

RIVISTA DI PSICOLOGIA CLINICA

THE ITALIAN JOURNAL OF
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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RIVISTA DI PSICOLOGIA CLINICA

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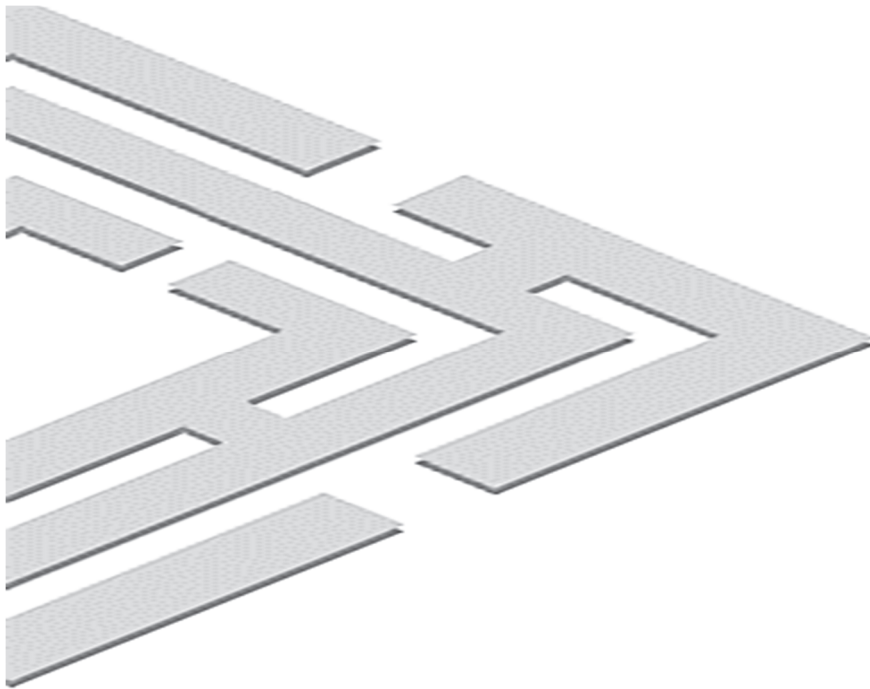
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Psychology profession, clinical psychology, psychotherapy. Specificities and boundaries

Gianluca Castelnuovo^{*}, Santo Di Nuovo^{**},
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Abstract

In the Italian context, the psychology profession is regulated by a particular legal framework, which establishes that (a) a set of expert functions (e.g., psychological diagnosis, rehabilitation) are exclusively reserved to the psychology profession (b) psychotherapy is defined a second-order function reserved to psychologists (and practitioners) having a 4-year specialization after the master degree in psychology. This specific institutional framework raises the necessity of a threefold differentiation. First, the need to set clear scientific boundaries between professional psychology and other non-psychological forms of professional/expert practice (e.g., counselor, mental coach). Second, the need to clarify the specificity of the psychology practices operating in the clinical field with respect to those operating in other fields of intervention (e.g., school, community). Third, the need to model the

^{*} Department of Psychology. Università Cattolica, Milano (Italy).

^{**} Department of Educational Sciences. University of Catania (Italy).

^{***} Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies. Sapienza University of Rome (Italy).

^{****} Department of Psychology. University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy).

^{*****} Department of Human and Social Sciences. University of Salento (Italy).

Corresponding Author: Santo Di Nuovo, Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione, Via Biblioteca 4 – Catania 95124 (Italy). Email: s.dinuovo@unict.it

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articulation between the clinical psychologist and the psychotherapist. The paper provides a model to operate such a differentiation. Though motivated by and focused on the peculiarity of the Italian context, the current paper offers considerations that may transcend that context and be of general interest.

Keywords: Psychology profession, clinical psychology, psychotherapy.

Introduction

The psychology profession operates over a very broad range of phenomena and issues, in response to many forms of demands made by a plurality of social actors – e.g., individuals, groups, companies, institutions. In most – if not all – of the many domains of intervention where the psychology profession is active, other professions and expert functions are present, sometimes as complementary resources, sometimes as overlapping and competitive suppliers (e.g., social workers, trainers, human resource managers).

It is therefore important to have a clear definition of specificities and boundaries between the different professional and expert functions as well as between the functional profiles and levels inside the psychological profession. This paper is meant as a contribution in this direction. The document reports the conclusions reached by the working group created by the authors, in response to the request of the National Council of Italian Psychologists which asked for a scientific-technical opinion, as to how to “*establish and define the activities of prevention, habilitation, rehabilitation and support in goals, methodology, procedures and actions in psychology with particular attention to the clinical setting, and regarding the same dimensions in psychotherapy*”.

Thus, the paper focuses on the Italian context, where the psychology profession is regulated by its own particular legal framework, which establishes that (a) a set of expert functions (e.g., psychological diagnosis, rehabilitation) are exclusively reserved to the psychology profession, and (b) psychotherapy is defined a second-order function reserved to psychologists (and practitioners) having a 4-year specialization after the master degree in psychology. This specific institutional framework raises the necessity of a threefold differentiation. First, the

need to set clear scientific boundaries between professional psychology and other non-psychological forms of professional/expert practice (e.g., counselor, mental coach, clinical pedagogue, clinical sociologist, philosophical counselor, etc.). Second, the need to clarify the specificity of the psychology practices operating in the clinical field with respect to those operating in other fields of intervention (e.g., school, community, legal contexts, sport, marketing). Third, the need to model the articulation between the basic and specialist profiles of professional practice in the clinical field – namely between the domain of competence of the clinical psychologist (where a Master’s degree is the level of education required to practice) and that of the psychotherapist (where a 4-year specialization is the requirement for practicing).

Though motivated by and focused on the peculiarity of the Italian context, the current paper offers considerations that may transcend that context and be of general interest. Our aim is to foster debate on the specificity of the psychology profession – including psychotherapy – and on concepts and methods by means of which psychology practices can regulate their dynamic intertwinement, both among themselves as well as with other expert functions.

The paper is broken down into 3 parts. As a preliminary stage, the Italian institutional scenario is outlined. Then, the specificity of clinical psychology practice is discussed. Finally, the distinction between clinical psychology and psychotherapy is addressed.

Scenario

Methodological premise

The clarification of the psychology and psychotherapy boundaries should be based on the idea that it should serve the interested parties (professionals, Orders, institutional agencies) to regulate professional praxis in a public and reliable manner. It is therefore necessary that the distinctions between psychology, the clinical field and psychotherapy, besides being valid from a theoretical-empirical standpoint, should be applicable to concrete cases – i.e., to answer questions such as: does professional conduct *x*, by reason of its ostensible and documentable characteristics *a*, *b*, *c*, fall within the functions that the law considers

to be the exclusive domain of the psychologist? Does it concern the clinical scope of that professional's act? Is it an act that falls within those that the law reserves for the psychotherapist?

Thus, it is not enough to make theoretically grounded conceptual distinctions; it is also necessary that such distinctions be anchored in objectifiable findings, reference to which puts the actors involved in a position to interpret and classify concrete cases. Incidentally, such anchoring becomes difficult to achieve due to the contingent nature of professional action – that is, to the fact that the meaning of the practitioner's action does not reside exclusively in the operations that substantiate it (e.g., conducting an interview, administering a test) but in how these operations interact and combine with each other within and according to the context determined by the user's request and the organizational and institutional conditions of the intervention.

Normative context

Consideration of the boundaries and structure of the psychological profession must necessarily take into account the specificity of the normative scenario governing the profession in Italy. Law 56/1989 establishes the professional figure of the psychologist, without further differentiation. In Italy, therefore, the psychologist is a single professional figure, qualified to practise in any field of intervention, to deal with any problem/requirement (except for psychotherapy, the practice of which is tied to the achievement of the level of specialized training).

The lack of normative differentiation of the professional figure reflects the conception (and practice) of the profession prevalent in the Italian context at the time Law 56/1989 was formulated. At that time the psychological profession was seen as substantiated by intervention methods and techniques of general applicability, transversal to the different fields of intervention.

The Profession's functional profile

Nowadays it should be recognized that while the domain-general dimension of the psychologist's functional profile is an inherent characteristic of the profession, the latter is not limited to that. In fact, the psychological profession is also qualified by two other, domain-specific dimensions necessary for the modulation/tailoring of professional action because of the context/phenomena/problems addressed:

- *sectoral technical skills* – relating to the specificity of the problems/phenomena on which one is intervening – for example: a motivational interview and a psychodiagnostic assessment interview share methodological and technical aspects (e.g., models for interpreting the question) but require different conducting criteria, due to the context in which and according to which they are exercised (purposes, organizational conditions);
- *interface skills* – relating to knowledge of the organizational-institutional frameworks of intervention (e.g., norms, standards, lines of development, organizational models and dynamics, timelines) – for example: a psychologist who intends to work in the legal context needs to know the qualifying standards of expert witness texts, the procedures in which they are embedded, the way they are interpreted and used by commissioners, and the implications potentially associated with them.

It can be reasonably assumed that, since the late 1980s, rather than the general component, the role of domain-specific skills within the psychology function has increased – and continues to increase – because of the progressive differentiation of social, institutional and production systems.

From a complementary standpoint, it is worth noting that the relevance of domain-specific competencies is both reflected and further nurtured by the structure of undergraduate training in psychology. Most psychology degree courses share the structure that combines a generalist phase (three-year segment) and a sectoral differentiation phase (master's segment). Almost all of Italy's master's degree courses are anchored to a domain of intervention (health, clinical, work, education, community), thus aiming primarily at the promotion of domain-specific knowledge and skills.

Implications

The two contextual elements recalled above are dialectically related to each other. On the one hand, the norm delineates the profession of the psychologist as a *unicum*; on the other hand, under the impetus of the progressive differentiation of social systems, the psychological profession (with the system of academic training at its base) is becoming increasingly sectorialized. Both elements are structural data that cannot be ignored or eliminated and therefore need to be brought back to synthesis.

To do so, it is useful to enhance the distinction between the two levels of the normative system that regulates the psychological profession – the statutory provision (56/89) and the deontological norm. The terms of this distinction are specified below.

- a) The qualified psychologist has legitimacy to work in any field of intervention. This means that “clinical psychologist” is a concept which is void of a legal profile: only “psychologist” exists under Italian law, without further specification. Rather than clinical psychologist, it is therefore appropriate to refer to *clinical psychology* (as well as school psychology, legal psychology, sport psychology, tourism psychology), meaning by this term a specific sectorial field of practice of the psychology profession. In short, there is not the clinical psychologist but the psychologist working in the field of clinical psychology.
- b) The specification of the field of operation is relevant, however, because of the combination of the deontological norm and the progressive sectorial differentiation of the profession. The deontological norm binds the professional psychologist to work exclusively within the areas for which he or she has the necessary skills. On the other hand, as mentioned above, sectorial differentiation means that an (increasingly) significant share of skills are domain-specific. Consequently, deontology makes the differences between domains of intervention salient because of the different functional profiles of competence associated with them.

From this standpoint, the psychology profession is configured similarly to the medical profession, differing from the engineering profession. In fact, we know that the law does not preclude the qualified physician from intervening in any kind of health-related problem; the

physician, however, is subject to the deontological requirement to operate “in science and conscience”, that is, exclusively within the perimeter defined by the skills he or she has. In contrast, the engineer’s license is not general, but sectorial: each engineer, by virtue of the class of degree he or she has acquired, qualifies in a field of practice. Sectorization is thus, in this case, established at the level of law, rather than deontologically.

In short, broadening the reasoning to the deontological norm leads to the conclusion that it is useful to supplement the two “classical” differentiations – psychological profession vs. non-psychological practice and non-specialist psychological practice vs. psychotherapy – with a third “horizontal” differentiation, internal to the psychological profession, between the areas of intervention, which is cogent from the deontological standpoint.

Psychology profession and clinical psychology

The specificity of the psychology profession in Italy

The distinction between the psychology profession and non-psychological professional practices is the subject of previous National Council of Italian Psychologist’s previous documents, to which we refer for an in-depth discussion. Systematically, these documents ground and derive the specificity of the psychological profession from its anchoring in psychological science. The action of the psychologist in the various fields of intervention, including the clinical one, is based on psychological theories that may be differentiated in methods and techniques (psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, systemic, social-cognitive, etc.) but have in common the scientific study of the individual and group mind, and the relationship between intrapsychic, interpersonal and social dimensions, between subjectivity, intersubjectivity and relationship. Psychological science has specific theoretical and cultural foundations, and it is to these that professional psychology refers.

This link with the common foundations of psychological science distinguishes the psychologist working in the clinical field not only from the counselor and the clinical pedagogue, but also from the

medical clinician and the neuroscientist who studies the foundations of the mind (in the same way it distinguishes the psychologist working in sports from the mental coach, the psychologist working in organizations from the other counseling figures active in that context, the psychologist working in schools from the pedagogue, etc.).

The curriculum provided by the bachelor's degree and then by the master's degree ensures the psychologist a common and specific foundation that the university training of pedagogues, physicians and neuroscientists does not contemplate: their intervention is therefore based on other scientific assumptions and related methods. Incidentally, this means there is a specificity of clinical psychology compared to clinical medicine with which it is integrated in a system of care that is increasingly multi and interdisciplinary (and in perspective, transdisciplinary), respecting the fundamental biopsychosocial approach that characterizes modern health systems.

The clinical psychology field. Background

The clinical psychology field has been the subject of several definitions, both at international and national levels.

According to Division 12 of the American Psychological Association, clinical psychology aims at the scientific study – integrating social science, theory and clinical knowledge – and applications of psychology regarding the understanding, prevention and intervention concerning stressogenic and dysfunctional psychological problems, and the promotion and maintenance of psychological well-being.

More specifically on the application level, APA considers clinical psychology as follows.

Clinical psychology is the psychological specialty that provides continuing and comprehensive mental and behavioral health care for individuals, couples, families, and groups; consultation to agencies and communities; training, education and supervision; and research-based practice. It is a specialty in breadth – one that addresses a wide range of mental and behavioral health problems – and marked by comprehensiveness and integration of knowledge and skill from a broad array of disciplines within and outside of psychology proper.

The scope of clinical psychology encompasses all ages, multiple diversities, and varied systems¹.

The statement of clinical psychology activities in the Italian context is also expressed by the recently revised text of the definition of the scientific-disciplinary field Clinical Psychology (for the purpose of university research and teaching) made by the Italian Ministry of University:

The scientific-disciplinary field of Clinical Psychology includes skills related to study methods, teaching and interventions in the different clinical and care contexts and operational levels (individual, relational, family, group, institutional), throughout the life cycle. Said skills concern the scientifically recognized applications of psychology in the fields of health, healthcare and hospital, pain study and therapy, forensics, psychological distress and psychopathological conditions (psychosomatic, sexological, stress, addiction included). They are aimed at the prevention, understanding, and treatment of the aforementioned conditions through wellness and health promotion interventions, identification of protective and risk factors, psychodiagnostic assessment, psychological rehabilitation, and psychotherapy.² Skills in clinical psychophysiology and clinical neuropsychology are included, as well as neuroscientific skills referring to bio-psycho-social pathogenetic models. Methodological skills, tools and techniques related to the aforementioned areas are included.

Finally, it is useful to recall the definition developed in the context of EFPA/EuroPsy.

Clinical Psychology constitutes one of the widespread areas of professional research and intervention in psychology whose domain of application concerns problems of adaptation, behavioral disorders, states and conditions of malaise and suffering for the purpose of

¹ Cf. <https://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/specialize/clinical>, where further specification of the objects and areas of clinical psychology are given.

² Psychotherapy is included here in the clinical psychology definition as a teaching topic introducing the nature of the object.

assessing and taking care of them by psychological means to facilitate and support people's cognitive, emotional and relational well-being and development.

In line with the normative definition of psychologist (L.56 /1989), Clinical Psychology is distinguished by the theories, methods and intervention tools aimed at prevention, assessment, habilitation-rehabilitation and psychological support activities, with a focus on understanding individual and collective user demand (couple, family, groups, organizations and community), psychodiagnostics and aid and support interventions, including strictly psychotherapeutic ones (which constitute a particular subset of specialized clinical intervention modalities aimed at more structured psychopathological forms).

Thematic cores of operational interest and clinical research may be exemplified among some such as: the prevention (primary and secondary) of personal distress; early identification and diagnosis of psychopathological risks; cognitive, affective-emotional, psychosocial, behavioral, personality, social and cultural factors that are at the origin of disorders or sustain the condition of distress; emotions and their regulation in relation to health and illness, with specific regard to affective dysregulations; clinical management modalities of different types of individual, couple, family and group disorders; various forms of individual, couple, family and group psychological counseling; the improvement of the effectiveness of psychodiagnostic techniques; ways of managing emotional, relational or decision-making crisis situations arising in various stages and contexts of life; the promotion of individual psychosocial well-being and in social contexts (kindergartens, schools, family and work); the design of effective forms of psychological and psychosocial rehabilitation; the evaluation of the effectiveness of aid interventions and health prevention and promotion programs in different social contexts, etc.³.

³ https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjV1LHwyfz-AhVyRfEDHQbcCp-sQFnoECA0QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.psy.it%2Fallegati%2Faree-pratica-professionale%2Fpsicologo_clinico.pdf&usg=AOv-Vaw2YvAfNOI0ghx6O_YtHhAmg

The psychological-clinical field

The above definitions are useful in delineating the perimeter of clinical psychology as a domain of the psychologist's intervention. They require, however, to be further specified in a functional key – that is: in terms of specifying the structural features that require a particular profile of domain-specific skills to be treated/modulated/governed.

Let us start with a general definition, which deepens those mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Clinical psychology is the exercise of the psychological function of knowledge and intervention within the clinical domain, the latter as the set of typical and atypical intrapsychic and relational, individual, couple, family, group, and institutional processes that govern the lives of individuals and groups in aspects related to subjectivity and its externalization (e.g., sense of personal accomplishment, the use of cognitive and emotional skills for the purpose of active adaptation, and the ability to entertain meaningful and beneficial relationships for well-being).

This general definition helps us identify two structural characteristics that delimit the clinical field, thus distinguishing it from the other fields of the psychological profession (social, community, educational, organizations, legal).

Object. The psychological clinical field is defined by the object of intervention. More specifically, the clinical scope consists of the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and contextual processes, factors, conditions, and phenomena (the contexts and dynamics of primary, couple, and family relationships; but also of groups operating in institutions and organizations; community dynamics) related to and/or substantiating states of psychological distress and discomfort. Where the attribute “psychological” refers to the determinants of distress (e.g., a limited capacity for mentalization that critically affects the ways of entering into relationships with others) and/or the subjective content of the experience (e.g., a condition of acute psychic suffering related to a loss).⁴

⁴ Two clarifications are useful. First, the object neither conceptually nor factually

The anchoring to “psychic distress/illness” is important in that psychological science has developed a specific and differentiated profile of psychological knowledge and skills in relation to it. Possession of a large portion of that profile is therefore a necessary deontological condition for carrying out psychological interventions having psychic distress/discomfort as their object.

Setting. Psychological clinical intervention is conveyed through professional operations that take place *through mediation and/or as a function of settings operating at the interpersonal/microsocial level* – primarily through interaction with the user, conducting groups, and participating in networks of interpersonal exchanges. This distinction

coincides with the demand, the goal and the user. It is not necessary that the request to the psychologist concerns the condition of mental distress. In fact, not infrequently, individuals with psychic distress make demands to the psychologist that reflect bias in the interpretation of their problem (e.g., the request to act on a family member seen as the critical element in need of psychological intervention). The goal of clinical psychological intervention also does not necessarily have to coincide with countering the condition of distress/discomfort. Indeed, in various cases, clinical psychological interventions use the demand motivated by distress as a starting point and a leverage for interventions geared toward promoting conditions of well-being and development of the person. Finally, the condition of distress should not be confused with the client who is suffering from it. This means that the clinical setting is not characterized by a specific type of user. In fact, on the one hand, the recipient of the intervention is not necessarily one suffering the distress (e.g., counseling parents aimed at treating their child’s distress). On the other, a person who is suffering distress may be the target of an intervention that does not specifically address that condition. For example, vocational counseling aimed at a worker who is also suffering psychological distress is not a clinical intervention. Incidentally, this last observation allows us to highlight a relevant feature of clinical psychological intervention – it is nonspecific and concerns organizational and production contexts. This means that it focuses on the psychological dimensions (e.g., modes of psychic functioning, beliefs, subjective condition, behavioural patterns) related to the psychological distress/discomfort that the subject experiences globally in his or her life context, rather than on the psychological dimensions functional to the quality of role performance in a given organizational/productive context (e.g., the psychological factors associated with organizational commitment or sports performance effectiveness).

Second, psychological distress and discomfort do not imply psychopathology. While it is true that a psychopathological condition is often associated with subjective distress, it is equally true that in many circumstances states of distress/discomfort do not imply atypical forms of mental functioning that can be diagnosed in terms of psychodiagnostic categories.

has a significant implication at the level of skill profile – the purposeful regulation of interpersonal/microsocial settings requires distinctive interpretive models, methods and techniques designed because of the subjective and intersubjective processes that characterize such human forms.

It is worth pointing out that the two anchors presented above should not be considered in absolute terms. Rather, each should be understood as indicative of a polarity on a continuum. Some interventions are clearly situated on such polarities – for example, an intervention to support a person who goes to the psychologist because of a situation of psychological distress is an example of a practice characterized by the combination of the individual distress/setting polarities. In other cases, however, the intervention is in a less polarized position. For example, in some cases the intervention is at the same time focused on the discomfort felt by the individual and on the components of that discomfort that interfere with role performance. Again, as already noted, in some cases the psychologist does not work directly with the persons suffering the distress, thus in an interpersonal setting, but in terms of advice given to agencies (e.g., a hospital ward, a school) engaged in taking charge of the distressed state of a particular category of subjects.

The intermediate conditions now recalled do not invalidate the sense of the proposed delimitation; rather, they highlight how in several cases the psychologist operates in cross-cutting and overlapping areas of intervention, and therefore needs a well-structured skills profile, combining models, methods and techniques related to several areas.

In summary, clinical psychology – like school psychology, legal psychology, occupational psychology, etc. – is not an autonomous professional system: this is what the ordinal law states, which makes no distinction within the psychological profession, except for psychotherapy. It is an aspect of the general psychological professional function, defined according to the characteristics of the object and setting of intervention: problems to be addressed, on the one hand, organizational formats of professional action, on the other.

Thus, the specificity of the clinical field does not concern the general functions exercised (e.g., prevention, support for individuals and

social groups, increasing the efficiency of psychic functions and the subjective well-being that follows), nor the methods used (e.g., interviewing, observation, testing), which are common to the psychological profession in all its forms (in fact, we speak of health, or rather health psychology).

Forms of the psychological-clinical field

Before addressing the specific area of psychotherapy, which is the subject of the next section, it may be useful to give an illustrative (non-exhaustive) list of functions that the psychologist can perform in the clinical setting.

- Diagnosis and rehabilitation in clinical neuropsychology.
- Diagnosis and treatment of neurodevelopmental disorders.
- Functional assessment and rehabilitation of intellectual disability.
- Clinical assessment of case-problems in school settings (to be referred to appropriate interventions beyond the scope of the school psychologist).
- Interventions on performance anxiety, in school and other educational settings.
- Support for families with members with disabilities, hyperactivity, special educational needs, adopted children, chronic conditions, dementia.
- Diagnosis of personality and family and group dynamics.
- Diagnosis and preventive intervention of the transition from Mild Cognitive Impairment to dementia.
- Diagnosis and intervention in services for different forms of addiction.
- Evaluation and intervention of “mental training” on stress in sports settings.
- Diagnosis and intervention on work-related stress in companies.
- Analysis and interventions for the treatment of chronic pain.
- Palliative interventions in oncology and hospice settings.
- Discomfort prevention interventions at all levels and in all contexts where it is implemented.
- Training in knowledge of clinical and dynamic, and neuroscientific

theories referring to pathogenetic models to non-psychological professionals (teachers, lawyers, social workers, physicians, nurses, speech therapists).

Psychotherapy

Within clinical psychology, psychotherapy is distinguished as a specific area of specialized activity, for the practice of which the law provides for level III training, lasting four years, as for medical specializations. Psychotherapy is considered a part of clinical psychology that, while sharing its basic assumptions, is specifically defined as “Treatment of mental or personality disorders, by psychological methods” (Oxford English Dictionary). Referring also for this to the APA definition, psychotherapy is

psychological service provided by a trained professional that primarily uses forms of communication and interaction to assess, diagnose, and treat dysfunctional emotional reactions, ways of thinking, and behavior patterns. Psychotherapy may be provided to individuals, couples, families, or members of a group. ... The psychotherapist is an individual who has been professionally trained and licensed to treat mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders by psychological means⁵.

Incidentally, the reserve introduced by Law 56/89 of psychotherapeutic activity to professionals with a four-year specialization appears to be consistent with the APA definition, where the former can be understood as an operational definition of the criterion of professional qualification indicated in the latter.

The psychotherapy field

We saw that the general epistemology, the scientifically grounded attention to the subjectivity of people, groups and social institutions, and the methods used are common to all professional psychology.

⁵ <https://dictionary.apa.org/psychotherapy>

Therefore, the definition of psychotherapy cannot be based only on the characteristics of professional action, but also on the determination of the *object* that motivates and defines the finalization of the specialized professional act.

According to this perspective, we identify the treatment of psychopathology as the primary, reserved and qualifying object of the psychotherapeutic function. Unless giving the term a merely metaphorical meaning, the term “psychotherapy” denotes the class of psychological forms of therapy. Consequently, as a *therapy*, the meaning of “psychotherapy” implies that it addresses a class of forms of pathology: pathologies of a psychological nature. This formulation does not exclude the fact that psychotherapy, as is well known, *also* addresses complex forms of existential, relational and environmental distress and suffering. When we state that psychotherapy is the (psychological) treatment of pathologies of a psychological nature, we mean to describe its function in its differential and exclusive aspect. This, of course, is not inconsistent with the fact that “the more includes the less” – that is, the psychotherapeutic function also deals with forms of distress that are not explicitly psychopathological. Examples could be many, for example, a couple’s psychotherapy where the two people undergoing therapy do not necessarily have a psychopathological disorder; or a boy undergoing psychotherapy because he suffers as a result of being bullied at school.

Returning to the psychotherapy of psychopathological conditions, it should be remembered that the relevant scientific literature recognizes psychopathological conditions and their scientific study as areas of high complexity that require deeper theoretical study, supervised learning of research and intervention techniques, openness to verification of the therapeutic outcome and process, and the use of appropriate skills to carry out such verification. For this reason, psychotherapeutic caretaking requires specialized *caring* (in the sense of treatment) skills, in addition to the *support* skills learned in basic training; specialized skills that – along with practical experience and related supervision in appropriate quantity and quality, as required by the standards for specialization – qualify the psychotherapist’s distinctive training and functional profile.

Based on these considerations, the following definition of psychotherapy is advanced.

Psychotherapy is the specialized psychological-clinical professional function responsible for therapeutic intervention on *conditions of psychopathological relevance* (as defined by the diagnostic framework in use at the international level). It acts *by means of verbal, relational, cognitive, and behavioral interventions* (unlike biological psychiatry, which includes pharmacological prescription in its intervention), with the willingness to scientifically verify the effectiveness and efficiency of its intervention, according to the research methodologies that the specific community of reference has purposely developed. In this sense, the psychotherapist tends to specialize in a form of intervention, related to a historical tradition, to specific theoretical models, in specific prevailing areas.

The following identifying parameters of the exclusivity dimension of psychotherapy are derived from this definition. It is to be considered the exercise of psychotherapeutic activity (rather than non-specialist psychology in the clinical setting) when the following conditions are present simultaneously:

- (a) interventions are made on both conditions of psychological distress or discomfort and on conditions of psychopathology⁶ that have been appropriately diagnosed and assessed as suitable for a psychotherapeutic programme;
- (b) that the intervention is planned as psychotherapeutic – that is, has the purpose of treating the psychopathological condition⁷ –

⁶ It is worth pointing out that where there is a condition of psychopathology, psychological distress/discomfort should by definition be considered a participating element of the psychopathological picture, and therefore subsumed within it. This implies that the psychologist who does not specialize in psychotherapy can work on distress/discomfort, even in people with psychopathology, only on condition that the goal of the intervention does not involve – even de facto – a planned modification of that psychopathological condition. For example, direct action on the distress associated with a depressive condition requires the intervention of the psychotherapist, as such action has as its *object* the psychopathological condition. On the other hand, the mitigation of a state of distress of a person with psychopathology, achieved through the enhancement of the quality of the social network of the suffering person, is an intervention that does not have for its object the formally planned modification of the psychopathological condition, therefore as such achievable by a non-specialized psychologist. The same applies to forms of support for the person with psychopathology, which, however, do not constitute structured psychotherapy in the sense described in (a) – (c).

⁷ The distinction introduced earlier between object and user type returns here.

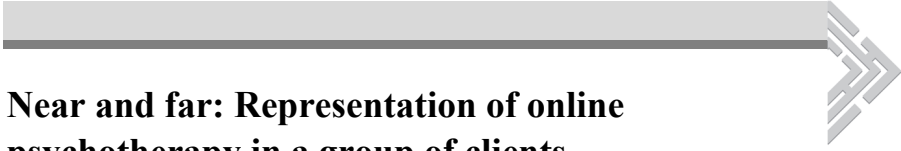
- because of a preliminary psychodiagnostic assessment⁸, and agreed as such with the client;
- (c) that psychotherapeutic intervention – regardless of its duration – is carried out with specialized methods and techniques, based on a precise *psychotherapy model*, requiring *specialized training* and an appropriate *supervision period* of treating patients, families or groups (which is done in Italy in the specialization that allows one to register on the list of psychotherapists). Again, the difference from clinical psychology is not in the overall goal of reducing distress and increasing the well-being of individuals, couples, families, and social groups, but in the *type of problems* addressed, and in the methods that require specific, specialized health-related training.

The fact that the user is suffering from a psychopathological condition is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for identifying the intervention as psychotherapeutic. The nonspecialized psychologist can work **with** users who suffer from psychopathological conditions, but not **on** those conditions (i.e.: with the goal of modifying them). Supportive interventions are not aimed at modifying the psychopathological condition, but at enhancing opportunities for adaptation within the constraints given by that condition (see previous note). Such interventions therefore fall within the clinical psychology, not psychotherapy, domain. From a complementary standpoint, the fact that the user suffers from psychopathology is not a necessary condition for classifying the practitioner's action as psychotherapy. In fact, there are cases in which the psychotherapist does not directly enter into a relationship with the person suffering from psychopathology, but acts as a consultant to subjects and agencies (e.g., family members, school) that mediate the context of the end user of the intervention. A necessary and sufficient condition for qualifying the action as psychotherapy is therefore that the purpose of the intervention – its function – is the treatment of the psychopathological condition.

⁸ The need for psychotherapeutic intervention to be grounded, motivated, and legitimized by psychodiagnostic assessment is a logical assumption of the proposed definition, not an operational prescription. It is obvious that if psychotherapy is defined as the treatment of psychopathology, the intervening professional qualifies his or her act as a psychotherapeutic action by reason of the fact and to the extent that it is exerted on a psychopathological condition, with the purpose, agreed upon with the client, of modifying it. Hence the obligation on the part of the practitioner to acquire adequate knowledge about the existence of the psychopathological condition prior to planning the intervention. Even when not directly making the diagnostic assessment, the professional (whether psychologist or psychotherapist) must define the limits and aims of his or her intervention on the basis of knowledge of the user's psychodiagnostic condition.

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Near and far: Representation of online psychotherapy in a group of clients

*Barbara Cordella**, *Annachiara Miano***, *Angelo R. Pennella****

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Abstract

The research was designed to explore the perspective of digital natives (DN) when confronted with online psychological counselling and video conference psychotherapy (VCP). 30 interviews were conducted, distinguishing those with experience only in offline settings, those with experience in mixed settings (offline/online) and those with no experience of psychological interventions. The narratives were analysed through cluster analysis and a subsequent correspondence analysis. The results underline the importance of the physical co-presence and the organisational aspects of the setting as facilitating factors of the clinical process but do not allow the specific characterisation of the DNs. The representations collected regarding online

* Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies. Sapienza University of Rome.

** Psychologist, specialist in Health Psychology.

*** Lecturer in Psychotherapy at the School of Specialization in Health Psychology. Sapienza University of Rome.

Corresponding Author: Barbara Cordella, Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies. Sapienza University of Rome, via Via degli Apuli, 1, 00185 Roma RM. Email: barbara.cordella@uniroma1.it

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psychological counselling/VCP seem in fact to have been influenced more by the emotional correlates of the pandemic period than by the characteristics of remote psychological work.

Keywords: Videoconferencing psychotherapy (VCP), online setting, digital natives, pandemic.

Introduction

Background

The use of distance relationships mediated by technological tools (telephone, email, etc.) is certainly not new for psychology and psychotherapy (Baer *et al.*, 1995; Carlino, 2011; Reed *et al.*, 2000) However, there is no doubt that the spread of SARS-CoV-2 has given a sudden boost to telepsychology (Sammons *et al.*, 2020) in the sense of the provision of psychological services through telecommunications technologies. The need to suspend face-to-face activities due to the risk of contagion has in fact led the majority of psychologists and psychotherapists to resort to techno-mediated distance relationships to avoid a treatment blackout. So-called video conference psychotherapy (VCP) based on the use of video-calling software (e.g., Skype, WhatsApp) or video-conferencing services (e.g. Webex, Zoom) has become widespread.

Although some countries do not yet have an adequate availability of the internet and network-connected devices (Singh & Sagar, 2022), in many areas of the world broadband and optical fibre allow the transmission of large quantities of data, thus facilitating efficient video calling and video conferencing. There is therefore the possibility, even in the psychological field, of overcoming the space-time constraints intrinsic to face-to-face relationships.

From a descriptive point of view, the characteristics attributed to VCP derive, in fact, from the design of networks, devices and apps. The user-friendly approach with which these products are developed also shapes VCP, not surprise singly described as a fast, convenient, simple and flexible method (Morozet *et al.*, 2020; Schuster *et al.*, 2020; Stoll *et al.*, 2020).

VCP is also recognised as being more economical. The fact that the clinician does not have to bear the burden of a study in which to welcome clients and that the latter do not have to physically go to them entails a reduction in costs for both (Morland *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, technological development has facilitated the creation of companies specialising in VCPs (e.g., Betterhelp, ReGain, Serenis, Unobravo), of which the main strengths are convenience, customisation and cost-effectiveness.

While for VCP, the characteristics of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) constitute both advantages and critical aspects. The loss of information relating to some sensory channels (e.g. smell), the impossibility of developing bodily interactions and the narrowing of the visual field linked to webcams are just some of the limitations of remote work. Although in some cases they may seem merely practical issues, in reality technology significantly affects the characteristics of the clinical relationship and the “presence” of the therapist, in the sense of attention, immersion, emotional involvement, rêverie and willingness to be involved in enactment (Geller & Greenber, 2012). In online relationships, for example, the therapist’s greater fatigue and distractibility is known, along with their propensity to exclude events that occur in the client’s personal environment from the resignification processes (Pennella & Bignami, 2021; Russell, 2015; Weinberg, 2021). Even the advantage of the ease of access to the relationship allowed by ICT can turn into an unpleasant ease of exit: in fact, one click is enough to abandon the interview and, in some cases, the therapy. Counselling and VCP are in fact not exempt from ghosting, which can moreover be done not only by the client but also by the clinician (Farber *et al.*, 2022). After all, the fact of being able to start psychotherapy easily and the feeling of being able to easily share intimate issues (Suler, 2004) does not necessarily make the relationship solid and stable over time (Aboujaoude *et al.*, 2021; Frittgen & Haltaufderheide, 2022).

There is no doubt that the technology underlying the long-distance relationship induces changes in the nature of borders and spaces but also in the way in which one is present in the relationship (Simpson *et al.*, 2020). It is evident that in VCP the customer has greater control of the situation; they can influence the quality and quantity of the shared information, for example, by changing the camera angle, the visibility

of the surrounding objects and also the background or the brightness of the environment, all this without considering a series of incidental factors (e.g. line interruptions, poor webcam quality) which can sometimes significantly characterise the therapist-client interaction. Basically, the qualities that we tend to attribute to VCP, as well as its limits, are the expression of the technology that allows for a synchronous long-distance relationship.

Aim

The research we present arose from some different observations:

1. Despite the large number of research studies in the sector, most of them have explored online psychological counselling and VCP from the point of view of the clinician, paying attention to some elements deemed relevant (e.g., setting, working alliance) (Bekes *et al.*, 2021; McDonald *et al.*, 2020; Pennella & Spaccarotella, 2021). Less explored is the perspective with which clients experience the techno-mediated distance clinical relationship.
2. Some studies (Giordano *et al.*, 2022) show that in the pandemic period clients developed and/or maintained positive clinical relationships thanks to VCP.
3. The perception of the utility of VCP in the therapeutic field is evidently influenced by numerous factors. Among these we consider the habit of using devices which makes the techno-mediated distance relationship very familiar.
4. For this reason, our research questions aim to address whether “digital natives”, in particular the so-called “Millennials” and “Generation Z” born between 1987 and 2000 (Botteri & Cremonesi, 2019), approach telepsychology in general and VCP in particular, with an attitude that is influenced by their familiarity with the digital technologies they normally employ to mediate their social interactions (Twenge, 2017).

Method

The current study adopts a qualitative method aimed at detecting the content and structure of texts collected by means of in-depth interviews. All the people interviewed participated on a voluntary basis, they were recruited with a snowball technique and expressed interest in the topic.

The research received the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology, Sapienza, Rome.

The group of interviewees

Between July and October 2021, 30 people were interviewed, divided into three numerically homogeneous groups: (a) people with previous experience of offline counselling and/or psychotherapy, (b) people with previous experience of counselling and/or psychotherapy both offline and online and (c) people with no experience of counselling and/or psychotherapy. The subdivision was carried out in the expectation that the presence/absence of experiences of psychological interventions could affect the narratives proposed by the interviewees. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the three groups which, as can be seen, are substantially similar.

Exclusion criteria

In order to reduce the possibility that the interviewees had “professional” knowledge and skills in techno-mediated communication, students or graduates in psychology, medicine, communication sciences, information technology and pedagogy were excluded.

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the interviewees: group a, b, c

group a: people with previous experience of offline counselling and/or psychotherapy

<i>N</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Instruction</i>
1	F	21	High school diploma
2	F	22	High school diploma
3	F	22	Degree
4	F	24	High school diploma
5	F	24	High school diploma
6	F	26	Degree
7	F	27	Degree
8	F	27	Degree
9	M	28	High school diploma
10	M	29	High school diploma
N	8/2		6/4

group b: people with previous experience of counselling and/or psychotherapy both offline and online

<i>N</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Instruction</i>
1	F	21	High school diploma
2	F	25	Degree
3	F	25	Degree
4	F	30	Degree
5	F	30	High school diploma
6	F	32	High school diploma
7	F	34	Degree
8	M	24	High school diploma
9	M	24	High school diploma
10	M	32	Degree
N	7/3		5/5

group c: people with no experience of counselling and/or psychotherapy

<i>N</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Instruction</i>
1	F	19	High school diploma
2	F	22	High school diploma
3	F	24	High school diploma
4	F	25	Degree
5	F	27	Degree
6	F	27	High school diploma
7	F	28	Degree
8	F	28	Degree
9	M	22	High school diploma
10	M	28	High school diploma
N	8/2		6/4

Legenda: The tables show the demographic characteristics of the three groups interviewed. In each table, the last row indicates the number of F and M and the number with High school diploma or Degree.

The open interview

An open interview was used as a survey tool with the aim of offering the interviewee the greatest possible freedom to associate their own discourse with the question posed by the researcher. In fact, the interview proposed a single question aimed at providing a sort of frame to the text presented by the interviewees: it can be considered a generative narrative question (Flick, 1998). The interviewer resorted to further prompting (“echo responses”) only in cases where the interviewee’s silence could suggest an early interruption of the response. The estimated time for the interview was about 20 minutes. The question was the following:

We are conducting research into how people picture themselves based on their ideas and experiences with online counselling and psychotherapy services. We therefore ask for your willingness to participate in this research by answering a single question. The interview will last about 20 minutes, and we ask you to use the entire time to talk about your opinions and experiences. We ask for your consent to record the interview because the text will then be analysed using a computer programme. The information you provide us will be collected anonymously and analysed in aggregate form in compliance with the law on privacy. If you agree we can start.

Think about your ideas and experiences with online counselling and psychotherapy services.

Theoretical Framework

In analysing the narratives collected we assume the integration of a socio-constructivist perspective, which considers “reality” as a discursive product, the result of the meanings attributed to events by those who share a specific context, and a psychoanalytic perspective (Matte Blanco, 1975) which makes it possible to enhance the double logic (cognitive/conscious and affective/unconscious) that characterizes the functioning of the individual and social mind. In this direction, Carli and Paniccia (2002) write that the social bond (culture) is based on the sharing of the unconscious, generalizing and affective symbolizations of those who belong to the same context and it is this bond that orients the behaviour, including verbal behaviour, of the single subject.

We can therefore assume that the question the interviewees were asked is a sign that the respondents interpreted, expressing a semantic content (verbal behaviour) but that the latter finds meaning in an affective, generalizing and latent (unconscious) space (Salvatore & Cordella, 2022). For this reason, in agreement with Mossi & Salvatore (2011), Venuleo *et al.* (2020), we will distinguish the semantic plane (meaning) attributed to the clusters, from the semiotic plane (symbolic) expressed by the factors.

Procedures

The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed and combined into a single corpus subjected to text analysis using the T-Lab tool. Specifically, a thematic analysis of elementary contexts was carried out, using cluster analysis and a correspondences analysis (Lancia, 2004).

The introduction of the corpus to the tool starts an automatic phase, which serves, among other things, to establish the list of words used in the corpus and the segmentation of the text in elementary contexts (EC). At the end of this phase, we examine the statistical indices that allow us to detect the analysability of the text. Table 2 shows the indices that allow us to ascertain the analysability of the text. In our case, the latter presents 6075 Types (words different from each other), of which 3028 Hapax (words that occur only once) and 69220 Tokens (total number of words found in the corpus). On the basis of these data it is possible to consider two indices: the Type/Tokens ratio (which is considered adequate for a value lower than 0.2; ours is 0.088) and the Hapax/Types ratio which must be around 50%: ours is 0.498 (Bolasco, 1999; Greco, 2016).

Subsequently, the terms present in the word list are selected, excluding empty words (adverbs, pronouns, etc.), and the terms are traced back to their root. The following are excluded:

- words that refer to the dimensions of space and time because we are interested in exploring the generalizing, affective dimensions;
- the words present in the stimulus question;
- the words that belong to the high frequency range since they are

taken for granted in the context of the subject dealt with (Bolasco, 1999).

At this point a “thematic analysis of the ECs” can be carried out, through the software thanks to a cluster analysis and a correspondence analysis (Cordella *et al.*, 2014).

Table 2. Characteristics of the text

<i>Indices</i>	<i>Values</i>
Texts	30
Types	6,075
Tokens	69,220
Hapax	3,028
Type/Tokens	0.088
Hapax/Types	0.498

Legend: The table shows the different indices and the values assumed for the corpus in question.

Results

The analysis brought out three factors and four clusters.

The factors

With respect to the first factor in its negative pole, *psychologist* (the co-occurring lemmas of factors and clusters will be shown in italics) appears as the first term. We are therefore inclined to think of the following lemmas as inherent to this professional figure. In this sense, the verbs *to understand*, *to need*, *to help* and *to see* seem to attribute to the psychologist, on the one hand, the task of understanding the *patient's problems* (psychological/emotional, i.e., his/her mental space) and, on the other, of providing *support of* such issues in the form of an *easy message*, which does not involve special efforts.

Table 3. The co-occurring words of the three factors

Factor 1			
Inside			
Negative pole		Positive pole	
Mental Space		Material Space	
<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>	<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Psychologist	5.71	Home	5.97
Understand	4.85	Go out	2.28
Need	4.68	Study	1.82
Help	3.01	Real	1.60
See	2.92	Take	1.48
Problems	0.95	Environment	1.03
Patient	0.91	Room	1.02
Support	0.83	Getused to	1.02
Message	0.82	Place	0.99
Easy	0.78	Time	0.98

Factor 2			
Technology			
Negative pole		Positive pole	
Concrete Results		Comfortable	
<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>	<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Therapist	3.11	Work	3.28
Physics	2.09	Feel	2.06
Path	1.66	Comfortable	1.71
Face	1.42	Write	0.99
Need	1.12	From home	0.95
Tool	0.89	Ask	0.87
Wants	0.68	Return	0.85
Important	0.66	Lad	0.80
Human	0.64	Site	0.74
Present	0.61	Pleasure	0.72

Factor3			
The long-distance relationship			
Negative pole		Positive pole	
Satisfaction		Wariness	
<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>	<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Find	3.61	Therapy	11.52
Be able to	3.17	Begin	4.64
Screen	2.43	Experience	3.30
Relationship	1.99	Therapy online	1.52
Distance	1.65	Render	1.36
Use	1.34	Memory	1.19
Direct	1.21	Watch	1.19
Encounter	1.13	Re-watch	0.60
Repeat	0.97	Speak	0.48
Possible	0.82	Wait	0.47

Regarding the positive pole, the term *home* assumes importance. It can be noted that some of the following lemmas (*environment, room, place*) seem to reinforce the concreteness of this term. The home, therefore, is understood as a material space that surrounds and welcomes, the place in which one's activities are carried out (*to go out, studying, taking*) and which is therefore connoted as the *real* but is also an environment from which one wants *to go out*. In fact, it is the situation created by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the consequent lockdowns that have exhausted the sphere of reality at home, facilitating requests for help anchored, however, within one's own home.

In a nutshell, this factor refers to something that is "inside", an "inside" which contrasts a physical space (domestic environment) and a mental space. The first factor therefore offers us a just a position that speaks of an "inside-mental" (understanding of oneself and one's difficulties) and of an "inside-material" (living environment), both places that must be seen and understood.

Turning now to the second factor, in its negative pole, the term *therapist* takes on importance, followed by the lemma *physics*. Therefore, the idea of a concrete, effective *tool* seems basically to emerge, the *need* and the *want to face a path* that allows one to achieve tangible results. In the positive pole, the lemma that provides the greatest contribution is *work*, followed by *to feel* and *comfortable*, an activity therefore that puts one at ease and is perceived as not disturbing. Working *from home* thus not feeling the obligation and the "inconvenience" of going out in order to be able to carry out one's duties. Being online allows one to work comfortably, without discomfort and harassment. It is therefore a factor that deals with technology, on the one hand, for concrete results, and on the other hand, for comfort; we could say it is related to "smart" methods.

Finally, with respect to the third factor, the lemmas of the negative pole with the greatest contribution are *find* and *be able to*. The first refers to a successful action, the second refers to the idea of being able to achieve one's goal. Next are terms like *screen, relationship* and *distance*. We are therefore led to think that the achievement of the goal (*relationship*) we are talking about takes place through a *distance* mediated by the *screen*. ICT has therefore made it *possible* to develop a *direct encounter* with the other person while keeping those involved

at a *distance*. In other words, what seems to emerge is the idea of being able to *repeat* (to replicate) online what happens offline.

Compared to the positive pole, the lemma making the greatest contribution is *therapy*. Next in terms of contribution are the lemmas *begin* and *experience*. We are therefore inclined to think that the reference is to starting an *online therapy* in which it is crucial to *watch* and to *speak*. However, it is an experience based on *rendering*, both because it restores an aspect of offline therapy and because it refers to the importance of the image. However, online therapy also seems to evoke *memory* and with it the possible comparison with other (offline) relationships. One can therefore *watch* and *re-watch* the online experience, adopting a position of prudent and circumspect *waiting*.

Unlike the previous ones, in which the therapist is referred to, the focus of this factor is therapy understood as an interpersonal experience: that is, attention is shifted from the subject to the process. This factor therefore refers to the idea of a long-distance relationship, in which, on the one hand, the discovery and satisfaction of being able to have an online meeting are expressed, and on the other, an attitude of wariness towards an experience that still needs to be carefully examined and evaluated (watch and re-watch).

The clusters

In analysing the meaning of the clusters, we took into account both the co-occurrence of the words and the elementary contexts (EC) from which they originate. This choice, in some cases, was also useful for broadening the meaning attributed.

Table 4. The co-occurring words that characterise the four clusters

Clusters	1	2	3	4
	<i>Comparison and migration</i>	<i>Easy access</i>	<i>A virtue of necessity</i>	<i>Survive at home</i>
Therapy		Understand	Be able to	Home
Start		Psychologist	Find	Work
Experience		Need	Screen	Comfortable
Path		Help	Relationship	Study
Online therapy		Problems	Physicist	So out
Face		Easy	Distance	From home
Therapist		See	Direct	Room
Watch		Ask	Need	Take
Remember		Internet	Encounter	Real
Re-watch			Behaviour	Place
Difference			Service	Day
			See	Depression
			Image	Mother

Cluster 1: Comparison and migration

This cluster mainly sees the contribution of interviewees with experience of offline psychotherapy or with mixed settings (offline and online) (group “a” and “b”). The terms focus on the *therapy experience* and on starting an *online therapy*. The terms *watch* and *re-watch*, but also *remember* and *difference*, lead us to think that we are dealing with a group called (forced) to evaluate/*face* a change of setting and the consequent change in the relationship with the clinician. Attention therefore goes to the differences between offline and online. However, the attitude is attentive and open towards the techno-mediated distance relationship whose advantages (comfort) are appreciated. The cluster is in fact placed in the quadrant “Inside-material”/“Technology-comfortable”/“Relationship-satisfaction”.

Considering the ECs (Tab. 4), the conviction first of all emerges that the VCP can safeguard the continuity of the therapeutic relationship, not only in exceptional situations such as the pandemic, in which the migration from offline to online has been essential, but also in more ordinary situations, such as work transfers. Basically, especially those who have experience with face-to-face psychotherapy,

experience VCP as a *last resort* to avoid breaking up the relationship with the therapist (Tab. 4: verbalization 1, 5).

However, reading the ECs of Cluster 1, specifically raises the question of the comparison between the materiality and immateriality of the encounter. The actions (getting dressed, going out, taking the car, etc.) necessary to go to the clinician's office, for example, create a space-time in which to reflect on what happened or on the topics one intends to raise. In other words, the idea emerges that the "doing" – prior to and following the interview – facilitates the development of a thought and is therefore an integral part of the interview/therapeutic process. The materiality supporting the encounter reinforces the tendency to symbolise it as a special space-time in which something special happens (Tab. 4: verbalization 7, 11).

Table 5. Some of the ECs associated with the first cluster

Case No	Verbalization
1	"it is an extra possibility and above all, in my opinion, it allows you to continue along a path with the same person who has already arrived at a certain point, it just doesn't create this, this strong detachment"
5	"the positive side of still being able to continue despite the fact that perhaps for work or family reasons one is not in the same city as one's therapist and it is certainly an advantage not to have to interrupt the course and perhaps it can also be good for those who live a somewhat hectic life"
7	"It's a ritual, it's not just the therapy, it's also the thought of the therapy, it is also the space of the therapy, which I think helps one to enter a certain modality. This is my place, this is my space, now I don't have to, I'm here, and I don't have to think about anything else, I have no other distractions, I have nothing"
9	"Doing it online you have an appointment at three, maybe until five to three you stay in bed watching a TV series, I don't know, maybe you've been like this for a while and then spend that hour over there, close the connection, you know, and you stay in bed anyway"
11	"In a room where when I entered the room the whole outside world was truly transfigured and it was a totally different experience to everyday life"

On the other hand, in the VCP the boundary between conversation and daily activities appears more blurred, and the impoverishment, if

not annihilation, of the actions in support of the encounter also seems to reduce the “specialness” of the encounter. In essence, Cluster 1 expresses the experience of an online experience more easily incorporated into the daily routine and therefore in some way more easily reduced to the level of what is familiar (usual) (Tab. 4: verbalization 9).

Cluster 2: Easy access

This cluster mainly includes the contributions of those who have no experience of psychological counselling and/or psychotherapy (group “c”). On the one hand, the socially shared – even somewhat obvious – representation of the psychologist as a helping profession oriented towards providing their clients with support and understanding seems to emerge and, on the other, there is the tendency to transfer the characteristics associated with apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Skype) to videoconferencing in psychotherapy. Basically, if you *need to understand your problems, asking for help* from a psychologist is normal, and doing it via the *internet* makes it even more accessible and *easier*. On the other hand, videoconferencing can easily be associated with forms of social relationships (think of social networks such as Instagram and Facebook) based on *seeing* and being seen.

We also notice that it is precisely this cluster closest to common sense, indicating the reasons for turning to a psychologist, that is related to problems rather than pathology. This may signal a vision of psychology close to people’s daily lives, a vision that may be facilitated by the pandemic itself and the VCP.

The cluster is located in the quadrant “Inside-mental”/“Technology-concrete”/“Relationship-satisfaction”, confirming a group in which the absence of direct experience activates shared social representations in which psychotherapy is oriented towards providing tangible solutions to people’s inner problems and in which technological innovation has an obvious positive connotation. In this direction, the ECs underline the convenience of being online, which does not oblige one to leave one’s familiar spaces (*comfort zone*) and which allows one to interpose a screen between oneself and the other person.

Table 6. Some of the ECs associated with the second cluster

Case No	Verbalization
8	“Through a screen, it could make people open up more easily because it’s like you’re talking to, somehow, a voice in your head”
10	“Let’s say so with less, with less shyness. This actually does a lot. Now, for example, I’m in a room familiar to me without vacuously wondering where to sit, where to put my things”
21	“I find it like a kind of hiding, but also protecting yourself, in the end. Protect yourself from what the other person might think”

Cluster 3: A virtue of necessity

This cluster includes both those who have experience of counselling and/or offline psychotherapy (group “a”) and those who have used mixed settings (group “b”). The lemmas of this cluster suggest that these are people who *are able* to (or think they can) *find*, thanks to the *screen*, what they *need*: the *relationship* with the psychologist. Driven by *necessity*, remote *encounters* are therefore considered possible. In other words, in order to find a concrete solution to one’s needs, one also accepts a *service* anchored to the *image*. The cluster is positioned in the “Inside-material”/“Technology-Concrete”/“Relationship-Wariness” quadrant, confirming the group’s propensity to cautiously welcome the techno-mediated distance relationship as a concrete solution to a specific problem.

An experience that emerges from the statements (EC) that fall into this group is the sense of constraint associated with the VCP. In most cases, the transition from offline to online was in fact imposed by the pandemic. We therefore think that the VCP has absorbed some of the emotions elicited by the health emergency and the consequent limitations on individual freedoms. The loss of human contact, physical and emotional distance and coldness thus become important aspects of the way this cluster experiences the VCP (Tab. 6: verbalization 16, 23). On the other hand, however, it is recognised that techno-mediated communication has also protected the ability to relate socially in general and psychotherapy in particular. The “virtues” attributed to the VCP are grafted onto this conviction, in particular the freedom and

flexibility that this modality can offer (Tab. 6: verbalization 3). In this cluster therefore the idea emerges that VCP is in fact consistent with the current socio-cultural and health scenario and is thus an expression of an increasingly ICT-oriented reality.

Table 7. Some of the ECs associated with the third cluster

Case No	Verbalization
3	“Very useful above all because we live in a society in which we are now very distant from each other, we travel, etc., we spend periods abroad, I think it is important to have 100% psychological support”
16	“When we went online, I really couldn’t see his physical reactions. That is, yes I saw his face, but there are a whole part of gestures, movements that I didn’t see, and then it seemed to me as if there was a, that is, a greater distance, obviously because you are not in the same place and therefore it took a while to adjust to this”
23	“Distances can be bridged with computers, but, really, they are not an effective solution to what I think is the need of the patient, with whom in my opinion the psychologist also needs a little, I don’t know, physical contact”

Cluster 4: Surviving at home

Contributions to this cluster were made by all subgroups. It is characterised both by terms that refer to actions (*studying, going out, taking*), which therefore evoke dynamism and movement, and terms (*home, from home, room, place*), which suggest, on the contrary, fixity and being static. Essentially, a tension emerges in the cluster between the commitment to do, which implies “coming out of one’s shell”, and the seduction of a caring comfort (*mother*). This tension constantly threatens to consume (encapsulate) the action within a *place*, a *room*, a *day*, thus it condemns one to a passive *depression*. The cluster is placed in the “Inside-Mental”/“Technology-Comfortable”/“Relationship-Wariness” quadrant, in an area where the interior/interiority is characterised by comfort but also by an intrinsic prudence.

The ECs belonging to Cluster 4 confirm the ambivalence experienced towards domestic environments. The pandemic has in fact reinforced the tendency to symbolise the home as a safe and secure place,

but it has also brought activities (educational, work, etc.) unrelated to this into the home (Tab. 7: verbalization 22, 10). This mixture has certainly offered some advantages, but it has also had negative effects. The boundaries (and distinctions) between one context and another, between one activity and another have become, for example, more blurred, influencing – as we have already noted – also the clinical relationship. Basically, the benefits of remote working are intertwined with the reduction of the risk associated with contact (confrontation) with strangers, but they have also overlapped and confused activities and contexts (Tab. 7: verbalization 13).

In the case of VCP, the techno-mediated distance relationship has facilitated the inclination of some to escape the extraneousness of the clinical situation by remaining within an environment experienced as safe and reassuring. On the other hand, permeability has not only characterised the boundaries between the home and external reality, but has also involved internal boundaries (spaces and family relationships). Domestic environments have therefore become “crowded” and “noisy”, losing the tranquillity and privacy that was associated with them. In this cluster, therefore, a conflict emerges between staying at home, avoiding confrontation with the extraneousness of the clinical situation but having to cope with the intrusion of an inquisitive family member, and facing the “other”, acquiring independence and autonomy, but losing in terms of safety and control.

Table 8. Some of the ECs associated with the fourth cluster

Case No	Verbalization
10	“Even if you go there, most of the time it remains a foreign place, let’s say not in my routine. I can be, feel at ease in a room, I can’t feel at ease instead in the same way in a, in a studio”
13	“You know, I didn’t want my mother to listen to what I was saying, so yes, I had to manage the space at home for a moment, but in the end I created this space for myself and it went well anyway. So yes, a little less privacy”
22	“Actually, it is much more practical because we now know that doing things from home, perhaps meetings and lessons, allow you to do many other things in the meantime, and indeed there are people who do not see the place, the house, like a hostile environment but instead are accommodating in their own home”

Discussion

Considering what emerges from the research, it seems useful to return to the intention with which the study was launched: to explore the perspective of clients, in particular of “Millennials” and “Generation Z” with regard to psychological interventions carried out remotely. It seems to us that our objective has only been partially achieved and we believe this is due to the period (July/October 2021) in which the interviews were conducted. Its proximity to the most critical phases of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (remember that the first reopening after the lockdowns took place only in April 2021) in fact influenced the narrations collected, directing the considerations towards “the need/opportunity” of online contact rather than towards the “choice/non-choice” of this relationship modality.

What has been said appears to be found in all clusters, except in Cluster 2. In fact, in the latter, the lack of direct experience of psychological interventions, particularly offline, has led to the transfer to VCP – rather automatically – of the characteristics usually attributed to apps and network services, thus connoting this setting as substantially “normal”. In the absence of specific experiences, there is a tendency to apply to VCP what is observed in other social situations (think of work meetings or online teaching), thus taking for granted not only the feasibility and usefulness of the psychological intervention remotely but also its substantial overlap with that provided offline.

On the other hand, the ease of use of techno-mediated communications can lead the client to believe that VCP, simply because it takes place online, can be just as easy. In other words, it is possible that a halo effect is implemented, that is, that the “ease” of the medium (video call and/or videoconference) is transferred to the process (psychotherapy), concealing the commitment and participation that psychotherapy in any case requires, even if carried out via video conference. The risk is that the VCP can satisfy the desire for relationships, but also the need for security and control by diluting, even canceling, the extraneousness of the encounter. After all, the environments in which you find yourself are your own, clothing can be informal, access and exit from the interview simple and immediate. In this perspective, VCP can collude with the client’s resistance and with their propensity to remove that uncanny element that

psychotherapy, paradoxically, is instead called to elicit and understand.

In the other clusters, we feel able to state that the narratives collected, rather than discussing the proposed theme, express the need to protect the social relationality that characterised the pandemic period, motivating the use of online as a response to the spread of SARS-CoV-2. We therefore believe that the experiences and attitudes of DNs towards ICT applied to psychological counselling and psychotherapy have been assimilated to the pandemic context. However, it should be added that the small number of interviewees (30) inevitably qualifies our research as exploratory with respect to a theme that we consider complex.

However, it seems interesting to note that the interviewees confirmed some reflections on the setting proposed by the therapists (cf. Russell, 2015). More specifically, in the comparison between offline and online settings, many ECs underline the importance of the actions needed to go to the psychologist's office. In fact, preparations, transfers and organisation of the day develop a "space-time" prior to and following the meeting which structures a ritual surrounding and supports the clinical intervention. The interviewees therefore point out the usefulness of a clearing house in which to start reflecting on oneself and on the counselling/psychotherapy. In essence, the usefulness of gradually transitioning between the two different mindsets is underlined and consequently, the value that a set of material activities (e.g., taking the bus, going back home, etc.), although not strictly part of the counselling setting, can assume and, in fact, contribute to its functionality.

From this angle, it is useful to note that current electronic devices (smartphones, tablets, notebooks, etc.) make it possible to carry out different activities at the same time and to switch quickly from one to another: in fact, being able to multitask today is a cultural request aimed at both devices and people (for example: following a lesson, responding to a chat, etc. at the same time). The objective is obviously the improvement of productivity through a reduction of the so-called "dead times". In this sense, multitasking can be very convenient, as can VCP. In both cases, however, we observe a reduction, if not a cancellation, precisely of those interstitial spaces that people

use as places in which to germinate thought. Therefore, the fact of being able to access a counselling/psychotherapy interview with a quick and convenient switch risks hindering the very process that should be optimised. And it is on this being “comfortable” that we believe we can develop a further reflection. In fact, we could say that a comfortable modality does not seem to promote that change of perspective, that is, that widening of categories that clinical intervention intends instead to favour. On the other hand, however, it does not seem to us that this aspect only concerns DNs. Rather, it indicates more generally the issue of the motivation with which an online clinical intervention is approached.

Conclusions

The present work started with the aim of exploring whether familiarity with devices, specific to DNs, could positively influence the perception of online psychological services. The research question was not confirmed. Rather, it clearly emerges that perception is influenced by the element that the narrator assumes as a dimension of normality.

In this direction, if one has no experience of offline psychological services, it is assumed that VCP has the same positive characteristics as found in smart working or online training. If, on the contrary, one does have experience of offline psychological counselling, the proposed narrative highlights the difficulties encountered in VCP, while emphasising that it represented an opportunity during the pandemic.

Finally, it appears relevant that the comfortable/easy qualification attributed to the online psychological service is taken for granted by the inexperienced group, while it assumes a clear problematic nature for those who have experience of face-to-face counselling, taking on the value of a possible obstacle to the work required.

Our research, of an exploratory nature, is based around a small set of interviews which prevents generalisations for DNs and customers intended as a more general group. Nevertheless, we believe our work brought to the surface a pattern that is worth further analysis: the association of comfortable/easy to online counselling. This association could be further studied so as to verify its actual presence and, if so,

to explore how the VCP, more and more widespread, can collude with the patient's propensity not to get involved in the intervention. In other words, the association of comfortable/easy to online counselling, if confirmed, could signal an image of the psychological performance that connotes it as magical, bearer of immediate solutions to needs, rather than as a path that requires commitment and time. "Because" as Grasso (2022) states when dealing with this topic, "in reality, being in a relationship is uncomfortable". On this, as well as on the links between VCP and dimensions of our current "interreality" (Riva, 2014), we believe further research and reflections are necessary.

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Natural environment and its psychological effects: Exploring individuals' narratives

Raffaella Abate*, Guyonne Rogier**

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Abstract

In recent years, several clinical syndromes have emerged, labeled as eco-psychopathologies, underlying the psychological relationship between individuals and natural environment. The aim of the present study was to analyze the nature of psychological distress related to this relationship administering to a sample of 20 participants: the Eco Psychopathologies Interview. The narratives elicited by this semi-structured interview were recorded and transcribed. The elementary context analysis, carried out with the T-Lab software, led to a two-factors and three-clusters solution. The interpretation process has identified the factors as *Narrative of the personal story* and *Action*. Three clusters have emerged, labeled *Bonding*, *Transforming* and *Educating*. As discussed, this qualitative data supports the idea that psychological distress emerging from the human relationship with the natural environment is a matter of identity, personal values and attachment to place.

Keywords: Eco-psychopathology, nature, qualitative data, identity, environment, interview.

* Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies. Sapienza University of Rome (Italy).

** Department of Science of Education. University of Genova (Italy).

Corresponding author: Raffaella Abate. Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies. Sapienza University of Rome, via Via degli Apuli, 1, 00185 Roma RM. Email: raffaella.abate@uniroma1.it

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, climate change should be considered as one of the main public health issues of the 21st century (Sheehan *et al.*, 2017). In the last decade, researchers focused on its psychological consequences, with the identification of several clinical syndromes labeled eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, solastagia, eco-pain and eco-depression (Albrecht, 2005; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Clayton, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020).

Research on the psychological consequences of climate change focused especially on extreme weather phenomena such as earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, storms, and floods. Literature supports the idea that extreme weather events and environmental changes are closely associated with a wide range of acute and/or chronic emotional responses including sadness, distress, fear, and helplessness (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Vestal (2017) highlighted the impact of extreme weather conditions on mental health, with an increase of anxiety disorder, depression, violence and suicide. Advancing this line of research, several theoretical and empirical contributions focused on specific variables accounting for eco-psychopathologies, such as climate concern, anxiety or ecological pain (Clayton, 2003; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Ojala, 2021).

Literature defines climate anxiety as a concern or a fear arising from uncertainty about issues related to the future of the environment (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2020; Hickman *et al.*, 2021). Climate anxiety is positively related to generalized anxiety and depression (Wullenkord *et al.*, 2021), impacting individuals' quality of life (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). In addition, research has showed that this concern predominantly affects young people (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), suggesting that the onset of eco-psychopathologies is likely to be age-related. However, the reason why climate concerns would affect younger people more than others is not clear.

Also, climate anxiety is strongly associated with ecological grief, linked to environmental deterioration and destruction of beloved places (Ellis & Albrecht, 2017; Ojala, 2021). Studies documented ecological grief in individuals who lost their home after environmental disasters or in response to ecological changes occurred over time (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Other authors observed ecological grief in

people who have a lifestyle closely connected to the environment, such as Australian farmers and Inuit living in Canada, suggesting that this eco-psychopathology may be related to identity issues (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Specifically, in these population, the pain associated with ecological grief would arise from the anticipation of future ecological losses (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). From this perspective, the concept of ecological grief appears similar to the notion of solastalgia, defined by Albrecht (2005) as “the pain associated with the awareness that beloved place is under immediate attack”.

Despite these interesting results, a recent systematic review on solastalgia (Galway *et al.*, 2019) has concluded that, to date, no appropriate assessment tools for measuring these constructs are available. This gap may be explained by the fact that, despite a increase of the number of studies about the development of psychopathological conditions in response to climate change, the influence of emotions related to the natural environment on mental health is still unclear (Stanley *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, the lack of a clear conceptual definition of these variables and the consequent lack of assessment tools hinder the soundness of the conclusions drawn by empirical studies. Consequently, efforts are needed to investigate the nature of eco-psychopathologies and the variables accounting for these forms of psychological distress to contribute to the advancement of theoretical conceptualizations of the field. In addition, eco-psychopathologies are still under-studied in several geographical areas including Italy. As highlighted in recent reviews (Middleton *et al.*, 2020; Robison *et al.*, 2022), the field of research needs more culturally oriented investigations.

The present study aims to fill some gaps, through an exploratory study, identifying the nature of psychological distress resulting from the relationship between the individual and the natural environment. Indeed, there is currently a lack of qualitative studies analyzing the psychological distress that can result from the relationship between individuals and the nature. Such studies would be relevant preliminary steps to shape future research directions on environmental psychological distress. Also, the study focuses on a sample of Italian adults, considered here a potential at-risk population for eco-psychopathologies' onset in light of the high exposure of the Italian territory to

environmental changes (Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, 2021). Indeed, according to institutional reports (ISPRA; 2021), Italy is exposed to a high risk of instability, landslides and floods because of its geological, morphological and hydrographic conformation. To fill these gaps, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study on a sample of Italian adults investigating the relationships between psychological distress and nature.

Method

Participants and procedures

The sample consisted of 20 Italian adults, aged between 20 and 50 years ($M=24.6$ years; $SD=6.37$; 35% male). The educational level of the sample was distributed as it follows: 15% postgraduate; 50% bachelor's degree; 35% high school degree. Regarding annual income, 45% of the sample reports to earn between €36,000 and €70,000 per year, 10% between €70,000 and €100,000, 35% less than €36,000 and only 5% more than €100,000. Participants were recruited between the 19th October 2022 and the 20th December 2022, through a convenience sampling technique. No compensation was offered. Participants should be between 18 and 65 years old and being Italian.

The procedure of the study has been approved by the Ethical Committee of Sapienza University of Rome (Prot. N° 0000798-2022). Participants were informed about the aims of the study and participation's conditions (e.g., anonymity and confidentiality, right to withdraw). In case the individual accepted to participate, an informed consent was subscribed before the beginning of the procedure. Then, participants were asked to fulfill a brief questionnaire and to answer the interview. The interviews were carried out in Italian, in a private place at the convenience of the informant. The interviews length ranges from 20 to 90 minutes ($M_{length}=55$ minutes). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed *ad verbatim*.

Measures

Socio-economic information. A form was created and administered to collect information about gender, age and socio-economic status.

Eco Psychopathologies Interview (EPI; Abate & Velotti, in press). The interview was developed along the lines of the Indiana Psychiatric Illness Interview (Lysaker *et al.*, 2002), that is a semi-structured interview divided into four sections, aiming to elicit illness narratives of individuals with mental disorders. Similarly, the EPI is a semi-structured interview which offers participants the opportunity to 1) share their life story; 2) describe their mental states in relation to the natural environment and the way these states have influenced their lives; 3) describe their concerns about the conditions of the natural environment and how these concerns impacted their life choices; 4) share their expectations towards the future. After a brief warming-up moment asking the interviewed to briefly summarize his/her life story, the investigation focuses on the nature of psychological discomfort related to environmental issues. It asks the interviewed to identify the causes and consequences of these experiences of distress. Specifically, consequences on the relational, occupational and lifestyle individual's functioning are investigated with separate questions. In case a change is recognized in some of these areas, the interviewed is asked to specify the nature of these changes at both cognitive and emotional level. Finally, the last questions of the EPI encouraged the individual to reflect on expectations for own future and the future of the natural environment.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the textual corpus was carried out with the T-Lab Plus 10 software version 10.1.1. Once the corpus of interviews has been imported and the language to be analyzed has been selected, the software carries out an automatic step in which text normalization, polytome selection, vocabulary construction and corpus segmentation according to punctuation, number of characters and statistical criteria take place (Lancia, 2012). Before proceeding with the selection of keywords, it is necessary to alphabetize the lexical units (words and multi-words, classified on the basis of a criterion) by grouping them under the same root. This step is essential because the software's dictionary does not allow all words to be automatically reduced to their root.

At the end of these operations, lemmatization takes place, which is later refined in the keyword (the lexical units present in the corpus) selection step. In this study, keywords were selected using the following exclusion criteria: high frequency words, adverbs and pronouns (Bolasco, 1999). After this, an evaluation of the quantitative characteristics of the corpus is carried out to check whether it is possible to process the data statistically (Bolasco, 1999; Giuliano & La Rocca, 2010).

The software is then asked to perform a thematic analysis of the elementary contexts (i.e., an automatic cluster analysis using a bisecting K-means algorithm). The algorithm is limited to 10 partitions in order to exclude all elementary contexts that do not present at least two co-occurrences. Specifically, elementary contexts are syntagmatic units (i.e., fragments, sentences, paragraphs) in which each primary document can be subdivided.

The analysis provides semantic groups (set of lemmas with similar semantic meaning) emerging from statistical elaboration of the lemmas' co-occurrences. The clusters represent the set of lexical units that share the same elementary context so that each cluster is described as a list of typical words (i.e., lexical units with the corresponding χ^2 value), and a label emerging from the qualitative interpretation of both typical words and associated elementary contexts.

The qualitative interpretation was carried out in a discussion group involving seven psychologists, including clinical and/or research

psychologists, cognitive-behavioral and/or systemic-relational psychotherapists. The first individual interpretations are shared and compared to discuss disagreement and reach a consensus.

In addition, clusters are represented in a system of coordinates (factors) which allow to determine the polarities and the discursive axes of text (positive and negative poles). Specifically, the factors represent the cultural space in which thinking is organized (Cordella, 2014). As for clusters, factors are characterized by a list of typical lemmas associated with high χ^2 values and are interpreted with the same process described above.

Results

Elementary contexts analysis

The whole corpus consisted of 63319 lemmas, 950 elementary contexts analyzed and 426 keywords. The elementary contexts analysis led to the identification of three thematic clusters. These explained 26.77%, 48.15%, and 25.08% of the variance respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of elementary contexts included in each cluster and weight percentage

<i>Clusters</i>	<i>Elementary contexts</i>	<i>Weight (χ^2)</i>
1. Bonding	253	26.77%
2. Transforming	455	48.15%
3. Educating	237	25.08%

Cluster 1. The first cluster labelled *Bonding* stresses the central role attributed to the *relationships* between *individual*, either *family* members or *friends* (see Table 2). In addition, the bond to natural environment seems to be shaped by these relational reference points that provided the personal values and offering *meaning* and encouraging *respect*.

Table 2. List of typical lemmas for the Bonding cluster and illustrative elementary context units

<i>Lemmas</i>	χ^2
relationship	87.224
meaning	33.016
respect	32.735
individual	26.335
family	24.747
certain	22.345
friend	23.323
to start	22.456
to remain	11.243
reality	4.983

Example of elementary context units

“[...]my first memory is when I was about two years old [...] when I started going to the seaside. Of course, it’s a memory linked to the happiness of meeting my family, with holidays, with the sea, with situations of joy and therefore images of sunshine and happiness [...]”.

“I was really comfortable with this teacher because she had a great positive mind-set [...], she told me a lot and also regarding the respect of anyone and the respect of environment”.

“[...]my mother is a person who is really impacted by weather changes [...] but I can say that I am thermopathic too”.

Cluster 2. The second cluster, called *Transforming* refers to the way the connection between past and current places shapes the nature of psychological problems (Table 3). Participants, when asked to describe the psychological consequences of their relationship with nature, described the *shaping* process of the childhood *house* on their *story* in the broader *world* also evidencing *differences* and *changes* of this environment as part of the psychological *problems* experienced.

Table 3. List of typical lemmas for the Transforming cluster and illustrative elementary context units

Lemmas	χ^2
house	32.69
to shape	34.13
story	28.57
world	26.14
type	25.08
related	14.50
to take	13.42
different	7.42
change	5.40
problems	4.71

Example of elementary context units

“[...] one thing that influences me a lot, but apart from the climate, it’s also the environment, because I think it’s something that’s quite common, it’s natural that being in a quiet place, maybe in the middle of the countryside or on a beach near the sea, in a situation where nature is present, and present in a positive way, it’s something that makes you happy. [...] but on the other hand, seeing unpleasant situations such as the latest things that happened with these devastating rains, the water bombs and landslides [...] that have been caused by this crazy climate is something that makes you feel uncomfortable [...]”.

“[...] I used to be much more distant from plants, such as greenery. I didn’t pay much attention to it. Nowadays, noticing that there are more plants in the streets which are not very well cared [...] or that there aren’t enough plants, it is something that makes me think about what I pay attention to. Whereas I didn’t pay attention to this before, because I understand now more and more how important it is to be in contact with nature and how much benefit it gives to us [...]”.

Cluster 3. The third cluster, labeled *Educating*, illustrates the extent by which the psychological relationship with nature grows at *school* where it is possible to *speak* about facts regarding nature as well as to *express feelings* and learn *respect* towards nature (see Table 4).

Table 4. List of typical lemmas for the *Educating* cluster and illustrative elementary context units

<i>Lemmas</i>	χ^2
high school	49.58
to stay	38.85
to express	36.34
emotion	31.62
to speak	25.87
school	26.86
to put	20.39
to Feel	15.01
respect	11.81
fact	7.38

Example of elementary context units

“[...]the best years of my life were from pre-school to kindergarten, to primary school. The ones I have the most memories of [...] we did a lot of things even with the teachers of extra outdoor activities [...]so we planted seedlings [...].”

“[...]during lessons when I was nine years old, they taught us, in practice, how to avoid waste and so on, and I remember I became really paranoid [...].”

“[...]middle school gave me the opportunity to do a lot of things that the children might not have been able to do, even sleeping outside alone but in a controlled environment, horse riding [...].”

Factor extraction

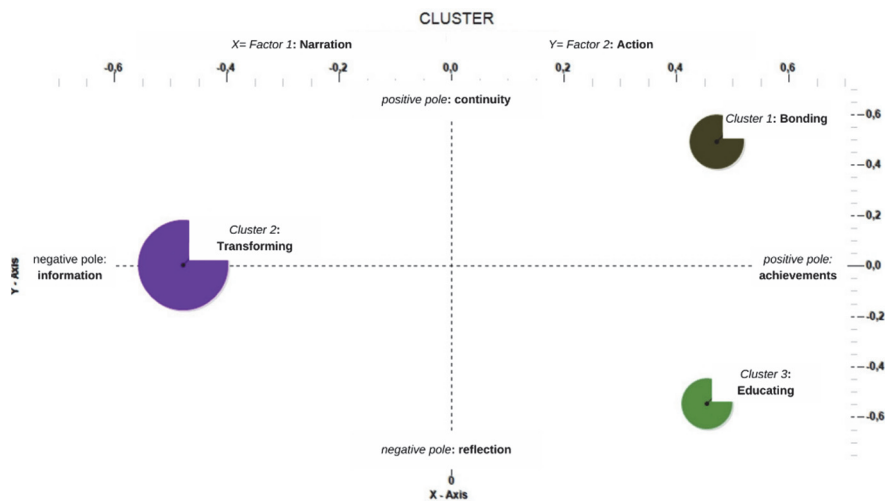
Finally, two factors were extracted and interpreted (see Table 5). Along axis 1, keywords related to the negative polarity (the terms “positive” and “negative” associated with the polarities are to be understood in a purely mathematical meaning) were related to the capacity to *connect* with and to reflect on personal story (*story; to remember*; see Table 5), whereas those related to the positive polarity stress the role of Continuity, being linked to as a process of identifying the impact of past events in shaping the present (*to remain; compared to; before*; see Table 5). The continuum ranging from *reflection* to *thought* was interpreted as a *Narration* that gradually develop trough a continuous re-organization of meanings attributed to own story considering the role of the environment changes. The second factor includes a positive polarity related to personal achievements (*to succeed; maturing*; see Table 5) and a negative polarity consisting in the description of the set of necessary information and knowledge for reaching personal achievements (*school; exam*; see Table 5). The interpretative process describes this factor as *Action* continuum that combines what we need to know (*information*) to reach the place where we should be (*achievements*).

Table 5. Lists of top 10 lexical units percentage of inertia explained by factors

FACTOR 1 (61,77%) <i>Narration</i>		FACTOR 2 (38,23%) <i>Action</i>	
<i>POLE (-): Reflection</i>	<i>POLE (+): Continuity</i>	<i>POLE (-): Information</i>	<i>POLE (+): Achievements</i>
to connect	to remain	middle school	relations
to make	compared to	high school	meaning
home	before	fifth	aspects
beliefs	to find	school	maturing
story	express	exam	certain
to remember	professional	emotions	job
to tell	relationships	To talk	to work
type	high school	feeling	influence
to account	to succeed	path	family
details	To start	schoolmate	to succeed

The positions of the clusters on the Cartesian axes (i.e., factors) emerging from this analysis are displayed in Figure 1. The *Bonding* cluster has a greater weight in the positive polarity of both factors, suggesting that the continuity between values' systems and relationship with nature foster achievements. The *Transforming* cluster weighs on the negative pole of factor two and is exactly halfway between the positive pole and the negative pole of the first factor. The transformative process described by this cluster therefore seems to tightly depend on the possibility to benefit from necessary information but also results as an optimal balance between reflective attitude and the need to maintain a continuity between the present and the past. Finally, the *Educating* cluster weighs more heavily on the negative polarity of the first factor and on the positive polarity of the second factor one. This suggests that the role of the educational system in shaping the human-nature relationship is primarily in fostering a reflective attitude and eliciting pro-environmental behavior rather than in providing information.

Figure 1. Graphical representation of factorial plan and clusters



Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore the issue of psychological distress related to the relationship between individuals and natural environment through a new interview, the EPI. From the narratives elicited by the EPI, three thematic clusters were identified: *Bonding*, *Transforming* and *Educating*.

The thematic area of *Bonding* refers to the relationships and their values. This theme was related to the *Narration* factor, suggesting an association with the identity construction process (Piccinno & Fiorentini, 2015). This seems to be in line with previous theoretical perspectives stressing the relevance of the identity issue in the relationship between individuals and nature (Albrecht, 2005; Clayton, 2020). Indeed, it suggests that the development of the relationship with the natural environment may be related to the construction of individual's identity and value system. In fact, our results stress the potential relevance of the value systems in shaping the individual's relationship with nature. Of note, some authors argued that, at the basis of individuals' beliefs about the environment, there are four human values, namely, biospheric, altruistic, selfish and hedonistic values. These would be associated with concerns for the environment, for others, for one's personal resources and for well-being and pleasure respectively (Bouman *et al.*, 2018). According to these studies, beliefs, attitudes and identity aspects related to the environment correlate with values belonging to self-transcendence and self-valorization which represent openness to change and a sense of preservation (Schwartz, 1994). These values would motivate individual to engage in activities useful to others and the environment (Stern *et al.*, 1998; Schultz & Zelezny, 1999). Therefore, this cluster echoes with the definition of eco-psychopathology as an environmental concern, mostly identified in the literature as eco-anxiety (Clayton, 2020). From this perspective, environmental concerns may be rooted the development of the relationship with the environment and have implications for the construction of the individual's identity and value system.

The thematic area *Transforming* refers to the home and childhood memories and places suggesting the role of attachment to the place. In agreement with conclusions of past studies, the interruption or loss of

the attachment bond is a key factor that may lead to the development of eco-psychopathologies (Albrecht, 2005; Higginbotham *et al.*, 2006, Galway *et al.*, 2019; Clayton, 2020). Of note, the construct of place attachment partially overlapped with the identity one with the first construct been described as comprising the two dimensions of place identification and place identity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Place identification refers to a social identity expressed through the place in which a social group is situated or located (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Complementarily, the place identity construct grasps the idea that the self is not only based on the relationships the individual has with others, but also on the relationships that individuals establish with the affective and everyday places (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983; Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1992). Qualitative data brought here suggest that it may be essential to refer to the construct of attachment to place such as the affective bond created between individuals and places to understand the nature of eco-psychopathologies (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). Indeed, the qualitative analysis of the interviews confirm the idea that individuals develop an attachment bond with everyday life places that also change over time. Unfortunately, except for the contributions focusing on solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005), there is a lack of knowledge regarding the interplay between role attachment to place and connection with nature in the explanation of psychological distress onset related to the relationship between individuals and the natural environment.

The last thematic area seems to confirm the idea of environmental-related passthrough education in contact with nature. According to some studies, although there is an innate connection to nature, this is also shaped by experiences (Kellert, 1997). Many studies confirm the idea that individuals who are more connected to nature as adults, remember having spent more time in nature during their childhood than those who are less connected to nature (Tam, 2013). Moreover, some studies suggested that contact with nature experienced during childhood impact the proneness to connect with nature in adulthood (Bang, 2007; Unsworth, 2012). This theme seems to confirm the idea that some populations, more than others, may have a higher incidence of developing eco-psychopathology because of a lifestyle that is strongly linked to the natural environment (Middleton *et al.*, 2020). This suggests that positive childhood experiences of nature may lay the

foundations for greater concern and sensitivity to the natural environment and the subsequent development of psychological distress associated with it.

Finally, the identification of the factors suggests the role of additional elements. The factor of *Narration* seems to be a process of reorganization of one's own history. The second factor would represent the need to deepen knowledge about one's own history to implement an action for changing the future. This converges with the idea that storytelling enables people to reconstruct their existence by understanding and becoming more aware of its developments (Bruner, 2006).

Limitations and conclusion

The limitations of this exploratory and qualitative study rely on the limited replicability as well as the quite small sample size. This leads to the fact that the typical words are not strongly differentiated across clusters.

Another aspect could be related to the interview itself and the poor knowledge among the interviewees regarding the phenomenon of eco-psychopathologies. Despite the current massive coverage of climate change in the mass media, several individuals claimed to not suffer from psychological issues related to the natural environment as, for example, they did not recognize anxiety regarding climate changes as a form of psychological distress. This aspect informs us regarding the relevance of the cultural framework on the way individual think and interpret the issue of eco-psychopathology and the way empirical investigations should be carried out in the Italian culture. Also, this element could direct public communication campaign that may want to stress the potential psychological consequences of climate changes.

Another aspect to consider is that narratives may also be influenced by the age of the respondent. In this respect, the literature suggests that concerns about climate change are predominant among young adults, that concerns about climate change vary according to the severity of its impact on one's life (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). An additional aspect is related to the practical implications of the work. Particularly,

the recruitment of the sample was a critical element due to the difficulty in finding people willing to participate.

Finally, limitations to the qualitative interpretation of the clusters and factors include the educational and professional background of the discussion group participants. The homogeneity in this background may have increased the risk of bias of interpretation process.

Future Direction and implications

The present study analyzed the narratives of Italian adults regarding the relationship between psychological distress related to natural environment. The knowledge reached here may be further extended by replicating the study among vulnerable population such as individuals exposed to environmental disasters. Despite the fact that this is a qualitative study, the data obtained have several implications for future research. In fact, research could be directed towards studying the implications of the identity process and the development of the value system linked to the individual's relationship with the natural environment. Regarding clinical implications, this study may help to plan future prevention and treatment interventions focused on psychopathological conditions linked to the natural environment.

As a whole, the study suggests that eco-psychopathological symptoms converge from several factors, including identity development, the relationship that humans build over time with the environment, the attachment bond with the environment, and aspects of personality such as values' systems. Each of these identified variables should be further investigated by future qualitative and quantitative studies.

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The representation of climate change: A retrospective newspaper analysis

Matteo Reho^{*}, Skaiste Kerušauskaitė^{**}, Barbara Cordella^{*},
Alessandro Gennaro^{***}

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an in-depth analysis aimed to identify climate change representations in four major Italian newspapers over 11 years. The objectives of the study were to map the prevailing themes, to examine the underlying semantic structures that shape the content of these themes, and to investigate the way they have evolved. To this end, the study used the Automated Co-occurrence Analysis for Semantic Mapping (ACASM) procedure applied to a text corpus consisting of the journal articles. The results highlight four distinctive themes based on two basic structures through which climate change is represented in the Italian media.

^{*} Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome (Italy).

^{**} Department of Classics, Philosophy and History, University of Genoa, Genoa (Italy).

^{***} Department of Human Sciences, Pegaso University (Italy).

Corresponding Author: Matteo Reho, Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies. Sapienza Università di Roma, Via degli Apuli 1, 00185 Roma RM. Email: matteo.reho@uniroma1.it

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Additionally, the study revealed significant temporal variability in the use of the themes during the period examined. Drawing on the framework of Semiotic Cultural Psychology theory, the implications of the findings are discussed, offering valuable insights into the perception and social representation of climate change in the Italian media landscape.

Keywords: Climate change, global warming, content analysis, newspapers, sensemaking.

Introduction

In the last decade, several empirical research studies have surveyed the representation of climate change in the media. As an example, Jaspal and Nerlich (2014) in a qualitative thematic analysis of British newspapers highlighted three representations of climate change in terms of a collective multi-faceted threat, an attribution of blame and a speculative solution to a complex socio-environmental problem. Similarly, a computer-assisted content analysis on climate-change-related newspapers provided evidence that the climate change issue is increasingly covered by the politics section rather than by the science column (Kirilenko & Stepchenkoygka, 2012). Bailey and colleagues (2014), studying the media representation of climate change through lexical analysis, found that U.S. newspapers contained a higher density of epistemic markers and used more ambiguous grammatical constructs related to uncertainties than Spanish newspapers, but every source analyzed used similar terms for expressing the uncertainty related to climate change. Kay and Gaymard (2021) in a three- newspaper analysis highlighted that climate coverage focused on politics and international involvement. In conclusion, media resources play an important role in supporting information about climate change among the population, tackling the hard task of simplifying and transmitting the complex scientific information concerning climate change issues (Ranney & Clark, 2016). Thus, in this panorama the media play a significant role in shaping psychological phenomena like climate change denial (Boykoff, 2013) or climate change anxiety (Clayton, 2020; Maran & Begotti, 2021), as well as in promoting the population's awareness about the implications of

climate change (Schäfer, 2012) which in some cases results in the adoption of pro-environmental and resilient behaviors (Hakala & Seeck, 2009).

The impact of the media on human choices and behavior has been amply explained by the Framing theory, which underlines the role of framing in promoting people's specific conceptualization of an issue or in helping to orient their thinking (Chong & Druckman, 2007). According to Entman (1993), people frame, that is, select some aspects of a phenomenon perceived as more salient in a certain communication context, promoting specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation. The concept of the frame has been widely acknowledged for its ability to explain the connection between the content of the message and the psychological mechanisms involved in media influence (Mazzara *et al.*, 2021), and it has been adopted to explain different phenomena such as public opinion (e.g., Fine, 1992; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012), the economy (e.g., Martin, 2016) and climate change (e.g., Anshelm & Hultman, 2014; Knight & Greenberg, 2011; Stecula & Merkley, 2019). Specifically, studies focusing on climate change identified different frames through which the phenomenon is represented at the international level. For example, Anshelm and Hultman (2014) conducted a study of climate change discourse in Sweden and identified four distinct frames that are used in the climate change debate. These frames include industrial fatalism, green Keynesianism, eco-socialism, and climate scepticism. Stecula and Merkley (2019), studying the evolution of frames over time in U.S. media sources, found that, although frames related to the economic harm associated with climate mitigation policies have played a significant role in the past, their importance is declining. In contrast, frames advocating public support and commitment for climate action have increased, as well as frames highlighting the economic benefits of climate action.

Despite the relevance of the results attained, frames are understood in terms of specific and contingent topics attributed to the phenomenon studied. However, such a focus does not allow us to highlight the structure of culturally generalized meanings grounding such specific and contingent frames. This limit makes it impossible to acknowledge the specific way the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., climate change) is tackled/narrated as a result of a cultural and social tenet.

To overcome this limitation, in the present work we aim to focus on climate change in newspapers according to the Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT; Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2007). The SCPT conceives frames in terms of themes that are active within narrative practices. Such themes are based on semantic structures that represent the basic components through which a given object is represented and that work in terms of latent dimensions of meaning— semiotic forces (Salvatore *et al.*, 2020) – orienting the way a specific issue is faced in narrative terms (Rochira *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, themes characterizing climate change issues could be identified in terms of patterns of co-occurring words. In this view, themes do not express an underlying content, which is already present in the text. Rather, a theme constitutes a pattern of meanings that acts as a sort of semiotic affordance that guides the interpreter’s interpretation (on the issue of texts and meaning, see Salvatore, 2016).

Adopting this perspective allows the topic of climate change to be placed in the perspective of clinical psychology that argues that the promotion of change – or, as in this case, resilience and pro-environmental behaviors – must take into account the interpretation of the social context within which people are embedded and in which the culturally based representations that guide individual attitudes and behaviors are formed (Carli & Panizza, 1999; Salvatore & Freda, 2011).

Accordingly, the present study investigates, on the one hand, the themes conveyed in a sample of articles about climate change taken from Italian newspapers, tracking their evolution in time; on the other hand, it focuses on the generalized cultural meanings that organize such themes.

Conceptual framework

The Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT) assumes that the individual’s psychological functioning is based on embodied patterns of meanings – understood in terms of generalized and affect-laden systems of assumptions (Salvatore *et al.*, 2016) – embodied in the systems of practices that make up the cultural milieu of the social group (Cole, 1998; Valsiner, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978) and therefore guide individual meaning-making. Thus, meaning making is inherently social and

cultural. The SCPT framework allows consideration of the affect-laden dimension of meanings and its ability to influence beliefs and behaviors, which is useful in explaining personal and public facts, such as media representations of major social issues.

According to the SCPT, the representation of a particular topic is the result of a consistent pattern of meaning (i.e., a theme) that foregrounds specific features or qualities while putting others in the background. Themes are generalized nuclei, employed in addressing the issue in the media texts analyzed. The emphasis is on the generalization aspect, as the analysis concentrates on the higher order meanings associated with the climate change issue, determining *how*, rather than *what*, the issue is framed, mainly, how the receiver of media information makes sense of it. Therefore, themes are underpinned in semantic structures, which in their turn are modelled as basic, semantic, *bipolar* components (Rochira *et al.*, 2020). In this analysis, bipolarity is the fundamental aspect of semantic components in the sense that the presence of one polarity implies the absence of the opposite meaning. For example, if something is “friend”, this means it is not hostile (Marková, 2003; Salvatore *et al.*, 2017). In this way, a theme consists of the presence or absence of the qualities that the semantic components make relevant (Salvatore *et al.*, 2012).

The SCPT theoretical perspective is handy for the analysis of the underlying representations of different phenomena. In the area of media representation, with a focus on newspapers, numerous studies have explored the representation of various social objects (Mannarini *et al.*, 2020). Rochira *et al.* (2020) and Mazzara *et al.* (2021) analyzed migration, Buhagiar *et al.* (2020) focused on Islam, and Pop *et al.* (2020) analyzed the LGBT community. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Venuleo *et al.* (2020) examined the semantic structures inherent in crisis-related narratives. The authors identified two key dimensions: the representation of the pandemic and the interpretation of its implications. Contesting the assumption of a universally disruptive meaning, the authors emphasized the need to recognize individual interpretations that are shaped by subjective meanings (Venuleo *et al.*, 2020). In addition, Lai *et al.* (2021) explored the complexities of communicative exchanges within online communities of young individuals struggling with eating disorders. Their investigation revealed the propensity of the so-called Pro-Ana (Pro-Anorexia) blog users to

normalize and idealize their eating behavior, potentially exacerbating the manifestation of psychotic traits associated with these disorders. Their findings underscored the importance of semantic structure analysis for better understanding and for effective intervention in these phenomena.

Taken together the above-mentioned studies highlight how the themes through which social phenomena are represented emerge from latent semiotic resources, which represent the social and individual means at disposal in facing the phenomena.

Aims

The newspapers' representation analysis is designed to map the themes characterizing Italian discussion on climate change and the latent sensemaking dimensions that ground and shape the content of such themes. Specifically, this study aims to: (a) identify the themes that emerge from media discourses on climate change; (b) identify the basic semantic structure underpinning the themes; (c) examine the variability in the themes through which climate change is narrated over time. Reaching such aims have three relevant implications. On the theoretical level, it contributes to the empirical analysis of the challenging issue of the relationship between the outputs (i.e., the contents) and organizational principles (i.e., the semantic structures) of social meaning-making processes (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013). On the empirical level, it allows us to detect differences in themes of climate change representation in newspapers and track their evolution in time. On the applicative level, mapping and tracking the way climate change is narrated makes it possible to acknowledge the semantic dimension and to identify alternative themes, helpful in promoting pro-environmental and resilient behaviors.

Method

Sample

To define the set of newspapers and articles for the analysis, the following procedure was adopted.

The sample consists of articles from four Italian national newspapers: *Repubblica*, *Il Manifesto*, *Il Giornale*, *Corriere della Sera*. Since the media representation of the climate issue has increased over time (IPCC, 2022), information was collected from 2011 to 2022 to have a broad understanding of the representation of climate change in the last 11 years and track its evolution over time. The newspaper choice was based on digital accessibility. The criterion of article selection was the presence of the term “climate” or “climate change” [in Italian: *clima* or *cambiamento climatico*] within the article at least once. In addition, in order to be analyzed each article had to contain a minimum of three hundred words within the text corpus. Finally, the selected articles had to be deemed focused on the topic of climate change by two independent raters with university level education. The consensus in cases of disagreement was reached by discussion.

In the following step a series of preliminary frequency analyses were conducted on a pre-selected set of articles with the goal of obtaining a constant temporal representation within the chosen time units for the final analysis. The time units of the final analysis were semesters (January to June and July to December). As the number of valid articles a month varied from 1 to 30, the risk was that the content in each timeframe would be overrepresented by some particular periods or peak events. Therefore, each semester included around 5 articles per month. If the monthly rate exceeded this limit, articles were selected randomly, while if a certain month was underrepresented, articles from nearby months were added. The whole sample selected consisted of 1530 articles. The distribution of articles in blocks and newspapers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the selected articles per time blocks and newspapers

Year	2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016		2017	
Semester	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	
Time block	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
Repubblica	14	16	17	18	23	24	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	
Il Manifesto	0	0	0	1	0	7	8	22	7	11	8	6	15	
Il Giornale	2	1	3	2	0	1	1	2	2	8	2	5	3	
Corriere della Sera	8	14	8	7	8	18	14	20	23	25	10	22	23	
Total	24	31	28	28	31	50	48	69	57	69	45	58	66	

Year	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		Total
Semester	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	
Time block	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
Repubblica	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	30	30	547
Il Manifesto	15	23	16	25	25	21	25	25	30	30	320
Il Giornale	6	4	14	5	24	18	25	25	30	30	213
Corriere della Sera	25	25	25	25	25	22	25	25	23	30	450
Total	71	77	80	80	99	86	100	100	113	120	1530

Data analysis

To identify the main themes and the semantic structure and to examine the positioning of the former within the latter, the data analysis employed the Automated Co-occurrence Analysis for Semantic Mapping procedure (ACASM, Gennaro & Salvatore, 2023; Salvatore *et al.*, 2012; 2017), which operates based on a semiotic understanding of meaning that takes into account sign transition (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). In the context of textual analysis, sign transition manifests as

co-occurrences of lexemes, specifically syntagmatic associations, within the same contextual units, such as paragraphs. The ACASM procedure was conducted through the T-Lab software (Lancia, 2004). To this end, ACASM adopts a two-stage procedure (for technical details, see Gennaro & Salvatore, 2023).

In the first stage, the corpus is segmented into elementary context units (ECUs), which are groups of adjacent utterances. This procedure allows the length of the segments for thematic interpretation to be balanced while avoiding a lack of specific thematic associations. In our case, the following criterion was adopted: (1) each ECU begins just after the end of the previous ECU; (2) each ECU ends with the first punctuation mark (“.”, or “!”, or “?”) occurring after the threshold of 250 characters from the first character; (3) if an ECU is longer than 2000 characters, it ends with the last word found within that length, even if there is no punctuation mark.

Then all the lexical forms in the text were identified and assigned to their headwords. This procedure reduces lexical variation (e.g., word forms like “see”, “seeing”, and “saw” share the lemma “see”, while “woman” and “women” both have “woman” as their lemma).

Subsequently, a selection process was conducted to exclude irrelevant lemmas from the analysis. This involved excluding stop-words, instrumental, empty, and indicative words (e.g., “namely”, “indeed”, “and”, “this”) that lack specific semantic content, initially through the application of T-Lab’s stop-words list, followed by a refinement check conducted by the research team. Basic auxiliary verbs (i.e., “to be” and “to have”) and the top 5 most frequent lemmas were also excluded to minimize noise and focus on specific semiotic patterns. The selection yielded a subset of the 1000 most frequent lemmas, striking a balance between computational feasibility within the algorithm’s constraints and the ability to detect meaningful patterns in the data.

In light of this preliminary textual data arranging, the procedure reduced the text under analysis in a digital corpus where each cell within the matrix indicated the presence (1) or absence (0) of a particular lemma within a specific ECU.

In the second stage of the procedure, the digital textual representation obtained underwent a multidimensional analysis integrating Cluster Analysis (CA) and Correspondence Analysis (COR) to map,

respectively, the thematic contents of the text and identify the semantic structure organizing the text.

CA was employed on the digital matrix, which comprised elementary context units (ECUs) and lemmas, to cluster the ECUs in the textual corpus. The goal of CA was to identify clusters of headwords that tend to co-occur within a same ECU indicating similar semantic content or themes. Clustering was based on the similarity derived from the co-occurrence of words, grouping text units with shared co-occurring words together. This clustering approach allowed for a detailed representation of semantic content by encoding each unit of analysis with its specific co-occurring word set. The quality of the chosen cluster partition was then inspected using “cluster quality” measures: specifically, choosing the partition with the largest value for the Calinski-Harabasz and please add a space between ICC and (Rho) indices and the smallest value for the Davies-Bouldin index.

Subsequently, COR was conducted on the resulting matrix, with lemmas as rows and clusters as columns. Each cell in the matrix denoted the frequency of a lemma within a cluster.

COR aimed to reveal the underlying semantic structures associated with the themes identified through CA. In so doing, the factorial space obtained by the COR does not map the semantic structure of the text; rather, it detects the semantic dimensions in terms of which the patterns of co-occurring lemmas are (dis)-similar to each other. Each polarity represents a set of co-occurring signs that either appeared together or were absent. Additionally, COR enabled the representation of additional variables, known as illustrative variables, on the factorial dimensions. Although these variables did not contribute to the definition of the multidimensional space, they were associated with the established factorial dimensions. This facilitated the interpretation of the relationship between semantic structures and segment/article characteristics (time block in the specific case).

To examine the possible temporal variation of themes, a contingency table that provides the degree of association of each time block with each theme was extracted. Subsequently, for each time block the standard deviation of represented clusters was calculated. Standard deviation has been interpreted in terms of dispersion concerning the themes through which climate change is tackled. Specifically, the higher the standard deviation over time, the more the climate change

issue within a given time block is treated according to different narratives. Thus, higher standard deviation represents a more diversified and less tight representation of the climate change issue according to a dominant theme. Accordingly, a linear regression was run having the standard deviation as dependent variable and the six-month time blocks as independent variable.

Results

The matrix employed for analysis comprised 10277 ECUs organized in rows and 30377 lemmas in columns. The Cluster Analysis division into four themes was chosen as the optimal solution (Calinski-Harabasz = 70.50; Davies-Bouldin = 11.54; ICC = 0.02). The themes were defined by the most representative lemmas, which are presented in Table 2, and were interpreted by the research team through a consensus procedure (Harris *et al.*, 2012; Schielke *et al.*, 2009) as follows:

Theme 1. Climatic variations. Lemmas in this theme refer to the rising global temperatures (Temperature, Hot, Heat), the impact of climate change on the Earth's bodies of water (Water, Sea), the occurrence of extreme weather events (Drought, Extreme), changing weather patterns, the impact on biodiversity, and geographic regions and ecosystems affected by climate change (Phenomenon, Species, Area).

Theme 2. International negotiation. Lemmas referring to the formal agreements and commitments made by countries to address the challenges posed by climate change (Agreements, Commitments) as in the case of the Paris Agreement at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (Paris, Conference), the role of countries in addressing the problem (Country, China, United States), and the role of policymakers in setting climate policies (Trump, Obama, President).

Theme 3. Sustainability. Characteristic lemmas of this theme refer to the need for renewable and sustainable (Renewable, Sustainable) energy solutions (Energy, Energetic), the role of investment and corporate actions in addressing the climate crisis (Investment, Company), the energy industry and related fields, and the transition to sustainable energy systems, policies, and practices (Sector, Transition).

Theme 4. Activism. Lemmas referring to one of the best-known figures about the issue of climate change and her role in inspiring a global movement of activists (Greta, Thunberg, Activist, Movement), to the involvement of young individuals in climate change initiatives (Young, Boy, Student), to the Fridays for Future movement and the public spaces where protests and demonstrations related to climate change take place (Square, Fridays, Future).

Table 2. Lemmas characterizing the three themes

<i>Theme 1 – Climatic variations</i>				<i>Theme 2 – International negotiation</i>			
<i>Lemmas</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	χ^2	<i>Lemmas</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	χ^2
Temperature	1073	1285	1457.048	Agreement	806	9212	030.408
Water	883	1068	1170.725	Paris	766	936	1710.695
Hot	559	625	884.782	Country	1274	2128	1498.06
Drought	384	427	614.721	Trump	468	525	1216.172
Phenomenon	432	519	580.928	President	612	824	1136.787
Species	380	440	556.082	Conference	443	587	848.302
Extreme	387	471	504.71	Obama	310	340	837.166
Area	461	603	503.839	China	437	609	757.562
Sea	412	518	496.93	United States	408	605	622.352
Heat	289	314	486.216	Commitments	288	359	618.859
<i>Theme 3 – Sustainability</i>				<i>Theme 4 – Activism</i>			
<i>Lemmas</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	χ^2	<i>Lemmas</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	χ^2
Energy	884	1193	1430.301	Greta	407	449	1805.322
Renewable	596	682	1331.093	Young	380	461	1465.989
Energetic	685	853	1302.858	Square	267	309	1104.123
Investment	411	471	914.825	Activist	260	312	1019.061
Sector	408	531	709.869	Thunberg	206	225	926.351
Transition	362	484	595.899	Movement	243	306	885.734
Fossil	480	737	583.401	Boy	188	205	847.37
Sustainable	391	548	582.771	Fridays	166	173	797.96
Euro	305	390	549.652	Future	482	999	739.866
Company	316	421	523.912	Student	152	170	660.43

Note. All χ^2 values are significant below the level of .001.

The correspondence analysis on the lemmas x clusters matrix produced two factorial dimensions (Table 3). The consensus procedure used by the research team resulted in the following interpretations:

Factor 1. Institution – Environmental risks. The negative pole of this factor groups lemmas that refer to international governance and cooperation mechanisms, aimed at addressing climate change (Agreement, Paris, Target, Conference), the role of political leadership and the actions of individual nations (Country, President, Trump, Obama), the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources (Emission, Energy), formal structures and practices of ecological balance (Institution, Sustainable), and organizations that can contribute to actions against climate change (Euro, Company). Positive pole lemmas, on the other hand, refer to the concept of rising temperatures and heat (Temperature, Hot, Heat), to the interconnectedness of water resources and the marine environment (Water, Sea), to the changes and climate effects which translate into occurrence and intensification of extreme weather events (Phenomenon, Extreme), to water scarcity (Drought, Area), and to the impacts of changing environmental conditions on biodiversity (Species).

Factor 2. Advocacy – Transition. The negative pole of this factor includes lemmas that refer to individuals engaged in raising awareness and driving action (Greta Thunberg, Young, Boy, Student, Activist), to the collective and organized efforts of activists (Movement, Fridays, Square) in addressing climate change (Climate). On the other hand, the positive pole of this factor groups lemmas that refer to the role of energy systems and the need for sustainable alternatives (Energy, Renewable, Energetic), to the economic aspects of climate change and the energy sector (Investment, Sector, Billion, Euro), to the contrasting energy sources and their environmental implications (Fossil, Source), to the importance of adopting sustainable practices and systems (Sustainable).

In Figure 1 it may be observed that Climatic variations (Theme 1) were situated within the positive polarity of the first factor, indicative of its association with the Environmental risks. Conversely, International negotiation (Theme 2) showed an alignment with the negative pole of the first factor, signifying its association with Institution. Sustainability (Theme 3) positioned within the positive pole of the second factor, which represents Transition, while concurrently tending to

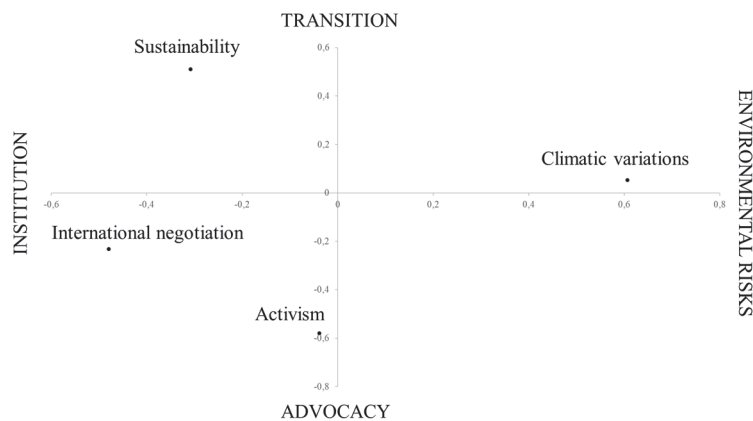
associate with the negative pole of the first factor (Institution). Lastly, Activism (Theme 4) emerged on the negative pole of the second factor, thereby reflecting its linkage to Advocacy.

Table 3. Characteristic lemmas of factorial dimensions

Factor 1				Factor 2			
Institution		Environmental risks		Advocacy		Transition	
Pole (-)	V Test	Pole (+)	V Test	Pole (-)	V Test	Pole (+)	V Test
Agreement	-0.0122	Temperature	0.0181	Greta	-0.0203	Energy	0.0205
Paris	-0.0107	Water	0.0161	Young	-0.0162	Renewable	0.0191
Country	-0.0093	Hot	0.0121	Square	-0.0121	Energetic	0.0185
Emission	-0.0086	Phenomenon	0.0084	Activist	-0.0112	Investment	0.0135
President	-0.0075	Drought	0.0083	Thunberg	-0.0106	Sector	0.0108
Trump	-0.0068	Species	0.0078	Boy	-0.0092	Billion	0.0089
Energy	-0.006	Sea	0.007	Movement	-0.0086	Euro	0.0089
Target	-0.0055	Area	0.0068	Fridays	-0.0083	Fossil	0.0081
Conference	-0.0052	Heat	0.0067	Climate	-0.0072	Source	0.008
Obama	-0.0049	Extreme	0.0067	Student	-0.0071	Sustainable	0.0075

Note. Each pole contains the 10 most representative lemmas.

Figure 1. Themes position on the semantic space, defined by factor 1 in the abscise axis and factor 2 in the ordinate axis



Finally, simple linear regression tested the significant role of time in predicting the variability of themes according to which the issue of climate change is tackled by newspapers. Specifically, the regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = .418$, $F [1,21] = 15,090$, $p < .001$) and showed an increase in variability over time in themes dealing with climate change ($\beta = .647$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study aimed to map the themes characterizing the Italian public discourse on climate change from 2011 to nowadays. Specifically, it was designed to detect the themes adopted by four national newspapers addressing the phenomenon of climate change, to identify the semantic structures underlying the themes, and, finally, to assess themes variability from 2011 to 2022.

The results concerning the issues addressed by newspapers on climate change revealed four main themes. The first encompassed Climate variations, characterized by phenomena such as the rise in temperatures, extended periods of drought followed by sporadic episodes of intense rainfall, and the occurrence of hurricanes. The second theme pertained to international negotiations, involving key events, like the United Nations Framework on Climate Change Convention and the Paris Agreement. The third theme accounted for the issue of Sustainability, encompassing endeavours focused on seeking energy solutions, and investments, aimed at eradicating reliance on fossil fuels. Lastly, the fourth theme concerned the issue of Activism. It focused on the active efforts undertaken by individuals to draw attention to the issue of climate change amongst the public and policymakers.

The themes identified highlight a substantial agreement of Italian public debate on climate change with that of the international media. Specifically, a recurring theme pertaining to the consequences and impact of climate change, referred to as Climatic variations in this study, is found to align with findings from other scholarly investigations. Han *et al.* (2017) conducted an extensive content analysis of Chinese newspapers from 2005 to 2015 and similarly identified a theme focusing on the consequences of climate change in terms of its environmental impact. This finding gains further support from the work of Lopera and

Moreno (2014), who analyzed the coverage of climate change in the Spanish press between 2000 and 2010, as well as Chand (2017), whose content analysis specifically explored the newspaper discourse surrounding climate change in the Fiji Islands. In both studies, an evident theme was closely related to climatic consequences and impacts. Furthermore, the theme of climatic consequences and impacts was also identified in the analysis conducted by Kirilenko and Stepchenkova (2012), which examined articles published by the New York Times between 1995 and 2010, as well as in the content analysis carried out by Keller *et al.* (2020), focusing on climate change coverage in the Indian press from 1997 to 2016.

The consistency of these findings across diverse geographical contexts and different time periods suggests the acknowledgment of wide-ranging climate change effects as a cross-cultural concern.

Furthermore, the identification of the international negotiations theme in this study aligns with findings from other international investigations. Kirilenko and Stepchenkova (2012) detected this theme through their meticulous analysis of articles that discussed international negotiations in the political domain. Such observation shows that the discourse surrounding climate change extends beyond its environmental dimensions to encompass the political sphere of global collaboration and decision-making. Furthermore, Keller *et al.* (2020) provided an additional corroboration by finding the presence of the same theme in their assessment of climate change coverage in the Indian press. The inclusion of the theme of international negotiations substantiates the recognition of the pivotal role played by multilateral endeavours and international agreements in addressing the global-scale implications of climate change.

Moreover, the theme of Sustainability identified in this study aligns with the “solutions” theme identified by Lopera and Moreno (2014) which emphasizes the exploration of viable approaches to address the challenges posed by climate change.

Notably, unlike the international literature, Italian articles leave space for the theme of activism. However, it is possible that this aspect may emerge in studies focused on the most recent years, given the international demonstrations by activists (e.g., vandalizing artworks in museums and public squares) aimed at drawing public and political attention to the issue of climate change.

To sum up, the presence of overlapping themes concerning climate change in the international scientific landscape suggests a prevailing global framing of the climate change phenomenon through recurrent representations.

The second objective of this study was to detect the latent organizing dimensions of climate change issues. The semantic structures that emerged were related to the dichotomous opposition between the institutional and the environmental risks, on one hand, and to the opposition between the sense of advocacy and the need for ecological transition on the other hand. As semantic structures ground and shape the content of the representation, it can be seen that different themes are consistently associated within the semiotic space (i.e., the space where the semantic structures intersect). This means that the position of the themes represents the instantiation of the semantic structures Institution-Environmental risks and Advocacy-Transition. Important to note is that the identification of the semantic structures, underlying the (media) representation of climate change allows us to find connections between seemingly separate social objects (e.g., international negotiations and the environment). Consequently, the contents of the representation of climate change can be recognized as a spatio-temporal manifestation of a broader sense-making dynamics that shapes the experience of the internal and external environment, namely, the image that individuals and groups (in this case, newspapers) have of themselves and their relationship to the surrounding context.

Finally, differently from previous cited works, the linear regression model allowed us to track the role of time in promoting different ways to tackle the climate change issue. Over time there is an increase in the focus of climate change according to different thematic contents (i.e., themes), and this trend may be a consequence of the general increase in media interest in climate-related issues as well as the increased awareness of the multifaced nature of the issue (IPCC, 2022).

In the whole, our data highlight that, on the one hand, the themes according to which climate change is tackled by the media are substantially aligned to those identified in other countries (see Chand, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2017; Keller *et al.*, 2020; Kirilenko and Stepchenkova, 2012; Lopera and Moreno, 2014). Nevertheless, the last 11 years have seen the increase of different thematic content related to the climate change phenomenon reflecting the awareness and the need for a

multifaceted understanding (OECD, 2009). Moreover, beyond this data-driven interpretation, it could be hypothesized that the greater variability of themes reflects, on the one hand, greater interest and demand from readers; on the other hand, greater attention to the issue of climate change by newspapers. In both cases, such variability results in diverse representations that are able to capture the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon as an attempt to increase social commitment toward enacting pro-environmental and resilient behaviors. A future test of these interpretive hypotheses would enhance the role of the media as a preferred medium for increasing the salience of the phenomenon involved and enhancing individual engagement and agency toward it.

Limits and conclusion

First of all, this study focuses only on the Italian context; moreover, the low number of newspapers under analysis and the lack of comparison to the international newspapers in the same time span mark the poor generalizability of this exploratory study. Future research should address such limitations conducting cross-national comparative studies within the framework of SCPT, which would help to identify and understand potential variations in climate change representations across different countries and cultures. As was underlined in the introduction of this paper, individual meaning-making is embodied in the cultural practices within a certain social group. Thus, further cross-cultural studies within SCPT framework could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how societal factors shape climate change perceptions and responses. For example, it would be interesting to investigate the relation between activism and theme variability in different cultures, as well as the relationship between theme variability and socio-economic factors. Additionally, including a broader range of newspapers in future research would provide a more comprehensive overview of climate change communication. Finally, future research should consider the influence of political orientation on climate change communication in order to verify whether different political orientations translate into different communicative models.

Nevertheless, this study is relevant both in the theoretical and

intervention perspectives. At the theoretical level, the study makes a contribution to the analysis of the relationship between narrative content and the organizing principles (i.e., semantic structures) of social meaning-making processes (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013).

At the empirical level, the ability to identify differences in the themes of climate change representation in newspapers and to track their evolution over time provides a deeper understanding of how climate change is represented in the media, capturing changes in narratives and identifying emerging themes. By examining the dynamic nature of these themes, a better understanding can be gained of the evolution of societal perceptions, attitudes and responses to climate change.

Moreover, at the applicative level, mapping and monitoring how climate change is narrated in the media can have practical implications in terms of promoting new or different narratives on the phenomenon at stake able to promote pro-environmental and resilient behaviors. In fact, identifying alternative themes beyond the dominant narratives provides opportunities to introduce different perspectives, emphasize the urgency of action, and encourage sustainable behaviors. Moreover, comprehensive mapping and monitoring about climate change communication could enable the design of targeted interventions that address specific issues and involve different social groups. This approach can promote pro-environmental attitudes, facilitate informed decision making, and foster resilient behaviors in the face of climate challenges.

In the final analysis, it could be argued that the issue of climate change is a matter of clinical psychology in light of its commitment toward the promotion of the psychosocial resources to sustain a complex socio-cognitive task that should be considered a strategic aim of institutional action, on a par with that of economic, infrastructural, and institutional resources.

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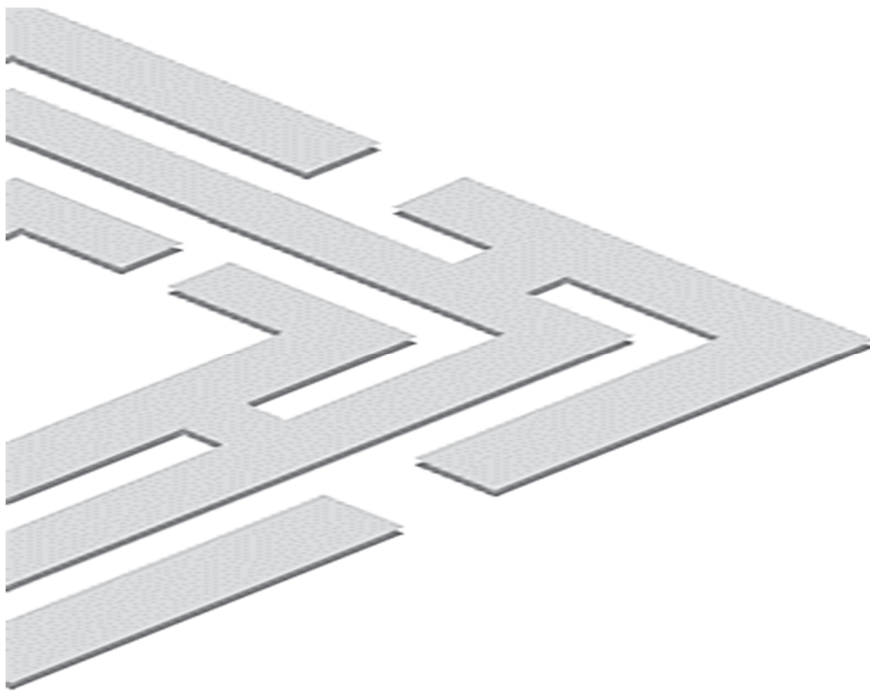
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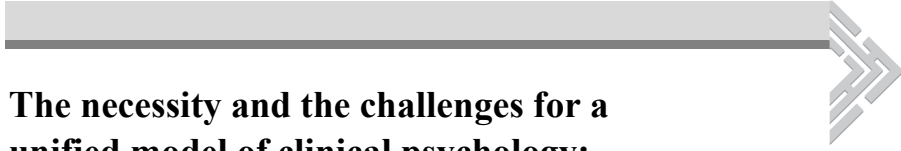
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COMMENTARIES*



* Commentaries on Salvatore *et al.* (2022). Compartmentalization and unity of professional psychology. A road map for the future of the discipline. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 1, 7-33.



The necessity and the challenges for a unified model of clinical psychology: A commentary on Salvatore *et al.*, 2022

*Stanley J. Berman**

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Abstract

Salvatore *et al.* (2022) have contributed a most important commentary about how patients and the profession of Clinical Psychology are at considerable risk as the trend towards specialization has meant that even core constructs in our field are not universally endorsed. A science without fundamental agreement about foundational concepts is at great risk. They go on to make several salient suggestions to facilitate addressing this substantial problem. In this commentary, the author strongly agrees with their concern and applauds their suggested next steps towards a resolution. He argues that all scientific pursuits benefit from both theory and research that has a broad focus as well as a very specialized focus. Advances in cell biology, for example have created a new and vital field of gene editing. The difficulty is when health care provider psychologists can no longer have dialogues about shared and overlapping theory and practice. Examples of collaborative work in World War II technology research and in the development of Chaos Theory are cited, as well as the philosopher Stephen Pepper's argument about the role of root hypotheses. He proposes beginning a process of an international working group to assist in this effort to reunify our field. He also cautions and specifies the significant obstacles to this endeavor.

Keywords: Clinical, psychology, unification, compartmentation.

* Child psychologist and pediatric health psychologist, 12 Turtle Lane, Dover, MA 02030-2053, USA. Email: stanleyberman208@gmail.com

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Salvatore and colleagues (2022) have contributed a most important and thoughtful argument on the costly compartmentalization and lack of unity in professional psychology. The paper is an urgent call to action to re-claim the science and practice of psychology. In the paper, there is a strong argument that Clinical Psychology, as a discipline, suffers due to the development of several silos across the decades. They propose that we are approaching a Tower of Babel situation which serves our profession and our patients poorly. This lack of unity has meant a loss of a consensual, or at least a substantially shared set of foundational concepts and road maps. One could ask if, indeed there ever was a golden age with a unitary endorsed meta-model. I will share my position at the outset and then present my arguments. I strongly agree with Salvatore and his co-authors that our field and our patients deserve clinical care that is based on a science with agreed upon foundational concepts and constructs. I would wish that we would all agree that this is a vital goal. As I will discuss, however, this goal, even with the thoughtful facilitation and guidance of Salvatore and colleagues, will remain elusive and aspirational as the current politics and viewpoints in our discipline do not suggest that this rapprochement between the different schools of thought and paradigms will occur.

This is not, however, akin to a collegiate debate in which one side wins. There is not a single correct answer or resolution to the question posed and explored in this paper. Both deep and narrow study and research, and broad attempts to arrive at a unified map have their place and their contributions. We recognize the benefit when scientists have a highly specific area of study. For example, advances in immunotherapy in the effective treatment of some cancers, were due to the narrow exploration of cell biologists and oncologists (Mutherjee, 2022). We are grateful to Nobel laureate chemists Doudna and Charpentier for their dogged and hyper-focused research contributions on genome editing. There are, however, substantial costs, as well, to the tunnel vision that is required for these achievements. Researchers, unchallenged by colleagues in different disciplines, will possibly stall in their work as they cannot move behind their single paradigm with its set of assumptions. They will be unduly tempted to try to fit an unexplained finding under the tent of their model; rather than ferret out what this finding may signify. We would, of course, apply Kuhn's work on paradigms here as a underpinning for this argument (Kuhn, 1966). We

see repeatedly, that when scientists and theorists are put in circumstances where they explore phenomenon together, the new synergies often lead to innovation and new understanding.

This was well illustrated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during World War II. Temporary buildings were erected. Scientists from varying disciplines were provided desks together to develop new technology for the war effort. At the real and metaphorical water coolers, researchers, whom typically did not encounter each other, began discussions which lead to collaborations and innovations. This unintentional “mixing” produced remarkable results (Burchard, J. 1948). In the 1980’s, science journalist, James Gleick, wrote a best-selling book on the emergent field of Chaos Theory. In chapter after chapter, he was able to show how, when intractable challenges were approached by scientists with divergent training, new ways of thinking and perceiving arose and refractory problems were solved (Gleick, 1987). Thus, there are clear benefits to both the disciplined narrow focus and the broad, cross-disciplinary collaboration.

The problem in Clinical Psychology is that we, too often, are sadly even proud that we are not proficient or have even an introductory understanding of new models, theories and empirical findings in psychology areas that are adjacent or distant to our own. We can observe in our colleagues who are scholars and practitioners of psychodynamic psychotherapy or of neuropsychology, for example, the following phenomenon. Their dedication to their sub-field may often translates to a lack of professional knowledge or proficiency in emerging constructs like Motivational Interviewing, the Trans-theoretical model, new models of suicide prevention or a grasp of non-psychodynamic interventions for the treatment of major depression. There should not be an expectation that clinical psychologists possess so much breadth and depth that they are up to date on visual perception research or the newest models for the development of Alzheimer’s Disease, if these are not their areas. We should, however, expect that foundational constructs in psychopathology, human development, human motivation, family systems and large systems functioning etc. should be the same road map or at least a very similar road map with some asterisks and overlays.

Stephen Pepper in 1942 described world hypotheses (Pepper, 1942). These are models from our world that are proposed to provide a paradigm or as he named it a root hypothesis for understanding our

entire world. For example, the machine became the paradigm (Mechanistic Paradigm) to understand how the world works and thus we had the lengthy era with this as the dominant paradigm. With a smaller focus, the early work on the development of the computer and its systems theory, as well as ecology theory in biology, became the root metaphors for a model for Family Systems. The cell is now a strong candidate as a model for our time. Pepper labeled this the Organismic Paradigm. To be clear, however, one could suggest that perhaps the world is like a tomato with its smooth, continuous outer skin and its chambers within. This model could be tried out and we would soon find its limitations. Each of these paradigms, however, has an agreed upon set of constructs, definitions, developmental models and internal logic.

If it is the case that psychologist A in Rome, psychologist B in Singapore and psychologist C in Los Angeles do not agree on seven or ten of a dozen key ideas and models in our field, then the discipline has a dramatic problem. There is not uniformity in medicine. An individual suffering from lower back pain may go to a number of medical specialists in orthopedics, neurology, brain surgery, pain management and psychiatry and receive contradictory recommendations. Nonetheless, as medical health care consumers, we have a basic trust that with a given set of symptoms, the assessment and treatment plan would most often be more similar than not, and certainly based on the same foundational assumptions and empirical support. If as Salvatore and co-authors assert that this is not the case, then their call to action needs to be heeded.

Salvatore, Ando' and colleagues (2022) propose an incisive critique of why compartmentalization has a high cost and impedes the transversality of psychological science. They propose three approaches, drawing from the literature, that may well be effective unifying strategies. These include the «search for an ultimate explanation», «the progressive extension of specific theories» and the «building of a metatheoretical framework... to match the conceptual connections among short theories» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 6). Each of their proposed strategies are sound recommendations and require our serious response to their call to action. They provide a road map to how to work towards a new paradigm for psychology.

There are additional obstacles that must be addressed to bring us all to the table to assume this imposing, but essential task. To begin with, the history of our field was one in which the theoreticians were the

original power brokers. Freud and his followers built their theory from clinical observation, but with little or no empirical testing. The behaviorists in the United States, in contrast, built their model from careful research and a reliance on empiricism. Both models, however, became paradigms and closed systems. A graduate student needed to explore these two competing models and then literally join the church of their choice. The discussions between these opposing models were often limited, contentious and not respectful. There was a lack of curiosity about why and how these competing models work and explained the phenomena under study. The argument proposed is that this was an era of theory as ascendant.

We are now in an era of the reverence for empirical findings, with reticence about the value of over-arching foundational theories. In this Hegelian struggle, Salvatore, Ando' and colleagues (2022) are calling for a synthesis and a resolution that respects and requires empirical testing and validation, but is also based upon a consensual paradigm for the human condition. There is a sociological challenge to be addressed for this call for unity to be responded to. Akin to the bitter political divides in the United States, Italy, France, Brazil and many other nations, in which warring parties are indeed warring; we have to create a path in which curiosity, humility and respect replace name calling and skepticism about the positions of the opposing camps.

The tripartite action steps proposed in the Salvatore article can and should be implemented. In addition, the formal appointment of on-going working groups in the professional psychology associations in many countries could begin the long and arduous journey towards a unified model for clinical psychology. While there may be a strong endorsement of this call for a unified platform for our field, early discussions will include an insistence of which diverse models must be foundational. One group might argue that an evolutionary model is essential, while another, in this century of the brain, call for the centrality of neuroscience. Salvatore *et al.*, 2022 point to efforts by Henriques, Sternberg (2004) and Melchert (2013) as good starting points. The Engel's biopsychosocial model and other systemic perspective might also be recognized as useful organizing perspectives (Engel, 1977). The marketplace of models will require patience and mutual respect. This work should have an international template for what concepts need to be addressed and with a plan for one or more

international forums in order to create a new international paradigm for psychology. These bodies should also create a road map for how and under what conditions, the paradigm can and should evolve and be updated. Should, for example, an international body meet every three or five years? We appreciate that in the beginning of such an initiative, there will be much flag waving. For example: There is no model without an evolutionary biology foundation or a systems model or psychodynamic model. This hopefully will be replaced by much more basic inquiries into what is development, or attachment, or psychopathology. This proposed concrete proposal may be naïve and aspirational. It would, however, be a great contribution to our discipline and to our clinical population. As Salvatore and associates insist, fundamental to this effort will be a constant awareness of the role of the human in their ecology and in their socio-cultural surround. We are indebted to Salvatore and co-authors for this seminal contribution and fervently hope that it will spur on new resolve and a fresh initiative.

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Norcia and the central italian earthquake: Challenges and lessons learned from the italian psychiatric reform movement

*Richard F. Mollica**, *Sonia Graziano***

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Abstract

Salvatore and colleagues wrote a brilliant *Target Article* (2022) in this journal on the state of Italian psychology and recommendations for change. In this contribution, we look at the failure of Italian psychology to address the suffering of the affected population of the central italian earthquake in Norcia in 2016. The Italian National Trauma Center centered in Orvieto, Umbria has been on the ground assisting local health care practitioners in caring for the mental health impact of the earthquake and the COVID pandemic lockdown. Absent Italian psychologists walk hand in hand with a political system that has had limited response to the mental health needs of earthquake survivors. Lessons learned from the historic revolution in Italian Psychiatry led by Professor Franco Basaglia are presented to help understand the current reality in Norcia. Many of the barriers to mental health reform

* Director, Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma. Massachusetts General Hospital; Harvard Medical School (HMS).

** Psychology Unit Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Unit Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital, IRCCS, Rome, Italy.

Corresponding Author: Richard F. Mollica, 8 Hillside Road. Lincoln mass USA 01773. Email: richard.mollica@gmail.com

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that existed for Basaglia and his colleagues still exist today. This contribution strongly supports Salvatore and colleagues' recommendations for the transformation of Italian psychology.

Keywords: Italian psychology, Norcia, earthquake, italian psychiatric reform.

The brilliant commentary by Sergio Salvatore and colleagues (2022) offers many possible explanations why modern Italian psychology (and psychiatry as well) failed to adequately respond to the suffering of the Italian community after a severe earthquake in Norcia, Italy in 2016, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The Italian National Trauma Center (INTC) and its American partner, the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HPRT), have been on location in Norcia and in the field attempting to modestly fill this gap in mental health care in Norcia, Cascia, and surrounding villages and towns. The Commentary by Salvatore *et al.* is a “look behind the curtain” that can possibly explain the almost total lack of Italian psychologists and psychiatrists serving the central Italian earthquake zone. While the suffering of the affected population is great, the lack of professional mental health involvement is an enigma. The compartmentalization of modern Italian psychology, termed *siloining* in America, could represent a major causal factor.

The siloining of modern Italian psychology into professional models and practices can generate a fragmented reality incapable of elucidating and responding to the mental health needs of a community following a disaster. As Salvatore *et al.* state, this compartmentalization or siloining has led to an inability of psychology as a profession and psychologists as practitioners to readily apply their highly specific approaches to earthquake survivors. This advanced specialization weakens psychology's social image as well as its impact on Italian society. The absent psychologist walks hand in hand with the Italian political system that chooses to ignore human suffering in an entire region and its population. As Salvatore *et al.* acknowledge, modern Italian psychologists are unable to reach out from their professional niches to solve the great challenges facing the world today, such as war in Ukraine, mass migration, climate change, ecocide, pandemics, and natural disasters.

The philosophical solutions offered by Salvatore and colleagues will not be addressed in this reflection. Instead, this commentary will bring forward the brilliant insights of the late Professor Franco Basaglia and the Italian revolution in psychiatry from decades ago. The first author (RFM) had the privilege of meeting Dr. Basaglia in the 1980s at La Sapienza, Rome. Because of his follow up to Hollingshead and Redlich's *Social Class and Mental Illness* (1958) as a young psychiatrist, Dr. Mollica was invited by Dr. Raffaello Misiti, Director of CNR, Rome, to help evaluate the impact of the Italian psychiatric reform and the law passed to close all Italian mental hospitals, Public Law 180. This evaluation was published in a collection of essays by Basaglia, his acolytes, and critics in the *International Journal of Mental Health* in 1985, entitled "The Unfinished Revolution in Italian Psychiatry: An International Perspective" (Mollica, 1985a).

The social, political, and cultural insights of the psychiatric reform movement, *Psichiatria Democratica*, spawned in Gorizia in the 1960s and formalized by Public Law 180, aimed to bring about psychiatric reform at all levels of society, from the governmental to the interpersonal. The Basaglia revolution resulted in the closing of the mental hospitals and implemented a new approach to the psychiatric care of the seriously mentally ill. This reform was a major human rights movement that was endorsed by psychiatric professionals, students, politicians, and the general public. Salvatore and colleagues may not be advocating a revolution as dramatic as the Italian psychiatric reform, but the latter can provide a roadmap for breaking down the silos and bringing psychologists and a newly derived theory of human suffering and professional practice into Italian communities such as Norcia.

Norcia: The central italian earthquake zone

The seismic events in Central Italy of 2016 and 2017, defined by the Italian National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV) as the Amatrice-Norcia-Visso seismic sequence, began in August 2016 with epicenters located between the upper Tronto Valley, the Monti Sibillini, Monti of the Laga and Monti of the Alto Aterno. On October 30, 2016, the strongest quake was recorded, with a magnitude

of 7.6 and epicenter between Norcia and Preci (PG). On January 18, 2017, a new sequence of four strong tremors of magnitude greater than 5 took place, with the epicenters located between L'Aquila and Montereale, Capitignano, and Cagnano Amiterno. This combination of events resulted in approximately 41,000 displaced persons, 388 injured, and 303 dead. Most of the population were displaced from their homes, workplaces, places of worship and community meeting sites.

As expected, the impact on the health of the population was very significant; experiences of discouragement and lack of hope were very common. The consequences for mental health of mass traumatic and catastrophic events (particularly in areas with high exposure) are well known and documented internationally. The scientific literature reports that in the months following this type of disaster, 25% of adults and 30% of children have mild to moderate mental health problems and 5% of adults and 10% of children have severe mental health problems. Scientific data reveal the possibility that such difficulties become chronic and characterized by high prevalence if not treated. The most vulnerable groups are children, the elderly, and individuals with previous pathologies. Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common (Schoenbaum *et al.*, 2009).

The COVID-19 health emergency, which hit Italy and the world in 2020, inevitably represented an additional risk factor, further compounding the sense of insecurity in the population already traumatized by the earthquakes. There is a risk of an increase in the suicide rate due to trauma with subsequent economic complications and unemployment. Risk is greater in the most disadvantaged classes where the ability to meet basic needs is hindered due to loss of work. Recently the alarm was raised by Italian psychiatrists at the International Conference on issues related to suicide, organized by Sapienza University of Rome on the World Day for the Prevention of Suicide in September 2020. The data showed that in Italy, from March to September 2020, there were 71 cases of suicide compared to 44 in the same period in 2019, an increase of over 60%. Particular attention should also be paid to the elderly who, as is well known, can die in the absence of specific medical reasons in relation to the sense of despair and impotence (“giving in-giving up syndrome”).

The Italian National Trauma Center (INTC) and the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HPRT) mental health assistance

The INTC-Harvard Team, composed of Italian and American psychiatrists, psychologists, and general medical doctors, is deeply committed to assisting the communities affected by the earthquakes in central Italy. Following an invitation to provide assistance for the consequences associated with earthquakes, HPRT and its partner organization INTC, which is supported by the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), have developed several projects aimed at protecting physical and mental health.

The projects focused on the diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems as a consequence of the traumatic experience. Collaboration with local general practitioners in the affected areas was initiated to better understand the emotional and psychosocial needs of the impacted population, including the consequences related to loss of loved ones, displacement of the population, and loss of jobs and homes. Training events and supervision activities were organized in partnership with local medical and educational leaders to insure local cultural and language issues were understood by the HPRT and INTC teams. Specific scientific assessment tools were provided and culturally adapted to the local population. HPRT and INTC made an historic contribution to Norcia by building a school wing for students and auditorium for the community. All activities were planned considering the cultural norms and specific needs of the population. This culturally adapted approach was utilized in all planned assistance projects.

Psychiatric consequences of disasters in Italy: Need for a mental health action plan

Chierzi and colleagues (2014) have provided an early review of the psychiatric consequences of national disasters in Italy. They conclude their research findings by stating:

Based on the results of our review and on previous international experiences of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HPRT) in managing

mental health care in complex emergencies, we believe that a cross-cultural valid action plan may be useful to manage the post-disaster mental health consequences in Italy (2014, p. 101).

Twelve years later, it is notable that a comprehensive mental health action plan still does not exist in Italy and is absent for the Norcia earthquake community.

The current health/mental health care environment in Norcia

There are currently 8 general practitioners and 17 nurses in Norcia and 24 nurses in Cascia providing health care. One full-time and 2 part-time psychologists and 3 social workers provide mental health care and care management. A psychiatrist enters the community for psychiatric consultation two full days a month in Norcia and Cascia, respectively. The health care staff are untrained in mental health in the context of disaster relief. The publicly funded health care administration has offered no mental health training or additional mental health support. Mental health crises have to be transferred to the general hospital in Spoleto, which is an hour away. The INTC-Harvard team has tried to partially fill this mental health gap by offering trainings and on-site counseling and consultation services.

Resisting reform: Acknowledging the effects of good psychology/bad psychology

In the Sala de Nove of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena is a marvelous series of frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti entitled *The Effects of Good Government and Bad Government*. These 14th century masterpieces were commissioned by the city Guelf leaders to celebrate its political credo that justice and the subordination of private interests to the common good cause all human social activities to flourish. *Good Government*, painted in the well-lit section of the room, expresses the delights of city and country life when administered by a good government; *Bad Government*, appropriately painted on the dark side of the room, reveals a city of violence and crumbling buildings, and a sinister,

desolate countryside. Lorenzetti's images are a physical portrayal of human social ideals (or lack thereof).

The Italian psychiatric reformers had the horrible images of the American psychiatric asylums of Jerry Cooke in the 1940s and Carla Cerati's photographs of the Italian mental hospitals in the 1960s as a backdrop (Mollica, 1985b, p. 1). The images of devastation caused by the earthquake in Norcia and those of earthquake survivors living in little metal boxes would certainly complement the early asylum photographs. If these images reveal the realities of bad mental health, what would images of good mental health look like? Salvatore and colleagues provide answers to the question of why the great advances in modern psychiatry have not provided "useful" mental health care for the earthquake survivors. What factors have caused Italian psychologists to abandon their interest in serving earthquake-stricken communities? The Italian psychiatric reformers provide some challenging answers to these two questions.

The intellectual contributions of Antonio Gramsci

At this point it may be helpful to consider the brilliant historical and intellectual contributions of Italy's leading political theorist and revolutionary thinker, Antonio Gramsci. While the Italian psychiatric reformers were heavily influenced by Gramsci's writings and ideas (Mollica, 1985c), our current generation of psychiatrists and psychologists rarely reference his work.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony may still be relevant as a theoretical background to the ideas put forth by Salvatore and colleagues on the current state of Italian psychology. Gramsci's concept of hegemony moved away from Marxist economic reductionism because he saw that the latter could not explain why individuals within society often agreed with social values and behaviors and participated in activities not in their own best interests. Gramsci saw, however, that racism and the mental hospital were not linked solely to economic production. Gramsci sought a more inclusive explanation, which he termed hegemony. According to Gramsci,

Hegemony is the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group. This consent is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Mollica, 1985c, p. 12).

Hegemony is more than a society’s social consensus. In those historically based practices which the French philosopher M. Foucault referred to as “articulations” or “discursive practices,” embedded within language, laws, cultural beliefs and behaviors, the media and all instruments of society reveal the meanings and values society assigns to individuals and institutions (Mollica, 1985d). According to Gramsci, while hegemony is inclined towards the best interests of the general population, it often offers only passive reforms that frequently give way to the corporate demands of the ruling class, without attempting in a radical way to re-structure society and eliminate the root causes of human misery. The Italian psychiatric reformers identified these hegemonic contradictions that maintained the abysmal conditions of the Italian asylum. Perhaps their insight can shed light on the almost total lack of mental health care for the survivors of the central Italy earthquake. The revolutionary insight of the Italian psychiatric reformers may also illuminate the current state of modern psychology addressed by Salvatore and colleagues. The discourse of Franco Basaglia and his followers provide lessons learned on why modern psychology has failed the Italian earthquake community. Those lessons offer insight into the current discursive formation of Italian psychology that has led to its extreme compartmentalization and its current inability as a profession to address the great challenges of the day experienced in real time by Italian society and its local communities.

Lessons learned from the italian psychiatric reform

Italy’s aborted psychiatric reform

The 1978 reform law prohibited any new admissions to Italian asylums; no new patients were to have contact with their old mental hospital. The current asylum patients were to be discharged to

government-funded rehabilitation centers and halfway houses; psychiatric treatment was to take place in the general hospitals; the problems of mental illness were to be addressed within the community. A new way of thinking, which was a complete change in the discipline of psychiatry, was that medical treatment was only a small part of the care of persons suffering from serious mental illness. The Italian reformers believed that the mentally ill patient had no need of being hospitalized in the asylum where they received the “second wound” of chronification and regression that was worse than the initiating mental health problem. The reformers believed the person suffering from mental illness had no need of a hospital bed, but instead needed a protected place in the community where they could recover by re-establishing their equilibrium with the world, secure from violence, repression, stigma, and marginalization. But as Senator Franca Basaglia (wife of Professor Franco Basaglia) publicly stated:

From the moment the law was passed, the greatest obstacles to its implementation were created by those who should have been applying it: the government, which was in no hurry to provide the suitable tools....the Italian regional administrations, which neglected to establish any guidelines for care in local facilities; local administrators who, whether unable to act or outright unwilling to do so, let time slip by in the expectation or hope of repeal or amendment; and even the caregivers themselves, since to move from a vanguard atmosphere such as that which led to the reform to a generalization of experiences meant having to work with doctors and paramedical personnel who had little incentive to change (Basaglia, 1985, p. 11).

Senator Franca Basaglia’s analysis of the government’s failure can apply today to the enormous bureaucracy that paralyzes all aspects of recovery in the central Italian earthquake zone. The reconstruction of Norcia and the movement of earthquake survivors out of temporary shelters is moving at a snail’s pace. Unfortunately, the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to this problem. In contrast to Senator Basaglia’s comments on doctors resistant to change, the INTC-Harvard team has found extraordinary support for mental health care of local survivors among nurses and doctors remaining in this community. The interest of the local medical community and its leadership in mental health care for earthquake survivors has been overwhelming

and very positive. The local health care providers, with the assistance of INTC-Harvard, are trying to address a huge mental health crisis with the aid of very few Italian psychologists and psychiatrists.

Private practice

The Italian psychiatric reform was responsible for increasing the number of psychiatric professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and social workers) in the public service by over 300% (from 6203 in 1979 to 16,780 in 1980) (Mollica, 1985c). But in spite of this increase in public service, many were shifting to private practice. Lack of government funding and lack of policy initiatives for caring for earthquake/disaster survivors, the difficulties of the clinical cases, and the stress of working in resource-poor environments are most likely drawing psychologists into private practice. No doubt the greater pay, power, and prestige of private practice tempts even the most devoted and idealistic psychologists and psychiatrists to remain comfortably in their compartmentalized silos. The INTC-Harvard team can find few incentives for psychologists to practice in Norcia. Fortunately, the team has found idealistic, socially committed psychologists willing and excited to work with modest pay but with excellent supervision and support. In contrast, in Italian private practice, peer supervision and academic support are often lacking. Yet supervision and academic support are key to integrating psychiatrists and psychologists into challenging professional situations. In Norcia, the prospect of *lavoro di squadra*, teamwork, has attracted mental health professionals to leave their siloed private practice.

Psychiatry and reality

The Italian psychiatric reformer Luciano Carrino, in his brilliant analysis, offers profound insights into the current Norcia context (Carrino, 1985). As he states, “the fact that some aspects of the patient’s illness improve if an intervention is made in his environment has never led us [the reformers] to adopt a disingenuous and simplistic idea that all illnesses are engendered directly by society.” Carrino goes on to

state the importance of incorporating *reality* into mental health care. The mental health clinician needs to understand the impact of the patient's real life on their suffering and to intervene in changing these conditions for the betterment of the patient. He states that impacting on reality has two basic dimensions: 1) transformation and adaptation of the health establishment to the needs of the patient; 2) entering into the reality of the community by helping it develop its potential to help community members cope with their living problems. Carrino spells out the recipe used by the INTC-Harvard team's successful engagement in the earthquake zone at the very beginning of the crisis, by entering into and adapting to the reality of the earthquake community before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Carrino and colleagues would be happy with the new emphasis in America on assessing the patient's social determinants of health. The social status of a patient (housing, food, utilities, transportation) has been determined to have an enormous impact on health and mental health, especially during a crisis such as an earthquake or a pandemic.

Carrino also warns us from his experience with reform that private practice and the other aspects of siloing can leave many patients out of the selection process for treatment. The patient's tendencies to isolate and avoid medical assistance contribute to this neglect. As he states,

Who has not observed that often in psychiatry, the more serious the problem, the less likely is treatment to be sought? A great many people who are in quite obvious distress are unable to express (often even to conceptualize) the need for help, or do so in their own way, which then escapes the notice of others. I am referring to the hundreds of the elderly, the children, and other people in asylums, the seriously handicapped, the poor, the immigrant – in sum, the thousands of isolated, excluded, and marginal people who testify, day in and day out, to the success of our model for the development of psychiatric care. These are people whose distress is noticed only when “emergency situations” are created (Carrino, 1985, p. 116).

Carrino provides amazing insights into our INTC-Harvard experience, where there was initially enormous interest in mental health training by the Italian Red Cross, the Protezione Civile, and the responding nongovernment organizations. Interest died off after the

crisis phase. Seven years after the earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the earthquake survivors themselves, who are in a state of isolation and depression, are unable to express openly their physical and emotional suffering. This suffering manifests itself in their physical complaints brought to the offices of the Norcia general practitioners and nurses.

Psychiatry and psychology also represent a social experience of scientific practice. The INTC-Harvard team has learned the lesson that the team must engage in the social life of the earthquake community. The team must have good relationships with the people of Norcia. Without this engagement, the suffering of the people cannot be heard and given a response. As Salvatore and colleagues state, the psychologists locked within their scientific compartments cannot hear and are not able to listen to the voice of the people who are in the greatest need of their psychological expertise.

Conclusion

The authors of this review have tied their experience in the central Italian earthquake zone of the past seven years to the historic Italian psychiatric reform. This interpretation was attempted as a response to the *Target Article* of Salvatore and colleagues (2022). Their brilliant philosophical analysis of the current crisis in Italian psychology and the lack of progress of psychology has much to admire as a valued perspective. They discuss three metaphysical approaches to the unification of a fractured and compartmentalized field. Our experience in the earthquake zone reveals the impact of this compartmentalization, that is, psychologists (and psychiatrists) are essentially absent from one of the largest geographical communities suffering in Italy today. As the Italian psychiatric reformers stated emphatically, mental health is not just a scientific discipline, it is also a social practice.

Many of the barriers to mental health reform that existed for Basaglia and his colleagues still exist today. Unfortunately, as Salvatore *et al.* note, the compartmentalized psychologist has retreated from overcoming these barriers in order to care for those in society in need of their specialized expertise. It is hoped that Salvatore *et al.*'s approach to unification will bring psychologists out of their silos so that they

can address together the great problems facing our global community, including natural disasters, war, climate change, the refugee and immigration crisis, and ecocide (the destruction of the natural world, including a massive extinction of plants and animals). This may be too much to ask of one mental health profession. Yet the time has come for new inspiration arising from a re-evaluation and deeper appreciation of the historic Italian psychiatric reform.

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