps never so ambiguously overused – both within and beyond psychology).

At least within the geographical and legal boundaries of Italy, five main critical issues currently pervade the profession in this phase of its now fifty-year-long development.

These five issues, which I will list in logical (though not necessarily hierarchical) order – since it is difficult to determine priority among them, given that we do not yet know how the situation will evolve, and what today appears secondary may tomorrow prove central – are deeply interconnected and interdependent. For each, I will outline several “minor” corollaries or derivative problems, again without assigning them any rigid hierarchy (as Sherlock Holmes would say, “It is of

¹ *Even in the narration of a story, as in the case of clocks (which, after all, narrate time), some wheels must turn backward – “Ruotismi”, in Horror vacui.* Rome: OET, 1945: p. 158. Leonardo Sinisgalli (1908-1981) has been an excellent Italian poet, essayist and mathematician.

² “Benito Cereno”, in *Piazza Tales*. New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856: third paragraph.

the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones”)³.

The critical issues are as follows:

(1) *The University System’s Persistent Difficulty in Providing Professional Practice-Oriented Education.* The Italian university system has long failed to equip future psychologists with genuinely professional, pragmatic, and operational training grounded in applied rather than purely theoretical concerns. The education of psychologists remains largely focused on the self-referential needs of academia rather than on a genuine need assessment of the profession in light of current and emerging market demands – demands that are transforming rapidly for all professions, not least under pressure from the European Union.

(2) *The Spread of a Simplified Public Image of Psychology on Social Media.* On social platforms, the public image of the psychological profession has increasingly conformed to trivialized semiotic models – foremost among them, the overused and somewhat ridiculous “influencer” paradigm. The linguistic and visual codes typical of social media are shaping professional self-expression in ways that flatten psychology into the language of common sense, forcing it to appear more as an agent of conformity than as a driver of social change.

(3) *The Proliferation of Pseudo-Psychological Services Offered by Unqualified Pseudo-Professionals.* Alongside these trends, we have witnessed an unchecked expansion of consulting and coaching services that blatantly and surreptitiously imitate psychological interventions without the requisite credentials. These are, more often than not, persuasive performers rather than legitimate helpers: “mental”, “life”, “love”, or “teen” coaches (self-proclaimed “mentors of future generations”), as well as motivational speakers, trainers, and “relational”, “existential”, “neuro-cognitive”, “socio-educational”, or “strategic” counselors – new variants emerging constantly. This legion of pseudo-professionals practices psychology unlawfully (and largely with

³ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, London: George Newnes, 1892.

impunity), in violation of Article 348 of the Italian Penal Code. Their online image, moreover, is often indistinguishable – in content and expression – from that presented by many licensed psychologists themselves (as noted in point 2), frequently lacking cultural depth and theoretical grounding, and relying instead on “techniques without theory”.

(4) *The Challenge of Online Psychological Assistance and Platform Mediation.* The rise of online psychological services – where digital platforms act as commissioners or brokers of interventions – poses new challenges to the clinical and psychotherapeutic relationship. Such platforms reframe those who seek help from patients into consumers, exert downward pressure on the market both economically and culturally, and induce professionals to compromise on both technical and ethical standards. The introduction of this commercial “third party” into the field has caught the professional community off guard; its intrusion circumvents the legal framework governing Italian professions⁴. Only now is its actual cultural, economic, and legal impact beginning to be recognized – yet public and institutional debate lags behind, while this new reality expands virtually unchecked.

(5) *The Emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence as a Formidable Competitor.* Generative AI has recently emerged as a powerful and unstoppable competitor in the domain of psychological assistance, often adopting modalities akin to those described in point (3). The debate on this topic – prompted by international, especially American, developments – has advanced rapidly in Italy as well, sometimes taking on apocalyptic overtones rather than maintaining critical distance, or, conversely, displaying excessive enthusiasm for the automation and acceleration of certain formal tasks.

Let us now examine these issues more closely.

⁴ Articles 2229 and following of the Civil Code.

Critical Issues (1) – The Problem of University Education

Immediately following the enactment of Law No. 56/1989 (Regulation of the Psychology Profession), a study group that named itself *Circolo del Cedro* – after the street in Trastevere, Rome, where its meetings were held (Circolo del Cedro, 1991, 1992) – highlighted how academic education in psychology appeared largely detached from the living reality of the profession. As noted in the group’s reflections, this structural deficiency could be traced back to the original design of the Psychology Degree Program established in 1971 within the Faculty of Education at *Sapienza* University of Rome. That institutional context, shaped by a prevailing Catholic pedagogical culture, was distant from the labor market and oriented either toward theoretical research or toward educational practices focused on childhood and adolescence.

The curriculum was never adequately updated, neither with the growing diffusion during the 1970s of private psychotherapeutic practice – and the related training promoted by emerging institutes targeting the first psychology graduates – nor with the establishment of the Italian National Health Service in 1978, which began to integrate psychologists into the public healthcare system⁵.

The first of these two developments ultimately created a paradoxical cultural obstacle to the development of university-level education in basic clinical and psychological intervention. In part, the issue had a distinctly economic dimension: many psychotherapy school directors – often also university professors – appeared more interested in instilling within students the conceptual premises for subsequent specialization in their own psychotherapeutic model than in enabling them to provide general psychological support upon graduation. Such support could have been grounded in principles and practices derived from general, social, and developmental psychology and from a connected conception of the clinical domain. This was precisely the approach advocated by Daniel Lagache (1969) and reinforced institutionally by Law No. 56/1989, which in Article 3 subordinated the practice of psychotherapy to specialized postgraduate training while simultaneously introducing a system of ministerial recognition for private institutes.

⁵ For an accurate historical reconstruction of this process, see Lombardo, 1990, 1994, 2025; Calvi & Lombardo, 1989; Lombardo & Romano, 2022.

Article 1 of Law No. 56/1989 did foresee that certain explicitly clinical “first-level” activities – prevention, diagnosis, habilitation–rehabilitation, and support – could be carried out by non-specialist psychologists. Nonetheless, at that time, Italian psychology seemed to begin and end with psychotherapy alone (Carli, 1995).

Carli’s critique was severe but accurate: he reproached university faculty for lacking the field experience necessary to construct professionalizing didactic models. However, he overlooked at least one significant innovation compared with earlier conceptions – namely, the establishment of the unified role of “psychologist”, which thereafter became the definitive standard framework for both training and professional practice in private and institutional contexts.

In any case, the university reforms of recent decades have done little to improve training – if anything, the opposite. Law No. 240/2010 (so called *Gelmini Reform*)⁶ introduced extensive changes to the university system, reorganizing governance and creating a new national Agency (ANVUR)⁷ tasked with assessing the quality of research and teaching. State funding was henceforth to be regulated by performance-based “merit”, and degree programs were to be consolidated for organizational and financial rationalization.

Fifteen years later, Italian universities continue to struggle with serious difficulties, many of which stem – at least in part – from that reform. The three most evident problems are: chronically insufficient funding; persistent disparities between the northern and southern regions in terms of resources and opportunities; and the slow, inadequate adaptation of education to the rapidly changing labor market.

ANVUR itself, designed to evaluate quality in higher education and research, has also been subject to significant criticism. Its procedures are often perceived as bureaucratic and excessively complex, requiring massive documentation and consuming substantial faculty time. Many of its criteria rely almost exclusively on quantitative indicators – such as publication and citation counts or graduate employment rates in formal jobs – even though in Italy temporary contracts remain the

⁶ Maria Stella Gelmini was the Italian Minister for Universities, Education, and Research in the Berlusconi Administration (2008-2011).

⁷ Acronym for the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research.

norm. A predominantly quantitative approach risks missing the actual quality of teaching and research, as well as the real preparedness of students, privileging easily measurable aspects that are not necessarily representative of true educational effectiveness. Moreover, ANVUR tends to apply uniform evaluation criteria to all universities, disregarding local, and disciplinary specificities.

Among the various fields, psychology education seems particularly affected by a chronic disconnection between academic training and the living reality of professional practice – a gap that ANVUR has neither investigated adequately nor addressed through any meaningful developmental perspective.

Nearly fifteen years after the *Gelmini* Reform, psychology students still study – if at all – only marginally, briefly, and in a few universities (typically at the initiative of professional boards) the fundamental principles of ethics and law governing professional practice. This omission is striking, since in all other degree programs – even those with limited legal content – students preparing for professions involving personal responsibility toward clients and society are expected to master the relevant normative frameworks.

This “historical” gap in psychologists’ basic education is especially troubling given that their professional activities – both in private practice and in public institutions – require a sound understanding of legal norms to make informed and responsible decisions with significant civil and criminal implications. These include not only accountability toward clients or patients, but also the complexity of interventions involving minors, incapacitated persons, or otherwise vulnerable or potentially dangerous individuals, for whom specific legal safeguards are required (Stampa, 2019).

Over the past decade, within the Ethical Committee of the Lazio Regional Board of Psychologists and in courses taught by external professionals at several universities, we have developed a structural model of professional ethics that conceptualizes it as an interface between the domains of ethics, law, and the theory and technique of psychological intervention – centered on the framework of *Demand Analysis* (Carli, 1987, 1993; Carli & Paniccia, 2003). In this model, the legal dimension represents the “hard kernel”, defining the essential objective knowledge without which the professional lacks key tools for competent practice. Ignorance of legal and ethical prescriptions –

for instance, concerning professional secrecy, the duty to report, or the rights of non-custodial parents regarding their children’s health and education – amounts to a level of unpreparedness incompatible with the exercise of the profession.

To illustrate: imagine a young architect entering the job market unaware of safety regulations at construction sites, environmental impact assessment procedures, or zoning and building permit requirements. Such a professional would not last a day. Schools of Architecture devote ample time to ensuring that students internalize the essential regulatory frameworks and operational concepts of their profession. The same is true of Medicine and Law, where future professionals are trained through continual emphasis on practical application, supervised simulations, and repeated exposure to real professional scenarios. In those faculties, it is no coincidence that professors are almost always active practitioners.

Not so in psychology, as I pointed out years ago in *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica* (Stampa, 2011) – a reflection that, today, appears even more alarming and instructive.

Indeed, within the Ethical Committees of our professional boards, we are often confronted with cases that astonish by the mixture of recklessness and ignorance displayed by colleagues accused of disciplinary violations. The most frequent involve conflicts among consultants in family law contexts, misuse of social media (see next Section), breaches of confidentiality due to misunderstanding of the “legitimate reason” (it. “giusta causa”) exemption under Article 622 of the Italian Penal Code, and various forms of malpractice arising from failure or unwillingness to maintain professional boundaries. Yet, the overwhelming majority of ethical infractions among psychologists are unintentional – stemming from misinformation, incompetence, carelessness, or disregard for binding norms whose significance is underestimated. University education should, above all, provide the foundation for a level of competence that would render such gross distortions of psychological and ethical practice not merely unacceptable, but unthinkable.

Critical Issues (2) – The Public Image of the Profession

The considerations outlined above lead directly to the question of how psychologists have begun to use social media. Let us start with language. The non-technical use of psychological terminology is increasingly becoming the standard among psychologists themselves, blending – without oversight – into the suggestive and promotional lexicon typical of social media platforms⁸.

A colleague specialized in sexology was summoned before a disciplinary board for her advertising on TikTok. One particularly illustrative case concerned a training package entitled “*Five Tricks to Stimulate the Penis*”. There is no prudishness regarding the topic; rather, she was asked why she had chosen the term “*tricks*” instead of “*methods*” or “*techniques*”, which are more neutral and more directly aligned with a scientifically rigorous approach. The colleague remained silent for a long time – much to her lawyer’s embarrassment – and finally replied: “Well, “*tricks*” is an expression typical of social media language...”. Exactly: of social media, not of psychology.

Indeed, technical terminology itself – having exited, as it were, through the front door of psychology to disperse into everyday language – has re-entered the profession through the back window, carrying with it the distorted meanings that common usage and media discourse have assigned to it over time. Expressions such as “*narcissism*”, “*empathy*”, “*trauma*”, “*panic*”, “*borderline*”, “*comfort zone*”, “*self-esteem*”, “*guilt*”, “*unconscious*” (now conflated with anything of which one is unaware), and “*stress*” (now conflated with anything tiring, annoying, or displeasing)⁹ – are used routinely by psychologists on social media not with their codified scientific meaning, but with the meaning presumed to be easily understood by even the least informed follower. Each of these terms thus ceases to function as a conceptual tool for understanding and defining mental states and becomes instead an allusion, a knowing wink, a “nudge-nudge” exchange in which both parties pretend to have understood one another. Clients – as is entirely normal – frequently invite us into this kind of collusive complicity: an evocative word, referencing supposedly “obvious” features of the

⁸ See Commissione Deontologica dell’Ordine degli Psicologi del Lazio (2024)

⁹ A significant contribution to this topic is Argentieri & Gosio (2015).

mind and thus of behavior, is used to elicit the sharing of an implied, unspoken meaning assumed to be mutually understood.

Consistent with this approach – marketed as “popularization”, “psychoeducation”, or in any case *customer oriented* – social media overflow with stereotyped offerings that are progressively transforming what were once called “patients”, “clients”, or “service users” into consumers of quick advice, self-help exercises, and “cash and carry” solutions to a wide range of emotional and relational issues (the most common being “How to Win Back Your Partner in *n* Steps”, complete with “The *n* Things You Must Not Do to Win Back Your Partner”). Psychological and clinical consultation, once “tailor-made”, has become “prêt-à-porter”.

A paradigmatic example from Instagram reads:

How to Be Happier with Positive Psychology. Learn the essential elements of positive psychology: take control of your happiness, change your moods at will, and master the flow state to achieve unprecedented results. All of this through exercises explained clearly and quickly. What you will learn: # How to change your emotional states more often and more rapidly, using your emotions as allies # How a simple exercise of a few minutes can put you almost instantly into a state of well-being # The little-known factors that undermine your happiness and serenity, and how to avoid them # How to master the flow state, a “powerful tool” that will allow you to achieve results never before attained # Much, much more...

Even granting a critical view of positive psychology – at least as originally conceived by M. E. P. Seligman (see Grasso & Stampa, 2006, 2008) – this presentation, offered by a psychologist who has clearly developed her own idiosyncratic simplified version of the approach, is truly disconcerting. Yet social media are saturated with similar proclamations, produced by licensed psychologists (again: authentic quotations, anonymized):

Enough with endless therapies! Center XY offers the only therapy capable of resolving all your psychological problems in just a few sessions.

XYZ Psychotherapy is the integrated method that I have developed over more than 15 years of experience, combining strategic brief therapy, positive psychology, well-being psychology, psychosomatics, and mind–body approaches with ancient holistic self-healing practices to enhance therapeutic

effectiveness and guarantee concrete, lasting results. Unlike other approaches, it allows you to overcome anxiety, stress, and difficulties in a short time (without long therapies and without medication), thanks to immediately effective strategies, a focus on the here-and-now, and a wide selection of integrated techniques.

My approach is highly pragmatic and problem-oriented, so I do not focus on analyzing the past; instead, I try to understand the person's resources in order to help them solve their problem concretely and quickly. To this end I also assign homework to speed up the process: for example, for someone with self-esteem issues, I may prescribe what I like to call the 'strengths journal' so that the person can focus on their strong points and thus develop on more solid foundations. Daily journaling greatly accelerates the process and makes the session last not fifty minutes but an entire week: in this way, the person remains engaged in their growth even outside the session, thus enhancing the intervention [...].

Urgency – alongside the oversimplification of psychological processes – has become a semiotic marker reproduced by social media, a discursive feature once absent from psychological culture, which traditionally grounded its identity in the defense of the time necessary to activate and develop processes of change that are not superficial but authentic precisely because they are deep and rooted in an epistemology of complexity. Only such an epistemology is capable of addressing the challenges inherent in intervening in mental life. Acceleration, therefore, becomes a new form of social alienation, as the philosopher and sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2015) has argued.

Social media may be the latest expression of the major semiotic revolution that began in the 1960s–70s with the expansion of mass communications, in which Jean Baudrillard prophetically saw the end of the social, marked by the implosion of meaning under the uncontrolled overload of information. What power once concealed through secrecy was now annulled through the accumulation of undecidable data, giving rise to what would later be called “post-truth”.

Retaining this nihilistic potential, social media have completed that revolution by reversing its meaning and direction: the sense once lost in the top/down strategic falsification of centralized communication networks is today lost in the infinite bottom/up dissemination of posts and images circulating by the billions each instant, rendering impossible any discrimination between true and false, plausible and

implausible, fantasy and reality. The semiotic signature of the contemporary world has become irreducibly exhibitionistic: compulsively showing everyone – and no one – the most trivial events of daily life has become the religion of our time, and incessantly checking one’s smartphone in search of markers of belonging to a virtual community has become a daily ritual.

How could this language fail to shape the public image of the profession, once psychologists began using social media to enter the marketplace?

Already several years ago (e.g., Levahot *et al.*, 2010; Taylor *et al.*, 2010), U.S. studies showed that the vast majority of psychologists (77%) and psychology trainees (81%) used social media without distinguishing between personal and professional profiles, paying little attention to the possibility that clients might gain access to strictly private information, potentially at odds with the theoretical and technical requirements of clinical practice.

There is no doubt that this “popular”, somewhat *cheap* mode of professional functioning has brought significant financial benefits to Italian psychologists. Data from ENPAP, the national social security entity for psychologists, concerning the dramatic period marked by COVID-19 (2020-2022) and the rapid expansion of online psychological services, show striking increases in the average income of registered professionals; this will be discussed further in section (4). Yet something more must be said about psychologists’ use of social media.

The public image of the profession is shaped in social consciousness, in tradition, and consequently in the Ethical Code, through the concepts of *decorum* and *dignity*. These are constructs that, on the one hand, broadly apply to all professions, and on the other hand possess specific modes of expression depending on the profession in question; moreover, they are subject to change – sometimes radical – over time. In the context considered here, the crucial factor is the culture of social media, whose language literally produces new modes of representing psychology, inevitably generating illusory expectations among the public and establishing a novel and implausible social mandate for the discipline (Grasso & Stampa, 2014).

Although “*decorum*” and “*dignity*” are often presented in Italian dictionaries as near-synonyms, it is useful here to emphasize their

distinction and complementarity, rather than their partial – if predictable – overlap.

In the use of the term *decorum*, the aesthetic dimension must be highlighted, referring to how one's conduct is perceived by others. In the use of *dignity*, the emphasis shifts to a more substantive dimension, involving the rights and duties of the person. Consider the two contexts in which it appears in the Italian Constitution: Article 3 (“All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law...”) and Article 36 (“Workers have the right to remuneration proportionate to the quantity and quality of their work and in any case sufficient to ensure a free and dignified existence for themselves and their families”).

In the social media environment, the dimension of appearance seems to have entirely absorbed that of substance, to the detriment of demonstrable professional competence grounded in qualified experience, scientific publications, and language befitting the seriousness of the intellectual and ethical responsibilities intrinsic to professional work – and all the more so to healthcare professions. So much so that regulations governing publicly available information provided by healthcare professionals prohibit any “promotional” and/or “suggestive” characterization – prohibitions that are unrealistic and thus entirely ineffective.

Yet in a context where appearance is everything, aesthetics become subsumed under ethics: *decorum in appearance* becomes the sole rule safeguarding the profession's public image. Here one might recall the second and third of the twelve shades of meaning assigned to “*decoro*” in Battaglia's *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (1966): «conduct that ensures the esteem and respect of others; a sense and awareness of what is fitting»; and «behavior inspired by correctness, discipline, respect, courtesy, good breeding, and education». It is better, in this context, to remain silent about the ways in which psychologists sometimes interact publicly in social media comment threads, exchanging harsh jokes, insults, and sarcastic remarks with users, followers, and the inevitable haters and trolls.

To conclude this brief analysis, something may be added regarding “*dignity*” as it pertains to professions and to psychology in particular.

In Battaglia (1966), the most relevant meaning is the following:

The habitual and consistently upheld condition of moral honor and nobility, arising from a person's intrinsic and essential qualities, grounded in their behavior and bearing in social relations, their merits and standing; and, at the same time, the respect that such ethical exemplarity demands and elicits in others.

De Mauro's *Grande dizionario dell'uso* (2000) follows a similar line, whereas the more recent Simone dictionary (2010) retains only one definition:

The condition of moral nobility deriving from a person's standing and qualities, and the respect owed to them for such a condition and which they must also maintain toward themselves.

How these concepts may translate into appropriate professional conduct can only be entrusted to principles of self-regulation, which every professional has both the duty and the interest to cultivate in order to operate correctly. As has been observed:

From a linguistic standpoint, the vagueness that blurs the boundaries of meaning is not a limitation but a resource. It is what enables words to be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to the changing and ever-new needs for meaning within a human community. It is up to speakers not to shy away from dialogue so that words may – where necessary – be filled with content that is as widely shared and shareable as possible (Torchia, 2019).

As will be seen shortly, this collapse of competence models in the social media system – and the concurrent erosion of established standards of “*decorum*” and “*dignity*” in the psychological profession – is, together with the widespread lack of practical preparation (for which responsibility lies squarely with university training), a significant factor in the proliferation of various forms of unauthorized professional practice.

Critical Issue (3) – The Proliferation of the Unlawful Practice of Psychology

Let us take another step forward, keeping in mind the points examined thus far. Social media are teeming with offers addressing

problems that are typically psychological in nature, originating from individuals who are not psychologists. A few examples from Instagram:

Work-related anxiety? Dissolve any negative emotion in just 20 minutes. Discover the “Empty the Cup” method, based on a 1,500-year-old Tibetan practice!

“I want to change my life and the lives of others!”. Become a Mental Coach – learn the only practical course based on 27 strategic pillars that will teach you how to be a Mental Coach and earn money by helping others”. Control your emotions, build your happiness! Transform your fears and uncertainties into pillars of strength, and navigate toward inner harmony.

Discover the RebirthinLove® method to become a Spiritual Coach & Mentor [...] You will learn how to integrate RebirthinLove® tools into your current work; how to develop your holistic practice to help an increasing number of people; and how to live in accordance with your Soul and fulfill your life purpose.

Enough with the quotations: in the end, they are all the same, and any one of them would suffice.

What matters for the present analysis is that (a) psychologists’ decades-long disinterest in “generalist” psychological interventions and their excessive – if not exclusive – focus on specialization in psychotherapy; (b) the complete cultural and strategic disengagement of professional Boards until roughly a decade ago; and (c) today, psychologists’ limited self-regulation in their own social-media communication – all of this has enabled the progressive occupation of vast market spaces by individuals who, without any training subject to public oversight, respond in the ways exemplified above to an emerging demand for psychological interventions. This demand is now recognized as far more widespread than was estimated even just a few years ago (a shift accelerated, of course, by the pandemic).

We have referred to “public oversight”, which in Italy is exercised by the professional Regulatory Bodies, the public boards through which professions are organized and regulated. Their establishment is consistent with Article 33(5) of the Constitution, which requires passing a State Examination for access to what are properly defined as professional activities. And there is a reason the Constitution mandates a State Examination: the exercise of a profession entails a high degree

of autonomy and discretion in choosing methods and approaches to clients' problems. It therefore requires an equally high degree of responsibility – captured in the well-known expression “*science and conscience*” – encompassing both the technical and ethical dimensions of competence and performance.

It is essential to recall that Article 1176 of the Civil Code establishes that a professional service entails an obligation of diligence, not of outcome (see Posteraro, 2019). Unlike merchants, artisans, or producers of goods, professionals must be remunerated even when the result is not satisfactory to the client or service recipient. This makes their duty to provide technical and ethical competence beyond any conceivable doubt – and to deliver a maximally responsible performance – even more stringent.

However, the cultural landscape is rapidly changing, and certainly not in ways that protect the professions. Indeed, the most recent legislative trend has been toward assimilating them to other forms of service provision, for which an obligation of results is not taboo but the rule.

This is one of those cases in which European legislation – binding on the Italian legal system – is misaligned with the Constitution of the Italian Republic. And because the Constitution cannot be easily amended, the Legislature has begun to improvise, introducing innovations surreptitiously, so as not to violate constitutional principles too visibly. Law 4/2013 is the clearest example: it created, within the Ministry of Economic Development, a registry of “professions” not organized in public professional regulatory bodies. This is effectively equivalent to saying that, lacking a professional regulatory body, access does not require passing a State Examination – and thus they should not even be called “professions”. It is a simple syllogism: if, in order to practise a profession, one is required to have passed a State Examination (as indeed provided for by the Constitution of the Italian Republic), then the activity carried out by someone who has not passed such an examination cannot be regarded as a profession.

The UNI standardization/certification body is tasked with “legitimizing” the private Associations representing these pseudo-professions through highly questionable procedures – particularly in relation to market-opening attempts by the various categories of counselors, coaches, mentors, and similar figures (see Conte & Stampa, 2021).

Thus, in defending the professions that they formally organize and

protect, the Boards are “fighting uphill”, forced to contend with a law that – unless declared unconstitutional – remains fully in force. The spirit of the trend emerging within the European Union is well represented in its Directives (notably Directive 2006/123/EC) and Recommendations, which promote easier access for young people to the labor market, including by shortening training periods, liberalizing regulated professions, and gradually transforming them into something akin to “one-person companies”, facilitated by reduced regulatory constraints in the name of free competition.

Law 4/2013 is the lever through which private associations of counselors, coaches, mentors, and similar figures – often through distorted interpretations – claim to have obtained public recognition, which, through a kind of “halo effect”, would extend from the association to its individual members.

Should we add that a large portion of the training of counselors, coaches, mentors, and similar figures is provided primarily by psychologists? Neither disciplinary actions nor the few (and often mitigated) court rulings obtained by the Boards have so far deterred them: civil sanctions against instigators and trainers have frequently been reduced or overturned on appeal; criminal prosecutions rarely succeed because the unlawful practice of psychology is difficult to prove unequivocally. When things go well, offenders are convicted of fraud – not of the unlawful practice of a profession.

In short, we are confronted with a permanent “state of war” – cultural, commercial, and judicial – in which counselors, coaches, mentors, and the like can rely on the active complicity of many who should, instead, be standing on the opposite side of the barricade. But how can the psychological profession hope to prevail in this conflict when it so often presents itself publicly using the same style, the same keywords, and the same clownish demeanor as its opponents?

Critical Issue (4) – The Challenge of Online Counseling

The next two sections will be brief, limiting themselves to presenting the final critical factors we intend to examine – factors associated with the most recent developments in the profession, driven by a rapidly and continuously evolving technological landscape.

The 2020–2022 pandemic enhanced and widespread online psychological consulting practice, which, until 2020, had often been viewed with skepticism and discouraged, despite its great usefulness in specific situations: Italians living abroad; individuals unable to leave their homes due to disability or because of the very psychological problems for which they were seeking help; and residents of marginal areas poorly connected to the cities where psychologists' offices are located. Since the 2020–2021 pandemic, psychologists increasingly work from their homes or studios via Zoom, Google Meet, or other videoconferencing platforms, offering forms of counseling that are progressively de-localized and “dematerialized”.

Not all clients/patients accept this modality willingly, yet its convenience is being increasingly appreciated, especially in large metropolitan areas where, until only a few years ago, the choice of a psychological consultant was based on geographic proximity. Indeed, both professional Boards and online service-presentation systems provided information on the availability of psychological services through Google Maps: the long-imagined but never formally instituted “neighborhood psychologist” effectively emerged in the same topographical maps used for locating restaurants, auto repair shops, or dance schools.

Accustomed – due to the pandemic – to remote working, individuals quickly came to accept the idea of meeting virtually with psychologists whose assistance they felt they needed. Gradually, problems that initially appeared serious and unsolvable have been overcome: the often poor quality of Internet connections; the fact that clients/patients may not be alone at home and may feel the symbolic, if not concrete, influence of the physical presence of relatives or cohabitants (it is not uncommon for patients to conduct their sessions from inside their cars, an extension of the home already noted by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, 1957); and the emerging tendency not to keep a fixed day and time for sessions, but to adopt an increasingly “flexible setting” at least with regard to strictly practical aspects – though such flexibility inevitably affects emotional dimensions as well.

At this point, everything has changed. In the past, finding potential clients/patients in one's neighborhood required primitive forms of advertising, such as leaving business cards on the balcony of a pharmacy or in the waiting room of a general practitioner. Now, digital

marketing expands with all its “capture” tactics, largely based on social media – with all the characteristics examined in the previous two sections.

But to this already powerful reinforcement of new, and often questionable, forms of online self-presentation and self-promotion by psychologists, another element was soon added: platforms.

Thousands of psychologists have entered – and continue entering – these systems for the recruitment and distribution of first-level clinical assistance and online psychotherapy.¹⁰ These systems operate through approaches heavily shaped by a commercial mentality, corresponding to innovative practices that once again show little regard for the decorum and dignity of the profession, and for its cultural differentiation from the unlawful imitations discussed in the previous section.

Clients/patients are assigned according to a strict criterion: they must reside in cities different from those of the consulting psychologist, so as to prevent the possibility of being redirected – at least physically – into the psychologist’s private office. Initial consultations are free of charge, and psychologists are instructed to “hook” and subsequently “retain” the client/patient. Fees are modest (currently around €50, of which 30% goes to the platform; the consultant receives roughly €35 gross per session), but compensated by a high volume of working hours. This model can allow – especially for younger professionals – an annual gross income of €50,000–60,000, assuming 6–8 hours of actual work per day, 24–26 days per month, for approximately 10 months per year. At least in theory: many hours, particularly at the beginning, are devoted to free consultations, and – according to accounts we have received – the turnover of clients/patients is rapid. Over time, however, the situation stabilizes, and a panel of roughly thirty regularly paying clients becomes relatively secure. Disengaging from the platform is costly: a fee of several hundred euros must be paid for each client/patient under care at the moment of withdrawal.

But what is the substantive nature of the professional engagement between psychologists and these platforms? On the surface, and from

¹⁰ The UnoBravo platform alone reported on Instagram, in mid-October 2025, “over 8,500 practitioners” – about one thousand more than in the same period of the previous year – “5 million online sessions delivered”, “over 400,000 people supported”, and “more than 20 psychotherapeutic orientations’ offered”.

a civil-law perspective, the arrangement appears to be a freelance contract. In reality, it is a form of quasi-subordinate labor disguised as self-employment, in which the employer is a dominant contracting party who strongly constrains thousands of weaker contractors, effectively placing them in a position of dependency.

There is no doubt that these platforms constitute a colossal business. It is enough to note that UnoBravo, emerging from nothing, reached a valuation of several tens of millions of euros in just four years. And there is no doubt that they provide, in very short timeframes, work opportunities for psychologists who would otherwise take years to achieve comparable levels of income. But equally, there is no doubt that their market approach is bold and entirely counter to the requirement that the psychological profession present itself to the public in ways aligned with legal and ethical mandates – not to mention the collective reputational damage that favors the spread of unlawful practice through the erosion of semiotic differentiation.

But what is about to happen next? We briefly address this (for now, it is impossible to do more) in the following section

Critical Issue (5) – The Challenge of Generative Artificial Intelligence

For some time now, several platforms have begun to impose a new requirement on the psychologists they employ – or rather, not an active requirement but a passive one. This consists in the remote recording of sessions through software installed and linked to the practitioner’s account on the platform, with the stated (and patently implausible) purpose of monitoring their work in order to assess its quality and effectiveness. As if such a form of surveillance did not constitute a substantial constraint on psychologists’ freedom to operate under conditions “that do not compromise their professional autonomy [...] in the choice of methods, techniques, and psychological tools, as well as in their use”, as stipulated in Article 6 of the Ethical Code of Italian Psychologists. And as if it did not also represent a significant constraint on the assisted person: who among us, once aware of being recorded, speaks with the same calm, spontaneity, and fluency as when certain that no recording is taking place?

Platform managers are increasingly explicit in acknowledging that these recordings are intended to be processed with AI software. How could one doubt that the true objective is to train AI systems to provide assistance first alongside, and later in place of, human psychologists?

In some countries, AI-based “psychological support” systems are already circulating online via mobile apps. Wysa, Woebot, and Rep-lika are chatbots that offer interactive “conversations” (if an exchange between a human communicating lived experience and a machine computing signifier occurrences and associations can meaningfully be called a “conversation” in the cultural sense traditionally assigned to the term) for the purpose of emotional support. A rapidly expanding literature highlights both the positive potential of such chatbots for anxiety–depression symptomatology (particularly short-term remis-sion of mild symptoms) and their limitations over time (follow-up pe-riods are inevitably too short), as well as possible risks (semantic mis-understandings, and the induction or reinforcement of self-harming behaviors). Overall, however, research remains unreliable due to small sample sizes, uncertain methodology, and – most critically – the biases produced by the vested interests of chatbot developers conducting out-come studies on their own products.

While some recent cross-sectional studies in the anglophone area may be considered more stimulating – e.g., Sweeney *et al.* (2021); Tulk Jesso *et al.* (2022); Ayers (2023); Li, Theng & Fu (2023); Ku-ehn (2023); APA Member Services (2024); Thakkar, Gupta & De Sousa (2024); Feng *et al.* (2025); Evans (2025) – Italian research on the topic remains largely undeveloped. Meanwhile, the latest report by Save The Children Italia (2025) indicates that 92.5% of adoles-cents aged 15–19 use AI tools (nearly double the proportion of adults, at 46.7%). Of these adolescents, 41.8% (from a national sam-ple of 800 individuals aged 15–19, compared with an additional rep-resentative sample of the Italian population aged 18–74, based on 1,359 interviews) report having turned to AI chatbots for help when they “felt sad, lonely, or anxious”; more than 42% sought advice on important decisions concerning romantic relationships, school diffi-culties, or family issues. Such figures signal an objective form of “professional competition” for psychologists, who would do well to reflect on them and identify potential pathways for use, integration, or differentiation.

The ethical and legal aspects of this issue, in the context of Italian professional psychology, also merit attention.

To begin with, there is still no regulatory framework applicable to the use of AI as a tool for psychological support. Compliance with Law 56/89, which governs psychological activities in Italy, implies that an assistance chatbot cannot be considered anything other than a self-help tool entirely detached from professional responsibility. A psychologist could not simply design and release such a chatbot on the market, as Article 3(4) of the Code of Ethics holds them responsible for their professional actions and their “predictable direct consequences”. Any negative effects on a chatbot user’s psychological balance, for which a causal link with the “conversations” could be demonstrated, would be immediately attributable to the professional who created it. Such a designer would, moreover, have deliberately – and with a remarkable degree of imprudence, if also under the weight of inevitability – renounced any control over the interaction between the software they built and its end-users.

The issue of collecting, protecting, processing, and storing sensitive data provided by assisted persons whenever a professional employs AI tools in their activity is the subject of intense debate, though its boundaries remain unclear. Who can guarantee, for the professional even before the client, adequate control over this process? An AI system could make any lawful or unlawful use of this mass of information without anyone becoming aware of it. The recent emerging regulations addressing these matters remain confused and far from offering even minimal guarantees¹¹. As is evident, we are at an early stage, and no

¹¹ Law No. 132/25, Scientific Research and Experimentation in the Development of Artificial Intelligence Systems in the Healthcare Sector, Article 8: “(1) The processing of data, including personal data, carried out by public and private non-profit entities, by the Scientific Institutes for Research, Hospitalisation and Healthcare (IRCCS) [...] as well as by private entities operating in the healthcare sector within research projects in which public and private non-profit entities or IRCCS participate, for the purposes of scientific research and experimentation in the development of artificial intelligence systems for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases, the development of pharmaceuticals, therapies and rehabilitative technologies, the creation of medical devices – including prostheses and interfaces between the body and assistive instruments supporting the patient’s condition – public health, personal safety, health and healthcare security, as well as the study of human physiology, biomechanics and biology, including in non-healthcare contexts, insofar as

one is prepared to make predictions even five years ahead. Nonetheless, AI is already far more advanced than the profession's current capacity to govern the research, implementation, and development processes of these emerging forms of consultation – which will undoubtedly spread in our context sooner than we realize their actual implications.

necessary for the establishment and use of databases and foundational models, are declared to be of significant public interest pursuant to Articles 32 and 33 of the Constitution and in compliance with Article 9(2)(g) of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016. (2) For the same purposes, without prejudice to the obligation to provide information to the data subject – which may also be fulfilled through a general notice made available on the data controller's website – and without requiring any further consent from the data subject where originally mandated by law, the secondary use of personal data stripped of direct identifying elements, including data belonging to the categories referred to in Article 9 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, is always authorised for the entities referred to in paragraph 1, except in cases where knowledge of the identity of the data subjects is unavoidable or necessary for the protection of their health. (3) In the areas set out in paragraph 1, or for the purposes referred to in Article 2-sexies, paragraph 2, letter (v), of the Personal Data Protection Code (Legislative Decree No. 196 of 30 June 2003), the processing of personal data – including data belonging to the special categories referred to in Article 9(1) of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 – for the purposes of anonymisation, pseudonymisation or synthesis is always permitted, subject to prior information being provided to the data subject pursuant to Article 13 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679. Such processing is also permitted when carried out for the study and research on athletic gestures, movements and performance in sport in all its forms, in accordance with the general principles set out in this Law and with due regard for the economic exploitation rights pertaining to competitive sporting activities held by their organisers. (4) The National Agency for Regional Healthcare Services (AGENAS), having obtained the opinion of the Data Protection Authority and taking into account international standards as well as the state of the art and of technology, may establish and update guidelines for procedures relating to the anonymisation of personal data referred to in paragraph 3 and for the creation of synthetic data, including with respect to different data categories and processing purposes. (5) The data processing activities referred to in paragraphs 1 and 2 must be notified to the Data Protection Authority, indicating all information required under Articles 24, 25, 32 and 35 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, as well as expressly indicating, where applicable, any entities designated pursuant to Article 28 of the same Regulation. Such processing may commence thirty days after the aforementioned notification, provided that no blocking order has been issued by the Data Protection Authority. (6) The investigative, prohibitory and sanctioning powers of the Data Protection Authority remain unaffected". As is evident, this legislative effort has resulted in provisions that are exceeding complex both to interpret and to apply.

It is possible that AI-based psychological support systems will absorb the multitude of proposals – whether originating from psychologists or from counselors, coaches, mentors, and similar practitioners – based on “tips”, advice, exercises, guided autosuggestion, and the like. This seems, in fact, to be the prevailing trend in the distortion of psychology that multiple social actors are currently driving. While the *New York Times* publishes an extensive and alarmed feature titled “*Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good*,”¹² in Italy a former government minister launches a new psychological assistance platform, “*Stop Thinking*”¹³ aligning with the cultural trajectory of a well-known psychiatrist, author of best-selling works such as *Love and Don’t Think* (Morelli, 2018) and *Close Your Eyes and Don’t Think* (Morelli, 2024). Non-thinking thus appears to be the new frontier of a paradoxical anti-psychological psychology that conforms to the strategic designs of multinational AI corporations – converging with them on economic grounds that are quite clear, yet culturally and politically still opaque. If psychology – particularly clinical psychology – grounded in the development of reflective capacity has deep democratic ideological roots in twentieth-century authors (Stampa, 1993), the promotion of non-thinking clearly signals a turn toward an authoritarian drift in the management of public life that, originating in the United States, is also spreading through Europe, propelled by AI systems. A population of non-thinkers is an ideal breeding ground for dictatorships (Pennella, 2019), and the contemporary Western landscape does not lack initiatives more or less overtly aligned with such aims.

Setting aside this broader historical context, let us return to the living reality of our profession. It is conceivable that this paradoxical “anti-psychological psychology” – not exactly the death of psychology, but rather a “zombie-psychology”, seeming a living dead – may partially replace human psychologists on online platforms.

We may be facing an epochal confrontation within psychology. In this context, there may also emerge a renewed and revitalized

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/28/opinion/smartphones-literacy-inequality-democracy.html>, July, 28, 2025.

¹³ Cfr. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=721427251031384. Danilo Toninelli was ministry for Infrastructure and Transport 2018-19, Conte Administration

psychology grounded in the epistemology of complexity and in a serious capacity to explore mental life, cultivated through the rigorous training of a new generation of professionals equipped with a substantive psycho-theoretical culture rather than empty techniques devoid of theory.

For this to occur, however, hoping is not sufficient. Universities, professional Orders, and scientific and professional associations must commit themselves actively to this work.

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