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SPECIAL ISSUE
Clinic of democracy

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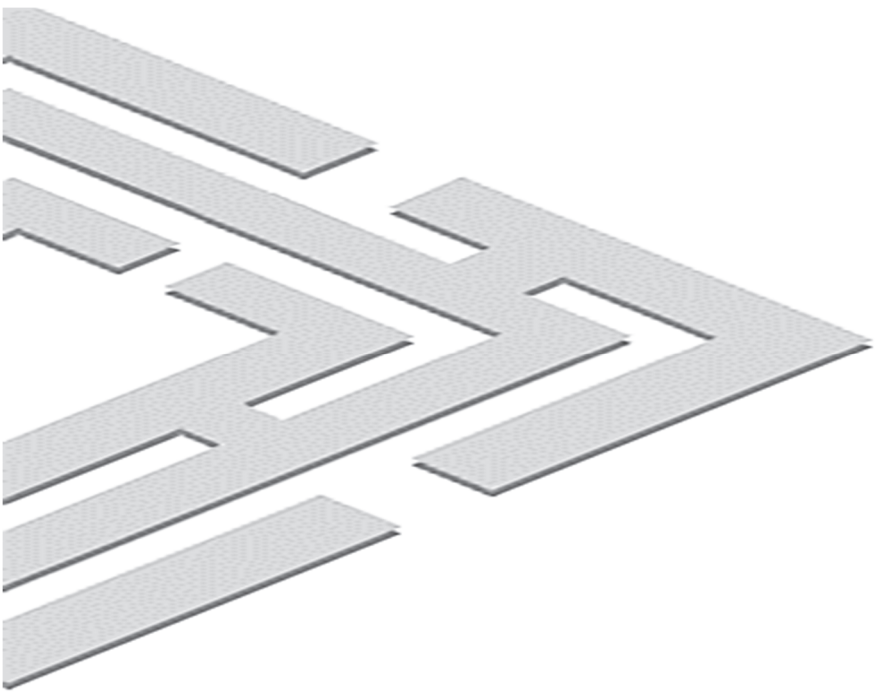

Introduction to the special issue "Clinic of democracy: The contribution of psychological science to the analysis, construction and development of democracies"

Cinzia Novara[*], *Gioacchino Lavanco*[*]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Negative capacity. From a psychoanalytic notion to a democratic strategy for dealing with conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Authors claim an innovative viewpoint on the conspiracy theories phenomenon. Considering them as epiphenomena of the crisis, authors do not see them as a mere attack to democracy (although they may have anti-democratic effects), rather they see them as creations in response to the human need for meaning. Thinking about the concepts of power and knowledge democracy, authors argue that the development of *negative capacity* can represent a strategy for individual and social development in a democratic perspective. Such capacity, if cultivated in a systemic and systematic way, can support the coexistence of different narratives (conspiracy and non-conspiracy) and well-being, providing an important aid to the individual and social right to understand the world while respecting otherness.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, democracy, individual and social development, interdisciplinary approach, negative capacity.

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, affected by accelerated rhythms and the crisis of normative and ideological references, finding what to believe is not an easy task. Knowledge is impoverished by an accelerated process of fragmentation (De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021; Kaës, 2013). Therefore, the problem consequent to the inexorable fall of certainty is expressed in the identification of a reasonable truth within the world of narration, common sense and the fragilization of reality (Lorusso, 2018).

In the contemporary community – connoted by a form of onlife connectivity (Floridi, 2015) due to the pervasiveness of *Information and Communication Technologies* (ICTs) and the enormous influence they have (and will continue to have) on human ways of understanding the world via the circulation, dissemination and alteration of information and communication flows (Riva, 2018) – the "independent" search for meaning, in a plethora of plausible scenarios, explodes in multiple and disparate interpretations. Such practice manifests a widespread desire to weave the threads of the master narrative of contemporary history (Blanuša & Hristov, 2020; Fenster, 2008) – i.e. a narrative about the understanding of the era we are living in and how it affects our autobiographical identity (Bruner, 1990).

The right to have one's own opinion and to be able to express it freely (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021) – as guaranteed, for instance, by Article 21 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic – is a dense (albeit apparently taken for granted) declination of living in a democratic country. Therefore, it is necessary to question the role of institutions – the third-party constructions that perform the function of guarantors (Kaës, 2013; Esposito, 2020) – in defining culture (Biesta, 2007) and what one has to believe in.

The idea that the contribution of higher education to democracy lies primarily in the education of knowledgeable, informed and critical citizens still plays a prominent role in the discussions on the role of higher education in democratic societies (Biesta, 2007). While some see the contribution of higher education specifically in the production of a particular type of critical citizen, others argue for a transformation of higher education itself. Higher education institutions (embedded in a broader social, political and economic context) are places of

productive cultural tension (Delanty, 2003) between specific training needs (e.g. the course of clinical psychology) and the concrete experience of trainees, who do not merely "learn the job", but, through experiential learning, create and integrate their own way (influenced by institutional experience) of understanding citizenship and professionality (e.g., being citizen and professional psychologists in today's community, with all the inevitable repercussions in ethical and deontological terms). Therefore, in our perspective, formative institutions should be conceptualized as situated and systemic experiences aimed at promoting human practices (as implementation of techniques and as creation of intra-personal processes). Delanty (2003), in this regard, suggests that universities should become places of public discourse rather than exclusive seats of expertise, so that they can become «important agents of the public sphere, initiating social change rather than just responding to it» (Delanty 2003, p. 81).

The *vexata quaestio* of the truth to believe (and the presence of its guarantors) is crucial and is fully expressed in the historical (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018; Pagán, 2020), yet topical, phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can be defined as *explanatory narratives* (Barkun, 2003; Harambam, 2020; Leone *et al*., 2020; Rabo, 2020; Räikkä & Ritola, 2020) *about the discovery of an evil plan to the detriment of the common good* (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2023, 2024; Uscinski, 2018; Uscinski & Enders, 2023).

Throughout this contribution, authors will address the issue of conspiracy theories in relation to the phenomenon of power, then, in relation to the democracy of knowledge – i.e., a context in which formal and informal knowledge is easily accessible and debatable by all citizens. Subsequently, authors will discuss conspiracy theories as a dynamic process of *embodied* understanding of the world and how, through the development of *negative capacity* (Bion, 2023; De Luca Picione, 2020), it is possible to develop a dialogical, creative and democratic relationship between people and institutions (Douglas *et al.*, 2024; Jolley *et al*., 2023).

Conspiracy theories and their relationship with power and knowledge

It is interesting to present the definition offered by Giry and Tika (2020) in which they appreciate conspiracy theory as a hegemonic (or recurrent) view of world functioning: «It is a theory of power, of its practices and representations in which plots, pacts, secrecy and concealment play a decisive and central part» (Giry & Tika, 2020, p. 114). Given the above, and in view of numerous analyses conducted on large samples – for a review see Biddlestone *et al.* (2022); Goreis & Voracek (2019); Pilch *et al.* (2023) – one might believe that conspiracy theories may represent a worldview substantiated by an unconscious way of dealing with the power difference between alleged victims and alleged conspirators – for more on this, see Loziak & Havrillová (2024). The results, however, are not unambiguous. Although adherence to conspiracy theories tends to correlate with perceptions of personal powerlessness (i.e., the belief that one's actions do not affect outcomes, e.g., Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020), conspiracy theories are not infrequently supported – not only instrumentally, but also «genuinely» (Brotherton, 2015) – by objectively powerful people (Douglas *et al.*, 2019).

Psychological research often assumes that conspiracy theories involve powerful groups, but those authors rarely specify whether such power is an objective characteristic of these groups or a characteristic attributed to these groups by conspiracy theory believers (Nera *et al*., 2020). In sum, the hypothesis that conspiracy theories are *at the core* a phenomenon that challenges power appears neither theoretically nor empirically tenable (Nera *et al*., 2020), i.e., conspiracy theory does not *a priori* challenge or defend the *status quo* (Biddlestone *et al.*, 2022).

The issue of power, therefore, has to be approached with a broader perspective. One of the most accepted definitions of social power describes it as «asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations» (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 361) – these resources do not have to be necessarily material (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

An interesting perspective on justice and power is provided by critical community psychology – an approach that seeks to promote individual and social well-being through the adoption of an ecological, justice-oriented and value-based perspective (Arcidiacono & Di

Martino, 2016; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This approach argues that well-being is also highly dependent on the environmental resources and the opportunities to access them. Critical community psychologists, therefore, work on promoting the quality of life through the advancement of justice, democracy, environment conservation, capacity building and freedom of choice (Natale *et al*., 2016). According to this perspective, framing human well-being according to how it is affected by a power differential, rather than the more abstract promotion of human rights, requires considering where power resides and how to address such imbalances from a systemic perspective (Natale *et al*., 2016).

According to the theory presented by Douglas *et al.* (2017), conspiracy theories represent a human response to an epistemic crisis – meaning is lacking –, an existential crisis – the perception of security and control is lacking –, and a social crisis – the widespread crisis exacerbates social malaise by activating needs for emotional closeness and the need for individual and social identity affirmation (Cichocka *et al*., 2016; De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024) – e.g., consider how migration flows and their (often questionable) management have stimulated the redundant theory of "ethnic substitution" as a political strategy in relation to an "authentic" belief. According to the theory presented by van Prooijen (2019), moreover, for a conspiracy theory to develop, it is necessary for a particular group to perceive a threat – in a particularly salient domain of life (Cichocka *et al*., 2016) – and to be able to identify an alleged enemy responsible for the evil through a process of meaning-making.

As pointed out by De Fortuna and De Luca Picione (2023, 2024), the core of the models presented by social psychology (an area of psychology that has been most interested in the phenomenon of conspiracy) is precisely the sensemaking process of experience (mobilized by the negative emotions associated with the perception of crisis). However, this process has not been explored from a perspective that focuses on the meaning and the potential of this function.

Every human experience can be considered essentially semiotic. If we adopt a perspective that conceives of knowledge as an experiential process of continuous mediation and articulation of signs (De Luca Picione, 2015, 2021; Hoffmeyer, 1997; Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore *et al.*, 2021, 2022; Valsiner, 2014, 2021; Valsiner & De Luca Picione,

2017), culture no longer represents a shared entity or collection of knowledge (Bruner, 1990), but the very nature of the relations by which we both define the world and are, at the same time, defined by it (Valsiner, 2014). This, *de facto*, greatly enriches our potential for signification, but, at the same time, problematizes the question of identifying the "true" to be believed.

Recalling the issue of cultural democracy, it seems that the link between cognitive styles and belief in conspiracy theories is weaker in student samples. Thus, it seems plausible that education is effective in reducing susceptibility to conspiracy theories by implementing analytical thinking styles (Biddlestone *et al*., 2022). Despite the consistency of such studies, these findings tell us nothing about the dimensions of meaning that such a narrative fulfils, both on an individual and on a collective level (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024; Klein & Nera, 2020). Indeed, in many cases, people of high social, cultural and economic status may be tempted to believe in a conspiracy theory (Brotherton, 2015). This suggests that everything related to education and critical reasoning skills represent nothing more than moderating variables in a catalytic context of causality (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014).

As reported by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) – who echo Magee and Galinsky (2008) – power can be formal or informal. Formal power is characteristic of a position that guarantees the legitimacy to exert influence, whereas informal power connotes factual power, not necessarily guaranteed by any formalized code. This condition, however, is expressed through differentiated access to material and immaterial resources (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). We could, moreover, explore the meaning that the very concept of "power" acquires, that is, of "having power" over someone, something or some place: control over the self, over the other, and over the material and immaterial, proximal and distal environment. Thus, in the broad sense, we can consider knowledge to be an application of a certain power – as it represents not only a system of learning, but also a processual system useful in practical applications, e.g., the ability to grasp useful information from experience to assume a position with respect to a given issue (Dewey, 2010).

That said, how does the relationship between knowledge and conspiracy theories develop? Who holds the knowledge? Who is

legitimized to have it and with what effects? Is it possible for two different forms of power and therefore different forms of knowledge to coexist? If so, how can it be managed? It is precisely here that a possible contribution from psychoanalytically oriented clinical psychology in favour of democratic action and collective and individual well-being fits in.

Conspiracy theories and their relationship with the democracy of thinking in response to crisis

Conspiracy theories represent an adaptive response to the crisis of meaning (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2023, 2024). Starting from an affective semiosis perspective (Salvatore & Freda, 2010; Salvatore *et al.*, 2021; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017), we can understand the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories as a process of sensemaking in relation to unpleasant feelings and salient external or internal, ambiguous or nefarious experiences due to the crisis (De Luca Picione *et al*., 2024). As mentioned above, uncertainty hinders people's ability to predict future circumstances and breaks the continuity of the narrative by creating meaning gaps (Freda, 2008; Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023).

Automatic and intuitive thinking (including biases) is the quickest and most efficient process (Kanhemann, 2011; Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017; Salvatore *et al*., 2019a) to fill in the meaning gaps and to re-weave the plot gaining an immediate affective dimension to shape experience (Salvatore *et al*., 2019a, 2023; Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017; Venuleo *et al.*, 2020). Conspiracy theories abound in times of crisis (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Again, the decrease in perceived control (the current crisis) increases the likelihood that people will adopt a conspiracy theory (Sullivan *et al.* 2010; Whitson & Galinsky 2008). Conspiracy theories, on their part, provide a simple reading of the world's phenomena that can restore a sense of mastery and identity (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024). Conspiracy theories, in sum, are about understanding the world in a state of deep affective and emotional activation due to the impairment of certain vital functions and needs (Douglas *et al*., 2017). The issue, however, is very complex insofar as supporting

conspiracy theories, on the one hand, can have relevant consequences, e.g. for health – for a review see van Mulukom *et al*. (2022) – for history understanding (Butter & Knight, 2020), for the influence on prosocial attitude (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Van der Linden, 2015); but on the other hand, it can represent a subjective narrative – not necessarily false, but tending to falsehood (Douglas & Sutton, 2023) – concerning one's way of understanding the world – a faculty, this, which is an expression of the functioning of a democratic society (Douglas *et al.*, 2019). This is why there is no need to resort to a hasty *debunking* strategy (Van Prooijen & Imhoff, 2022). Indeed, conspiracy thinking is not simply an inevitable reaction to postmodernity but can be a creative response (Butter & Knight, 2020). Conspiracy theories do not a priori pose a dangerous threat to democracy (Butter & Knight, 2020), they «can in fact play the role of a productive challenge to an existing order – albeit one that excessively simplifies complex political and historical events» (Fenster, 2008, p. 90). Conspiracy theories may not be strictly accurate, but they are one of the few popular attempts to address the problems of power and secrecy in modern society (Butter & Knight, 2020).

Conspiracy theories can be understood as an attempt to compensate for the powerlessness of bearing the world's evil and the need to unearth those responsible for all of society's problems (Blanuša & Hristov, 2020; Uscinski, 2018; Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Without considering the most literal meaning of the term "power", rather broadening its understanding by referring to the nuances it can acquire, conspiracy theories represent a function of epistemological and emotional, individual and social development in response to the crisis of meaning.

It is possible, however, that in some cases conspiracy narratives and individual and societal issues become so pressing that they lead to adialogical states of cognitive and emotional inflexibility. These are the cases in which theories are held with such conviction that they are pervasive and result in what Bollas (2011) calls a "*fascist state of mind*". Bollas (2011) believes that the ordinary functioning of a subject's mind is characterized by a dialogue between different parts of the self. To present this dialogue, Bollas (2011) uses the metaphor of a parliament. Just as in a parliament (which debates and makes decisions through a democratic process), the mind reaches conclusions through the interaction of its various parts. This process can involve

negotiations, compromises and conflicts, as the different parts have their own perspectives, needs and desires; whereby these different parts either compete for dominance or seek a resolution. Under the influence of a particularly intense impulse (such as fear, envy, uncertainty, etc.), this democratic intrapsychic dialogue can collapse into a centralizing internal order – like a dictatorship or tyranny of one voice – (Bollas, 2011): the "fascist mental state" – the reduction (the generalizing simplification of meaning) and hardening (the rigid reification of meaning) of meaning dimensionality, which leads to a reduced capacity for internal organization in the orientation of responsive and proactive action to environmental changes (Salvatore *et al.*, 2023; Venuleo *et al*., 2020). In practice, this translates into a monologic (Goertzel, 1994), incontrovertible and irrefutable view of the world, characteristic of the most effete idealists as well as the most convinced theorists. It is a non-dialogic narrative, but one that wants to impose itself as the only possible reality (De Luca Picione & Dell'Amico, in review; Webb & Rosenbaum, 2023).

The coexistence of two seemingly irreconcilable dimensions of power (my truth versus your falsehood), as well as the need to understand world events, do not have a simple, obvious or unambiguous resolution, but can benefit from the development of a capacity typical of clinical practice: *negative capacity* (Bion, 2023; De Luca Picione, 2020).

How clinical psychology can support the development of well-being and the coexistence of different views

Contrary to what it might seem – given the articulate elaboration of conspiracy thinking and the dedication to search for evidence in support of their theses (Brotherton, 2015) – conspiracy theorists enact a fast, intuitive and emotion/affection-driven style of reasoning (Blanuša & Hristov, 2020; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Webb & Rosenbaum, 2023). Indeed, as indicated above, belief in conspiracy theories is also inversely correlated with higher education indices, suggesting that developing slow thinking strategies reduces the likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). This issue, however, as argued above, needs to be explored from a different perspective.

Affect can be described as a primary psychophysical experience activated by the environment, but also as the main component of the human relationship with the context itself (Carli & Paniccia, 2003). According to *embodied cognition*, the representations of the world are rooted in the basic circuits that underpin the sensory processing of stimuli (De Luca Picione, 2024; Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore *et al*., 2019a; Tossici & Tossici *et al.*, 2024). This implies that the regulation of the relationship with the environment consists of the organization of psycho-sensory data with an increasing degree of specification and integration (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore *et al.*, 2019a; Tossici & De Luca Picione, 2024; Tossici *et al.*, 2024). The dynamic nature of time, however, does not allow for only retroactive sense-motor regulation, as this would not guarantee survival. Consequently, the *embodied*, situated and immediate nature of the somatopsychic sense-making process is recognized in its inferential character (Salvatore *et al*., 2019a, 2021). The most basic level of understanding, existing since birth, focuses on the discernment of sensations into antithetical categories such as pleasant-unpleasant (Salvatore *et al*., 2019a, 2021). Thus, higher-order logical states develop as elaborations of lower-order states, so that the body functions partly as a disorganized container of physiological patterns and partly as a laboratory for processing them (Salvatore *et al*., 2019a). According to this logic, a *feeling* is the conscious experience of an affective activation (e.g., feeling angry is the experience of the affective state of unpleasantness); whereas *emotions* (e.g., "anger") are the cognitive interpretation of the affective state in accordance with contextual variables (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017): «*I am angry because they cover up the truth about vaccines. The powerful always do this*, *they want to defend their own narrow-minded interests. I will not take the vaccine*».

The state of psycho-physiological activation of this process, which immediately follows the rupture of continuity caused by the crisis – of meaning, control and social closeness, with reference to Douglas *et al.* (2017) – can lead to the easy acquisition of a conspiracy belief (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2023, 2024). Indeed, in times of uncertainty, it is functional in reducing complexity by quickly and effectively guaranteeing a justificatory narrative that provides refuge from anxieties through the identification of a perpetrator (De Fortuna & De

Luca Picione, 2024; Landau *et al.*, 2015). In its extreme functioning, the normal absence (e.g. the unknown about vaccines) mutates into the presence of something evil (the already known of their medical ineffectiveness and manipulative use). In this way, every unprocessed sign undergoes a process of reification (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014) becoming the indessical sign of a conspiracy (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2023, 2024). We can say that the state of distressing uncertainty is reified anthropomorphically in the construction of an enemy – the widespread tendency to define and defend one's own identity, sense of belonging, cognition and beliefs by means of an affect-laden process of enemizing otherness: the so-called *paranoid belongingness* (Salvatore *et al.*, 2019b).

Let us define – now that we have introduced an affective modality of understanding the world in times of crisis – how clinical psychology can be a useful tool for democracy and for the development of a sense resource in a community. The *act suspension* is a typical practice of clinical psychology that Carli and Paniccia (2003) take from Bion's (2023) theorization of *negative capacity*, i.e. the capacity to stand in uncertainty. In this theoretical perspective, the suspension of «acted belief» (Carli & Paniccia, 2003) – triggered by a rapid understanding of the world guided by affective sensations (I perceive something unpleasant) and subsequently insertable into a non-dialogical macro-category of understanding experiences ("*vaccines are definitely dangerous*"), comparable to the monological, concatenated belief system (Goertzel, 1994; Swami *et al.*, 2011) – could allow different views to coexist in a democratic intra- and extra-psychic dialogue (Bollas, 2011). Given that conspiracy theorizing would seem to correlate with emotional dysregulation (Molenda *et al*., 2023) – not necessarily pathological (Bortolotti, 2023; De Fortuna & D Luca Picione, 2024; Douglas *et al*., 2024) –, being able to contain and question the emotional response of sensemaking would open the «conjugation of reality and experience in the subjunctive» (Bruner, 2009). How is this possible?

Implementing *negative capacity*, the psychologist succeeds, with an internal work of reflection on the self in relation to the other, to conduct and develop the psychotherapeutic relationship without colluding with the client's relational proposal (Carli & Paniccia, 2003; Grasso *et al.*, 2004; Semi, 1985). Based on the previously given

reflection of knowledge as power, it can be said, in a broad sense, that the clinician acquires power from the suspension of immediate judgement. By being able to "come in and out" of the relationship, i.e. by being able to identify with what one hears and experiences, but, at the same time, also being able to distance oneself from it, the clinician (over time) gains a deeper understanding of the matter in play (Grasso *et al*., 2004; Semi, 1985).

In the authors' discussion, this ability to pause in indefiniteness while waiting to better understand the stimuli around us – leaving intuitive (and more properly emotional) understanding unsaturated – can be particularly useful in the development of a multi-voice dialogue on the meaning of the events that animate our uncertain times.

According to *embodied cognition*, the initial act of immediate symbolization of an experience – which, however, is influenced by spatiotemporal dynamics and the individual and collective culture that generated it (Salvatore *et al.*, 2021; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017; Valsiner 2014, 2021) – is often intuitive and not associated with a properly communicable definition (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017). Nevertheless, by developing curiosity, flexibility, the ability to tolerate frustrations and the understanding of how emotions work, one can take a playful attitude towards narratives while leaving them unsaturated. Abiding in uncertainty makes creative evolutions possible in the fantasy game between truth and lies. Being and non-being manifest themselves in the conjunctive alternation of ideas, images, words and emotions (Bruner, 1990; Stenner, 2018; Winnicott, 2016). By leaving the question of reality and non-reality unresolved, therefore, we are more ready to accept the other's reality, even if it seems implausible to us. This would promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence (Douglas *et al*., 2024; Jolley *et al*., 2023).

As with the development of a transitional area (Winnicott, 1971) during childhood (which continues to exist throughout the individual's life), the community needs the development of a social transitional area that ensures that truth and illusion remain in a zone of co-existence (De Luca Picione & Dell'Amico, under review).

This process alone does not resolve the whole problem, because it is enormously complex, but it does create the conditions for potential development. People, by being able to keep their experience unsaturated, would be open to the unforeseen alternative and would be able

to verify their experiences with fewer preconceptions, whether communicated by peers, politicians, or even institutions. The development of negative capacity would contribute to the development of informal power (in the broad sense defined above) because it would allow people not to collapse their experience and judgement into a collusive act or an emotionally hasty judgement.

Picking up on Magee and Galinsky (2008), *negative capacity* would contribute to the development of power because it could lead to an increase in the ability to access «valued resources in social relations» (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 361). In some sense, therefore, the development of *negative capacity* can circumvent the problem of formalized power by providing an alternative based on the acceptance of the other and the possibility of democratic dialogue as it would also allow visions that are "impossible to accept". The cultivation of *negative capacity*, in sum, can at the very least contribute to a more fruitful relationship with the resources one already has – in this regard, it could be interesting to examine (in future works) the unfolding of individual and social resources in the light of the construct of *semiotic capital* (Cremaschi *et al*., 2021a, 2021b). An example, only apparently trivial, could be useful: from a community clinic perspective, a school program for the development of negative capacity could help young television viewers to assume a more critical attitude towards political debates staged on mass information channels. Again, a collective, by cultivating this skill, might be able to curb the increasing polarization of public debate and hate speech (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021). The development of this capacity, therefore, would be desirable at all levels of society.

In the opening we mentioned the role of institutions as guarantors (Kaës, 2013). This role, however, does not end with the possession of knowledge, of which they are still the official guarantors – e.g., the clinician who conducts a therapy without legal authorization commits an offence under Article 348 of the Penal Code (Abusive Exercise of a Profession) – despite the fact that they are challenged by the democratic faculty to acquire (with enormous ease) any information through IT devices (creating new forms of culture). Resuming (after justifying with our reflections) what was said at the beginning, Delanty (2003), points out that: «Universities (*but also institutions in general*) can play a major role in the knowledge society if they accept what might be

called the *principle of transgressivity*, that is, the university is not the exclusive site of expertise but a *site of public discourses*» (Delanty, 2003, p. 81, *our italic*).

The role of institutions as *meta-guarantors* (Kaës, 2013) – which are transpersonal constructs whose main function is to stabilize a symbolic framework (perceivable through rituals, norms, traditions and shared belief systems) that grants sense, identity, continuity and predictability at personal and collective levels –, therefore, from a community perspective, not only involves the provision of knowledge, but also and above all the need to point out the skills-as-processes (such as *negative capacity*) that protect a democratic dimension through which everyone can secure a personal form of well-being and power (while fully respecting others' freedoms and self-determination). We speak, in conclusion, of a function of institutions that strives to ensure the development of the processes involved in the parliamentary mental structure discussed by Bollas (2011). In such an intra-interpersonal relationality, many issues would take on a narrative, democratic and potentially evolutionary dimension.

Conclusion

Beginning with a brief description of the complexity of the current community, authors defined conspiracy theories in their relationship with the construct of power and the plurality of the world's readings (the democracy of knowledge). Defining power as the faculty of being able to make use of a certain type of resources, we qualified conspiracy theories as an attempt to respond adaptively and creatively to the crisis of power and knowledge (in the post-truth paradigm).

In a perspective that encompasses both the needs of individuals and those of the community, authors sought to provide some insights into how *negative capacity* can be a useful democratic resource for the human need to respond to the crisis (of which conspiracy theories are an outcome). Finally, authors argued for the importance of a function of institutions that stands as a guarantee of democracy and plurality (not just given knowledge) by allowing for gradualness (as opposed to immediacy) of thought and reflective processes.

In this article, authors do not simply warn against conspiracy

theories, but capture their communicative and symptomatic meaning and value (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024). If culture has no agentivity (Valsiner, 2014), rather it is humans who act, then conspiracy theories are not themselves a danger to democracy, but are, on the contrary, a creative outcome (Butter & Knight, 2020) with a communicative value (that is indispensable for any psychologist and scholar of the human dimension). If conspiracy theories are grasped in their dimension of meaning – that is, in their representation of the impossibility of satisfying basic human needs (Douglas *et al.*, 2017) –, then the individual and institutional response needs to be democratic because, regardless of their effects (even nefarious), they concern collective well-being and the difficulty of managing power imbalances (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2016; Natale *et al.*, 2016). Imbalance, which, in this case, is understood first and foremost in terms of access to the «hidden truth» (Fenster, 1999; Giry & Tika, 2020): the real purpose of vaccines, the murky events behind the US elections, climate change, a planetary elite managing the world's wealth, etc.

The answer to the crisis of meaning is neither unambiguous nor resolving, but it may pass through certain institutional interventions aimed at the implementation of clinical and psycho-educational projects (to be carried out at an integrated and systemic level) so that both the collective and the individual may benefit from the acquisition of the skills necessary to avoid enclosing the meaning of experience in a single, rigid and unequivocal vision. In this way, then, conspiracy theories (with their nefarious effects) would not disappear, but individuals and collectives would be better equipped to deal with the complex dynamics of democratic coexistence.

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Transforming clinical psychology: An ecological and psychopolitical perspective. An Italian and global case

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Abstract

Historically, the field of study and intervention of clinical psychology is the suffering and treatment of individuals, just as the forms through which it is applied are individual. However, its scope, techniques, theories and epistemological assumptions are always interconnected with and shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts and factors. This paper will summarize some of the underlined critical issues of clinical psychology highlighted in various areas of literature and experienced in daily practice, according to a "psychopolitical" perspective. Subsequently, developmental theoretical and practical trajectories will be outlined that incorporate these critical issues by tending toward an evolution of psychology, aiming to bring its responses closer to the rights and needs of peoples, communities, individuals so as to develop its potential democratic scope and thus enrich its contribution in the dialectical-creative process of active community participation.

Keywords: Clinical psychology, psychopolitical perspective, ecological approach, democracy, psychology profession.

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Psychology as a historical device

The profession of psychologist in Italy is the product of recent socio-historical processes (D'Elia, 2020). The profession arises from a specific cultural, social, and economic system, with the risk of creating (apparent) compensatory solutions (Basaglia, 1979) to the social contradictions of the same system, such as individualism and the disintegration of capital and social networks.

Psychology in Italy, both as cultural practice and a scientific device, is often collectively seen and represented as a private profession due to the law that established and instituted its existence. Law 56/1989, regulating the profession, is the result of a long process of political and corporatist negotiation. The price to be paid for such regulation lay – and still lies today – in the private positioning of the profession, at a symbolic level (the anthropological figure of the psychologist in his private practice continues to exert a cultural hegemony over any other representations), at a material level (just under 7% of psychologists work in the public health service), and at political level (for instance considering the political intervention of the "bonus psicologo"). Psychology, as a device for understanding and caring for the mind, is the result of historical and cultural events (Foschi & Innamorati, 2019), biographical (Atwood, 2001), technological, and scientific (Semerari, 2022). The complex intertwining of these levels generates, moment by moment, specific theoretical and practical modalities influenced by the spirit of the times and by associated anthropological, economic, psychological, and psychopathological hegemonies (Hacking, 2004; Innamorati, 2021).

And what is the object of this device? If madness is the «history of a long silence» (Foucault, 1961), and psychiatry is the discourse of technicians about this madness, then clinical psychology can be considered a technical and cultural discourse on human experience as a whole, not necessarily focused on madness (Foschi & Innamorati, 2020).

It is a discipline that responds to the social, cultural, and scientific need to understand the subject's experience from within, in mentalistic and individual terms. Therefore, the object of the clinical psychology device is the human experience (Armezzani, 2002). Nevertheless, the human being of psychology is not the human being of sociology, urban

planning, architecture, surgery; it is precisely – and it may seem obvious but is not – a psychological human being, the so-called Homo Psychologicus (Fromm, 1971). Clinical psychology can be conceived as the space and time of a specific psychological discourse on human experience; and it is known how the categories of clinical psychology risk being categories of the individual, the atomized and disembedded subject, categories aimed at understanding a dematerialized subject, deprived of a lived body (Husserl, 1999) and a more or less pacified cultural horizon of belonging. It is the space and time of a dialogue, from which emerges a certain discourse, a certain truth, a certain knowledge: the subject's knowledge is reconstructed as psychologized knowledge, mostly intrapsychic. The subject is constructed and reconstructed (depending on the hegemonic psychological models) as a "psychological puppet": his experience read with the categories of the psychic, his thoughts understood with the devices of the mental, his behaviors deciphered as direct determinations of the individual, more or less conscious, will.

This work will analyze historically neglected elements of clinical knowledge, such as the role of inequalities in the genesis of suffering and health, the myth of neutrality, and the diffusion of the associated therapeutic culture. Furthermore, it will address theoretical and practical issues, within a psychopolitical and ecological framework, aiming to contribute to the creation of an enriched clinical psychology able to challenge traditional clinical psychology and its effects on society as a whole.

Growth of clinical psychology and inequalities

The history of the development of clinical psychology is closely related to the global and national socio-economic contexts in which it has evolved, characterized by the Neoliberal culture built around the economistic myth and the belief in the possibility of unlimited growth.

Globally, despite the increased availability and accessibility of psychological interventions, the public's increased familiarity with clinical constructs, and the exponential growth in the number of psychologists, no data demonstrate a significant improvement in the health and well-being of citizens nor does it seem possible to indicate a

substantial change in the social structures that influence and shapes these conditions.

On the contrary, social narratives about the population's health conditions often emphasize, with alarmist tones, a constant deterioration, especially for the younger age groups (Ahn-Horst & Bourgeois 2024). Some authors point out the risk that clinical psychology may contribute to the maintenance of social (Patel, 2003) and health inequalities. Given the argument that «psychology's negative impacts occur despite the good intentions of most psychologists» (Fox *et al.*, 2009), it is crucial to consider the potential outcomes, risks, and iatrogenic effects of clinical psychology. This approach is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the overall impact of clinical psychology on societies. It involves not only evaluating effects at the clinical, individual, or intersubjective levels but also expanding beyond these assessments to understand broader societal implications. Such an analysis cannot rely solely on the epistemological and methodological assumptions typical of clinical psychology, which are inherently limited in understanding higher-order phenomena such as cultural, social, community, economic, and political phenomena, for which different conceptual and operational tools are needed, integrated within an interdisciplinary perspective.

This analysis must be based on defining the field where to evaluate the impact of clinical psychology: the social field, irreducible to the mere sum of individualities. Within this field, applying the lens of social justice (Powers & Faden, 2006), the health of the social body and the organization, as well as the forms, structures, and social processes, can be defined by the equitable distribution of resources – both material and symbolic – and rights, as well as health, among social groups. From this perspective, social, economic, power, health, and opportunity inequalities represent the main obstacles to the health of the social body and the development of democratic societies.

The history of inequalities and their effects on the social body and the living conditions of citizens is well known: socioeconomic inequalities began to significantly increase by the 1970s, following a period of greater equity, in the post-World War II era (Piketty, 2014). This process, associated with the entrenchment of the neoliberal paradigm, led to the disintegration of the social fabric linked to greater inequalities. As a matter of fact, a solid body of evidence (James,

2009; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018) highlighted the negative effects of inequalities on societies and the living and health conditions of citizens. In fact, consistent epidemiological data pointed out that more unequal societies are likely to be more violent, more divided and divisive, less cooperative, and more competitive than more equitable societies, which tend to be characterized by higher levels of well-being, health, participation, and social cohesion (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018).

In this perspective, a basic assumption, derived from epidemiology (CSDH, 2008) and capable of producing reflections on the ethical and political dimension of clinical psychology and its impact on social organization, is that health and disease, subjectively experienced, are objectively distributed in the social body along a social gradient. The health status varies according to the social position and the set of resources this position makes available. Compelling and incontrovertible evidence suggests that health and well-being are more widely distributed among the more advantaged strata of society: a better socioeconomic status is highly predictive of a higher life expectancy and better health conditions (CSDH, 2008; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018). In this context, however, the distribution in the social geography (Curtis & Rees Jones, 2018) of the application of clinical psychology, as a care device, seems to respond to the principle of the «inverse care law» (Hart, 1971), whereby the availability of care varies, especially where market forces are greater, in inverse proportion to need, fueling inequalities. Despite the global greater availability related to online delivery platforms, the scarcity of psychological services in the public healthcare and its impoverishment mean that the real practices of applying clinical psychology are economically more accessible to those who enjoy better economic, social, and consequently health conditions. Therefore, the economic barriers imposed by fees can be conceived as a form of selection, discrimination, and social stratification based on economic factors (Bessone & Sarasso, 2019), increasingly excluding from the right to access to care and health those people belonging to most disadvantaged economic, social, and health groups. In this perspective, to emphasize the impact on social and health inequalities of the distribution of a specific branch of clinical psychology, psychotherapy, the phrase «unequal distribution of psychotherapy» has been introduced (Bessone, 2020). This expression refers to the

potential difficulty of psychotherapy, as a social resource, in responding proportionally to the health needs of the population, which are closely related to social, symbolic, and material resources. Psychotherapy would be more readily available to those subgroups of the population who are less likely to live in circumstances and contexts that constitute a risk factor for distress.

These considerations on the relationship between social structures and the application of clinical psychology highlight specific sociopolitical implications of clinical practices, indicating, from a social justice perspective (Powers & Faden, 2006), paradoxically undemocratic and harmful effects. The same scarce sensitivity of clinical psychology to the distribution of power and social resources has been highlighted not only concerning barriers to access but also in the elective field of clinical practices, that of the relationship, emphasizing the risk that therapists' lack of awareness of social class may lead to unintentionally oppressive and/or classist behaviors (Trott & Reeves, 2018) and a specific social positioning of clinical practices.

The therapeutic culture

However, the widespread dissemination of clinical psychology has undoubtedly produced positive effects on the health of the social body and individuals, bringing many people closer to understanding and exploring their inner world, improving self-awareness, relational dynamics, and their way of being in the world. Moreover, as emphasized in 2023 by the President of the National Council of Italian Psychologists[1], during the conference for the general states of the psychological profession, in order to foster public engagement and investment in psychological interventions, the so-called "psychological well-being" can produce positive effects in the economic and work fields, both personally and socially. Additionally, the process of familiarization and habituation to clinical discourse (Furedi, 2005) has increased the social awareness of the harm caused by some relational modes, fostering the acceptance and recognition of the presence, in the public space,

[1] https://www.psy.it/il-presidente-del-cnop-david-lazzari-a-la-psiche-e-vita-discorso-di-apertura/

of different sensitivities and modes of interaction. This new social sensitivity to differences promotes processes of individual and collective subjectivation (Rose, 2007), in a manner consistent with the ethics of authenticity (Rose, 1990). Indeed, the coexistence of diagnostic labels derived from the DSM and clinical languages and entities constitutes the basis for processes of collective identification with the references provided by clinical systems (Hacking, 1995), also leading to «citizenship projects» (Rose, 2007) and advocacy (Saraceno *et al.*, 2022) with a strong identitarian connotation, with positive effects on the sense of belonging and participation in social organization.

These evident benefits, however, represent only a portion of the broader effects of the pervasiveness of clinical psychology on the social organization and its processes in contemporary societies. Studies on the «therapeutic culture» (Furedi, 2005) allow to grasp the complex and multifaceted consequences at the sociocultural level of the pervasiveness and greater social recognition of clinical devices in industrialized countries, which, in addition to promoting the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and societies, can, in the same way but in the opposite direction, fuel processes of cultural iatrogenesis (Illich, 2004) and social changes that do not necessarily produce health and well-being for everyone.

Following the logic of the "specific counterproductivity" to Illich's works, Furedi (2005) defines the therapeutic culture as a dominant and hegemonic cultural force built around the "therapeutic morality" that shapes the common system of meaning, socializing dynamics of an individualistic nature, characteristic of clinical practices and neoliberal ideology, for instance through the emphasis given on the centrality of the individual and constructs such as responsibility, autonomy, and individual independence. The "therapeutic culture" is the result of the socialization and normalization of ways, characteristic of clinical lenses, of understanding, conceiving, experiencing suffering, and corresponding interventions, whose adoption would extend beyond clinical settings. These modalities are characterized by a shift from «political determinations» to «emotional determinations» (Furedi, 2005) of suffering. In a context characterized by the greater availability of clinical psychology interventions, based on the increasingly shared code of emotionality, these would tend to be seen and experienced as more appropriate for managing, signifying, understanding, sharing, conta-

ining, and countering suffering, compared to different strategies, such as informal, spiritual, or political ones.

The "therapeutic culture" would thus be involved not only in the gradual erosion of other social devices implicated in the management of suffering but also in the phenomena of harmful weakening of social bonds, isolation, and social withdrawal characteristic of contemporary societies, increasingly unequal, where loneliness (Hunter, 2012) is configured as a growing public health problem, to the point of prompting the WHO to establish an ad hoc commission for its management. Furthermore, it has been emphasized how the "therapeutic culture" is connected to a pathologization of everyday difficulties, to the semantic expansion of what is commonly conceived as «mental disorder» (Haslam, 2021, 2016) and of many other terms derived from the clinical field (consider the overuse of the expression "trauma"), and to the pathologization of terms such as "anxiety", often associated with a «semantic context linked to diagnoses, disorders, and symptoms» (Xiao *et al.*, 2023).

Transforming clinical psychology: Overcoming neutrality

That said, we believe it is possible to transform dominant practices in clinical psychology starting from two principles:

- The recognition of the historicity of the discipline;
- The recognition of the limits of the discipline.

Firstly, we need to acknowledge all those historical, social, cultural, and economic trajectories that dynamically and complexly determine our theories and actions as clinical psychologists. Every act we perform, even of knowledge, is closely related to a history and a social and symbolic context from which it emerges. Every thought and theory is not in the vacuum but within the fabric of the material and symbolic determinations of the communities. Theories and practices are imbued with particular visions of humanity, society, health, and illness that are not value-free.

Secondly, while we are satisfied with the increased emotional and

relational sensitivity, and greater individual and collective salience for fragilities and oppressed minorities, it is important to curb the wave of therapeutic culture in which we are immersed. Clinical psychology deals with the mental level of experience. However, we are well aware that the factors necessary to build a person's mental health and well-being often are rooted beyond purely idiosyncratic factors, into the realm of material and symbolic determinations, namely all those rights whose violation generates situations of material and, circularly, psychological stress. This recognition of the historical determination of clinical psychology, acknowledging its epistemological limits and hegemonic tendencies, and attempting to redesign psychological theory and practice in light of these re-cognitions would also facilitate the questioning of one of the founding myths of clinical psychology, which reverberates in its social representation: its neutrality.

The cultural myth of psychology's neutrality act at least three levels of discourse: a more strictly epistemological one (which answers the question of how knowledge is constructed in a given discipline), a purely clinical one (which addresses how the relational process at the core of the discipline is constructed), and a purely political one. Purging the social, cultural, and material determinations from the construction of psychological clinical knowledge exposes us to the risk, at an epistemological level, of falling into a certain type of naïve realism (De Caro, 2004; Della Gatta & Salerno, 2018). We speak of the risk of conceiving the construction of psychological knowledge as the construction of true knowledge, as if (dualistically or monistically) there existed a world outside our perceptions and motor possibilities (Gibson, 1979; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Noë, 2010). The organism and the environment envelop each other and unfold within each other in that fundamental circularity that is life itself (Varela, 1991), and it is for this reason that in this infinite circularity between organism and environment, we cannot ignore all the tensions of life that are not strictly psychological but still possess (if not more) relevance in the construction of human experience.

«Without memory and desire» (Bion, 1973): one of the most famous warnings. This is precisely the risk we run at the clinical level: thinking, first as citizens and then as clinicians, that we have the tools that allow us to empty ourselves of our material, psychological, and cultural determinations to access the mind of the Other in a natural and

authentic way, as if there existed a level of psychological discourse truer than another, as if the mind were ontologically structured in layers of authenticity and truth; as if the clinical psychologist could truly meet the other in a field emptied of economic, symbolic, and social determinations. It is not only a sterile exercise but also a dangerous attempt to bracket all those non-psychological determinations that impact and construct the experience of the subject of clinical psychology: housing, job and economic stability and conditions, access to mobility, respect for minimum hygiene standards, access to the right to housing, gradient of real and perceived safety, gradient of racialization and sexism experienced, and so on.

The founding myth of neutrality has been, for clinical psychology, the bastion around which to build the citadel of its supposed impartial scientificity and citizenship; as if, by adopting a certain naive empiricism, psychology could escape the determinations of time; as if clinical psychology were not both the offspring and, circularly, the progenitor of the material, symbolic, and social conditions of the human beings who have constructed it; as if there were no link between the concrete events of time and the scientific events of clinical psychology. This small fraud of neutrality has evident political implications: if the conditions of health and illness are co-determined by the historical, social, political, and economic circumstances of individuals and communities, how can a neutral psychology fulfill its functions of care and promoting well-being?

Building on Castel's critique of analytical neutrality (1975), partially already extended to the psychotherapy apparatus through the term "Psicoterapismo" (Bessone *et al.*, 2022), the so-called neutral psychoanalyst becomes "socially neutralizable", "technically neutralized by the role they impose on themselves", and "practically neutralizing" invalidating any sociopolitical determination reinterpreted according to the analytical, symbolic, and intrapsychic discourse and level. The attitude of the analyst, the psychotherapist, and often the clinical psychologist, is thus transposed into a relationship where the position of implicit sociopolitical consent becomes the technical rule of neutrality, often presupposing or imposing apoliticism as the normal reference of the situation. This is one of the ways by which psychoanalysis, as well as psychotherapy and clinical psychology, completely overlook the problem of their political and extraclinical

significance. However, this does not erase their political consequences but preserves them, with the risk of consolidating the status quo (Prillentensky, 1989) and preventing analyses in extraclinical terms of the neutrality they are likely to impose and the neutralization they often risk to operate. Using Castel (1975) technically speaking, neutrality in the clinical relationship is the condition of possibility for its functioning, and, politically speaking, it is the political embodiment and the socialization of apoliticism. Nowadays, this happens in a political alignment with the neoliberal ideology, which tends to invisibilize the political element and where political dynamics are obscured and made less evident, contributing to masking the underlying implications, power conflicts (Brown, 2015), and oppressive circumstances.

If, on the other hand, we conceived good health practices as practices of liberation and emancipation from socio-economic inequalities (Barò, 2006; Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020), we would need to consider what role clinical psychology could play in promoting these practices and what role it might have in reinforcing the inequalities it should instead address. We have established that the processes maintaining inequalities are not only economic but also social and cultural; and at this point, we can hypothesize that clinical psychology might represent one of the mechanisms legitimizing these inequalities. The naturalization of psychological suffering, its individualization, and the naturalization and legitimization of social circumstances and inequalities mean that clinical psychology reads the mental as a purely intrapsychic level of experience, simultaneously constructing an equally individualistic and falsely natural intervention framework. The radical processes of reification of the mental push clinical psychologists (but also all those citizens imbued with therapeutic culture) to read and understand life's sufferings as purely psychological sufferings, as sufferings of the mind, with the consequence that the more appropriate treatment will necessarily appear the psychological one.

In summary, and with the words of Franco Basaglia (2000): «When one is mad and enters a mental hospital, they stop being mad and become a patient. They become rational as a patient. The problem is how to undo this knot, how to go beyond "institutional madness" and recognize madness where it originates, that is, in life». The political risk of a purely intrapsychic clinical psychology consists of a certain mystification of reality (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020): health and

illness phenomena are read by excluding the material and social aspects that we know to be determining in the construction of both health and illness (WHO, 2014), thus feeding and legitimizing, in this way, a highly unequal status quo that is, therefore, unhealthy for individuals and communities.

To transform clinical psychology from a persuasive tool into one of liberation (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020) and democratic participation, it is necessary to recognize how clinical psychology, as a product of its time, can reinforce the cultural myths that underpin that culture, such as individualism and indifference (James, 2009; Zamperini, 2007). Therefore, we hope that recognizing clinical psychology as a political tool that shapes social discourses around suffering will both enable and be facilitated by the development of an embedded clinical practice – one that is in constant dialogue with both formal and informal knowledge and institutions (such as political parties, associations, neighborhood committees, shopkeepers' associations, public services, social centers, and cultural circles) within the local community. Moreover, the «politicization of the discipline» (Barò, 2006) can be a theoretical tool that makes it possible to build specific clinical practices that acts at a local level knowing the various actors and stakeholders in the community, building alliances with them and facilitating emancipatory opportunities for participation and citizenship (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020). It entails clinical practices that are reactive to the contradictions of its communities and that knows how to respond to them by activating a vast array of appropriate formal and informal actors. For example, we argue that when faced with an individual suffering due to the threat of eviction, a clinical psychologist should know whom to consult in order to collaboratively develop even the most materially adequate response, one that addresses the practical realities of the situation.

In summary, the transformation of clinical psychology envisioned in this work follows two seemingly contradictory paths. On one hand, it actively opposes a naturalistic, neutral, and apolitical view of clinical practice; on the other, it seeks to engage with the dominance of therapeutic culture by politicizing social discourses on suffering, thereby raising awareness of the social determinants of distress experience, and positioning the clinic as a catalyst for political consciousness rather than mystification.

An ecological approach and psychopolitical perspective

As we said, the fact that the growing spread of clinical psychology has undoubtedly benefited many people does not mean that its effects, on the many levels through which the health of society can be analyzed, are exclusively positive. This suggests the need to adopt an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) on the impact of clinical psychology, going beyond its inherently individual focus. This means assuming that clinical psychology should be considered both as a symbolic and material system, operating at the individual level as well as at the environmental and societal levels. An ecological approach to clinical psychology involves making the environmental effects of clinical psychology as an object of study, encompassing gradually superordinate, interconnected levels of analysis, from intrapsychic to macro, and qualitatively different aspects, such as symbolic, material, or moral, as well as different geographical scales, from local to global. Furthermore, if the outcomes of evaluating the individual level through psychological lenses do not allow for this often overlooked assessment of the ecological impact of clinical psychology, then an interdisciplinary approach is required (Kagan *et al.*, 2001).

For instance, what happens to societies or interpersonal relationships when mental illness-related concepts, such as trauma, depression, and anxiety – introduced by clinical practices and theories – are increasingly used and undergo semantic inflation (Haslam, 2016; Haslam *et al.*, 2021; Xiao *et al.*, 2023)? What happens, at economic, interpersonal or individual level, to families when all members are involved in psychological therapies? Considering the pervasive presence of clinical psychology in society, to what extent does it influence the fact that the emotional distress of many students is rarely seen as a reason for structural changes in schools and is more frequently addressed through clinical psychological interventions? What impact do psychological treatments have on the risk and likelihood of accessing inappropriate, rights-violating pharmacological treatments (Bessone & Firenze, 2024)? What happens to spiritual life in societies or neighborhood where suffering is mainly articulated, understood, and cared for by clinical psychology lenses and interventions? What happens to the public health sector in Italy if most people seek to meet their health and wellness needs through platforms governed by the private sector

and market laws? What are the consequences for individual rights and for the kind of society that relies on a functioning public sector to uphold those rights? What happens in societies when the work of clinical psychologists starts to become socially appealing? What happens as a consequence of the growing increase in online courses on clinical psychology in Italy?

A similar ecological approach to psychology is both similar to and substantially different from that already proposed by Heft (2013). As far as we know, Heft's work emphasizes the importance of considering «human public social life» (Heft, 2013) and human econiches. He highlights the need for an «ecological psychology» (Heft, 2013, 2020) that, from a Darwinian perspective, should be able to go beyond the acceptance of the two related foundational dualisms of classical psychology (environment/mind, natural/cultural world). However, if this epistemological assumption brings him closer to the work of the sociologist Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2021, 2016, 2015), "the logic of practice" of the latter, despite starting from symbolic considerations, seems to be far from the Heft's work that appears to remain at a theoretical, often abstract level, focused solely on epistemological concerns, being often neither concrete nor pragmatic. Additionally, Heft's work seems to obscure or disregard, from a Marxian perspective, the differences in social power and the power relations and forces present in society, essential for the alignment with a liberation psychology perspective (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020). Moreover, while Heft (2013, 2020) considers the contradictions of psychology as a human system, it does not specifically focus on clinical psychology. His work does not seem to consider the non-neutral role of clinical psychology in the reproduction of social structures and norms, despite highlighting the structural role and ongoing changes within these systems and econiches.

In the field of psychology, approaches that consider the multifaceted, interconnected, and nested ecological impacts of psychology are used both by «liberation psychology» (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020; Barò, 2006) and by branches to which the adjective "critical" has been appended, indicating the possibility that psychological disciplines, such as community psychology (Kagan *et al.*, 2019) or health psychology (Prilleltensky *et al.*, 2003), may have concrete, symbolic, and material iatrogenic effects on social organization. These effects can represent structural forms of power and oppression (Comas-Díaz

& Torres Rivera, 2020; Parker, 2015; Prilleltensky, 2008), maintaining and often legitimating specific dominant structures and processes related to socioeconomic and health inequalities, and violating human rights (Prilleltensky, 1989). Furthermore, based on the analyses provided by the vast field of critical psychology, the need for a critical approach to psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and counseling in neoliberal states has been highlighted (Loewenthal, 2015).

From these considerations, the term «psychopolitical validity» (Prilleltensky *et al.*, 2008) has been coined, «a criterion for the evaluation of understanding and action in professions dealing with oppression, liberation, and well-being». This criterion consists of «the level of attention given to the role of power in explaining psychological and political phenomena affecting suffering and well-being». The term aims to highlight the interconnection of psychological and political dynamics.

> Affective, behavioral, and cognitive experiences cannot be detached from power plays being enacted at the personal, relational, and collective levels of analysis. Similarly, political contexts cannot be understood without an appreciation of the subjective, ideological, and cultural forces shaping power relations. This dialectic accounts for the term psychopolitical (Prilleltensky *et al.*, 2008).

Prilleltensky (2008) emphasizes the pervasiveness of power in every setting, highlighting how, as health practitioners embedded in a social reality shaped by social forces and power dynamics, we must critically reflect on how we think about and treat the people we work with, as well as on all interactions with members of our community. They underscores that «a primary challenge, then, is to reflect on our own existing practices and scrutinize their effects. A subsequent challenge is to incorporate lessons about power, oppression, wellness, and liberation into everyday practice» (p. 129).

We state that a psychopolitical approach, capable of understanding and intervening in the ecological and political impact of the power conveyed and exercised by clinical psychology, both within and outside the clinical setting, and its inevitable contradictions, should characterized by several principles:

• Positionality, self-reflexivity, and non-neutrality: this involves awareness of one's position in the sociopolitical context, recognizing that clinical psychology is never neutral. Nor can it be. It does not exist in a state of «sociological gravity absence» (Castel, 1975). It requires critically reflecting on one's role and the power dynamics we are part of, understanding how our actions, decisions, theories, and practices influence and are influenced by power structures. This means moving within the field of social justice, using the power derived from one's professional position responsibly, in line with the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (IUPsyS & IAAP, 2008).

• Intersectionality and social justice: a psychopolitical approach must be intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), considering how different dimensions of personal and social identity, and different affiliations (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability) intersect to create experiences of oppression and disadvantage, as well as privilege and social advantage, within specific contexts. It is necessary to promote social justice and collective health (Powers & Faden, 2006) by eliminating inequalities, systemic injustices, and rights violations, in clinical practice and in broader society, conveyed through axes of intersectional oppression, including through theories and practices of clinical psychology.

• Rights-based approach: without denying the criticalities and contradictions of discourses and practices that rely on human rights and the global power dynamics they manifest and enable, clinical practices and theories must ensure dignity and respect for every person and subjectivity, by virtue of our common belonging to humanity and the social determinants of mental health (WHO, 2014). Psychologists must work to support, promote and defend the rights not only of the citizens who turn to them but also promote their autonomy, inclusion, and active participation in community life and in decisions affecting their lives. They must also act to protect the rights and well-being of all vulnerable and marginalized people, working to remove barriers that prevent full enjoyment of fundamental rights in all sectors, promoting the creation of environments and social contexts that ensure dignified living conditions and inclusion for all.

• Non-duality and epistemological pluralism: a psychopolitical approach cannot be based on rigid dichotomies, such as mind/body, individual/society, symbolic/material, theory/practice, public/private, local/global, nature/culture, health/illness, object/subject, but must consider and integrate these dimensions, interconnected with power dynamics, and recognize the interconnection and interdependence of phenomena. This approach must draw on a variety of perspectives and methods of knowledge production, aware of the power dynamics permeating the knowledge construction process (Foucault, 1976), encouraging the integration of different and plural approaches, and considering different levels in a historical and dynamic perspective.

Theories, practices, and processes for transformation

A psychopolitical approach that encompasses these principles allows for capturing the multifaceted effects of clinical psychology on the social body and can be applied not only to its ecological evaluation but can simultaneously enrich the theories and practices of clinical psychology. This can mitigate its often overlooked iatrogenic effects, which may be clinically irrelevant or interpreted on an solely individual/mentalistic level.

While most theories and practices of clinical psychology today use concepts related to power at the individual level, for example, through the expressions "helplessness" or "omnipotence" (often alluding to a pathological dimension), or at the interpersonal level, for example, in relation to power in the clinical relationship and its dynamics, the community of clinical psychologists has also produced models that incorporate many of the aforementioned principles, highlighting an unprecedented attention to the consideration of clinical psychology devices as devices of power, in a biopolitical sense (Foucault, 1976, Rose, 1990, 2007), from an ecological perspective, and to the role of power dynamics in determining conditions of suffering and recovery.

The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), for instance, is a model co-constructed by the British Society of Psychologists with the people on whom this model should be applied (i.e., citizens experiencing mental distress, navigating care services, and so-called survivors) in a democratic process of

knowledge construction. It is based on the awareness of the mutual influence of biological, psychological, relational, social, cultural, economic, material, and political factors. In the PTMF, the fully social nature of human beings is considered by integrating the mental dimension of individuals (considered in their identities and social belonging) and the biological dimension, through the relevance attributed to processes of embodiment, material and social circumstances, discourses, narratives, meaning systems, and social beliefs.

The central role assigned to "social and cultural discourses and belief systems, material conditions, and bodily potentialities" from which personal meaning emerges, shaping the operation, experience, and expression of power, threat, and our responses to threat, is not disconnected from the consideration of multiple forms of power (biological/embodied; coercive; legal; economic/material; ideological; social/cultural; and interpersonal).

This allows for a deep incorporation of an intersectional, rights-based approach, assuming that neither emotional distress for individuals nor what counts as a "mental health" need or crisis in any given situation, nor human systems, such as healthcare systems, nor theories and judgments about identifying, explaining, and intervening in mental distress can be neutral or value-free. This sets the scene to consider the iatrogenic power of clinical psychology from an ecological perspective. Additionally, the centrality assigned to power allows "to generate personal, group, and social narratives that help to restore meaning and agency, and along with this, have the potential to create hope, rebuild relationships, and promote social action" in a wider community, social policy, and political context.

Additionally, there are many formalized approaches, such as task sharing and social prescribing, integrating psychological and political, symbolic and material, dimensions and operating within an ecological framework. The value of these approaches is not only operational but also transformative, promoting greater democratization of theories and practices related to clinical psychology, care services, and the broader social organization.

Task sharing (Orkin *et al.*, 2021), used especially in resource-scarce contexts, involves transferring skills, knowledge, and tasks to non-specialized professionals who are trained and supervised by more specialized professionals. This enabling to perform tasks traditionally

reserved for specialists increases the coverage and availability of psychological interventions and challenges the hierarchical nature of knowledge and power, redistributing knowledge-power within services and the community, empowering community members, and legitimizing other social actors. Although this approach has demonstrated its effectiveness in increasing the coverage of psychological interventions (WHO, 2024), one of its main limitations is the type of highly standardized knowledge that can be transferred. In Italy, the primary obstacle to its application is the defensive and corporatist stance of the professional psychology community towards counseling, and the reluctance of clinicians to relinquish part of their power, legitimizing less specialized actors to operate in the field of mental health and psychological care.

Social prescribing (Islam, 2020), which currently lacks a shared definition, is used especially in relation to many chronic diseases and so-called "common mental disorders". It involves integrating clinical, health interventions with socio-community, non-health interventions through the co-construction of an activity plan in the territory, considered as a risk, protective and therapeutic factor. Social prescribing allows for addressing feelings of loneliness of Western societies by promoting social support, especially for vulnerable population groups, from a perspective of social justice and intersectorality, addressing mental health by directly tackling the social determinants of mental health (WHO, 2014), and reactivating social participation processes. The main obstacle to its application (WHO, 2022), particularly in the context of clinical psychology interventions, is the need for personal, organizational, and infrastructural resources that shift the focus of work from the private practice, where it usually ends, to the community and the territory where it is located and towards which it can serve as a bridge.

In summary, task shifting and social prescribing, while not without risks and criticalities, are practical example allowing for integrating an ecological and psychopolitical perspective into mental health, enriching clinical practices that, whether psychological or psychiatric in nature, risk to absorb and monopolize the care functions within contemporary social systems permeated by the "therapeutic culture".

Task shifting and social prescribing have the advantage of potentially transforming care and social systems towards greater democrati-

zation, also through a redistribution of the social power held by clinical psychologists as exclusive bearers of knowledge-power over suffering, extending the boundaries of care from the clinical setting to living contexts, and integrating, at theoretical and practical levels, psychological and political dimensions, and readings and interventions on suffering that reconnect individual, psychic, and symbolic dimensions with material, community, and political ones.

Within an ecological perspective, we must ask ourselves how else clinical psychology can be constructed as a tool for liberation from oppressions. It would be necessary to have tools (like the PTMF) that can read the suffering of individuals and collectives in the most complex way possible, drawing from this reading the basis for building good health practices that can impact not only the subjective level of experience but also, and especially, the material level of oppression and denial of fundamental rights.

Rejecting the foundational myths of the current neoliberal system, i.e., rejecting individualism, infinite growth, competition at all costs, and the naturalization of social contradictions, would allow clinical psychology to carve out a function of social justice, promoting health conceived as a collective condition directly linked to material and symbolic disparities present in a given territory. Rejecting the private mandate and opening up to a political, public mandate of the discipline would allow it to build new practices, impacting the processes of belonging and participation in public life.

We highlighted how the unequal distribution of income and wealth by a few generate a struggle of everyone against everyone else, which, in turn, exacerbates a competitive and unsupportive social climate. These processes undermine social cohesion and capital, and collective participation, making society more fragmented, violent, unjust, and pathogenic. It is within this contradiction that clinical psychology should dwell and move, recognizing its original private-oriented and individualistic mandate and trying to reject it by constructing theoretical and practical frameworks facilitating processes that promote a more equitable distribution of social and symbolic capital, and democratic participation.

Subsequently, we imagine practices focusing on disadvantaged territory and on commodified spaces (squares, streets, parks) accessible and traversed mostly for consumption, to transform these territories

and spaces into places of subjective recognition (Benjamin, 2019). We envision a clinic of social bonds, with a health promotion function (Laverack, 2004), facilitating, with other actors and stakeholders, processes of participation and active citizenship, enabling individuals and communities to rebuild a sense of power, control and agency over their lives, and the feeling of being able to intervene, all together, on those social contradictions generating disorientation, suffering and preventable inequalities.

Conclusion

In Italy, since its private-oriented institution, the constant growth and development of clinical psychology has brought many undeniable advantages to the society and the quality of many lives, enriching them. Nevertheless, it is not without risks, costs and contradictions.

The increase of socioeconomic inequalities since the 1970s is strongly associated with the widespread dissemination of clinical psychology practices and devices that subtly incorporate, diffuse and reproduce the culture from which they derive, thus risking to maintain and not to challenge many avoidable social injustice and promoting the so-called "therapeutic culture".

Clinical psychological, as a device concerning human nature, should recognize its historical determinations, its limitation and, contrary to common belief, the impossibility of being a neutral actor in the democratic social field, or to generate exclusively positive effects, basing this assumption on the outcome on the lives of those having the privilege of accessing it. Furthermore, a broader, multifaceted and complex analysis of the impact of clinical psychology on the whole society, its health and democracy, need an interdisciplinary and ecological approach, starting from a critical consideration about the myth of neutrality and its consequences. Moreover, a psychopolitical account, highlighting the interconnection of psychological and political dimensions and the role of power in shaping it, can foster this analysis as well as transform harmful, epistemological, theoretical, and practical, aspects of clinical psychology. Principles incorporating these assumptions and having the potential to transform clinical psychology by addressing its impact on social assets have been highlighted: positionality, self-reflexivity, and

non-neutrality; intersectionality and social justice; rights-based approach; non-duality and epistemological pluralism.

Then, Power Threat Meaning Framework has been cited as a good practical example of democratic process to knowledge construction and model of distress, embedding the role of social determinants of mental health, power and inequalities as key factors for understanding and acting, conjugating clinical, community and societal level. Subsequently, social prescriptions and tasks shifting are been presented, evidencing them potential to democratize relevant and accessible knowledge and practice about mental health and well-being and expanding the field of intervention on the territory and including other relevant social actors.

Finally, it has been highlighted how the adoption of models, strategies and interventions as such, allows for transforming both clinical psychology and the social space and organization and communities which it is interconnected in a mutually influential relationship, in a health promotion and a democratic and empowering process for all.

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What can we learn from critical, liberation, and decolonization community psychologists of the global South?

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Abstract

The first part of this article illustrates how democracies are in crisis in many European countries and in the United States. The second part describes three important theoretical and political contributions made by critical community psychologists, decolonization, and liberation community psychologists to find theoretical constructs and action strategies that could enrich mainstream European and North American Clinical and Community Psychology. The third part explores how a thousand clinical psychologists, especially family therapists worldwide, have, through the Assisi Manifest, denounced the increase in psychological problems worldwide and the need to work not only with families but in the communities where people live. The last part outlines the major theoretical constructs and intervention methodologies we can integrate into our European community psychology activities and how to transform our "community homes" to decrease polarization and foster dialogue to foster better capabilities to care for one another and solve local and planetary problems.

Keywords: Democracy, critical community psychology, liberation community psychology, decolonization community psychology, family therapy, Assisi Manifest.

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Why democracy in Western societies is not doing well

Democracy in Western societies, from the United States to Europe, is facing a difficult period: countries are polarized and indebted, and many citizens, angry and worried over the level of immigration, crime, and living costs, abstain from voting or choose hard right parties. They blame mainstream and leftist governments who sustained liberal globalization which hurt many local people who lost their jobs in factories, when companies moved to countries where labor was cheaper. Many people feel alienated from elites who have promoted the knowledge economy and the technological innovators, who have become plutocrats, widening the gap between the ultrarich, the middle class, and the working poor (Francescato & Tomai, 2023; Putnam, 2023).

In Europe, the war in Ukraine has deepened the gulf between supporters of a European Union who want more ecological measures against climate change, common military and political foreign policy, and right-wing citizens who are against European federalism, globalization, and ecological measures, which have provoked the revolts of farmers. In the 2024 European election, many young people in Germany, who were green voters, voted AiD an extreme right-wing party (Scuetze & Maslin Nir, 2024).

Right-wing citizens fear the rising immigration of Muslims will dilute nationhood and endanger beloved traditions and values. The Hamas militants who, on October 7th, 2023, raped women, brutally killed 1,200 persons, and kidnapped hundreds of hostages have increased the fears of Israelis. Israeli soldiers looking for Hamas militants have killed more than 35,000 Palestinians, including 15,000 children, making it extremely difficult to create "the two-state solutions" and augmenting the danger of a new wider version of the historical religious wars between the many Muslims and Jews, who both believe God gave them the special right to live in the Holy Land (Pavoncello, 2024).

According to Friedman, our Western societies have lost many of their social, ethical, and political norms.

> We have entered in the kinds of normless worlds where societal institutional and leadership norms are being eroded. No one has to feel shame anymore because no norm has been violated. People in high places have done

shameful things in the past in American politics and business. What is new is so many people doing it so conspicuously, and with such impunity, nothing is more corrosive to a vibrant democracy than when leaders with formal authority behave without moral authority (Friedman, 2024, p 9).

Moreover, civil discourse and engaging with those with whom you disagree has become difficult even in many universities, where heated debates are welcome. In recent years, in many top universities in the Western world, people have been divided between oppressed and oppressors, racists and antiracists, and cannot dialogue but often break into fist fights. In November 2022, the Heterodox Academy, a nonprofit advocacy group, surveyed 1564 full-time college students ages 18 to 24. The group found that nearly three in five students (59%) hesitate to speak about controversial topics like religion, politics, race, sexual orientation, and gender for fear of negative backlash by classmates (Friedman, 2024).

Our recent wars have become, according to Stevens (2024), more dangerous because of the hatred that divides the contenders: «Hamas, Hezbollah, and their patrons in Iran openly call for Israel to be wiped off the map. In response, both countries want to fight aggressively, with the view that they can achieve security only by destroying their enemies' capability and will to wage war» (Stevens, 2024, p. 111).

According to Martin Griffiths (2024), undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs at the United Nations, the leaders of the world are «failing humanity by breaking the contract between ordinary people and those in whom power is vested». This is most evident in the leaders who, with such callous disregard for the consequences on their own people and others, remorselessly reach for the gun instead of pursuing diplomatic solutions. It is particularly egregious when it is permanent members of the Security Council, the United Nations, the body charged with maintaining international peace and security, who betray their solemn duties in this way, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, an act of violation of the United Nations Charter is a clear example. The failure of leadership is evident in some nations' almost unconditional wartime support provided to their allies. You can see in Gaza, where civilian lives and infrastructures are experiencing excessive harm. Just look at the weapons that have continued to flow to Israel from the United States and many other countries, despite the obviously

appalling impact of the war on civilians. Leaders' failure is especially evident to hold in account to those who breach the UN charter and international law, this lack of accountability emboldens those for whom rules and norms are mere obstacles to their greed for power and resources (Griffith, 2024, p. 16).

In 2023, «the world's collective military expenditure rose to 2.4 trillion dollars, while the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations obtained only 24 billion dollars for humanitarian assistance, a mere 43% of the amount required to meet the most urgent needs of hundreds of millions of people» (Griffith, 2024, p. 16).

We need leaders who can solve conflict through negotiation instead of using violence and waging wars which not only kill thousands of people but displace millions of people forced to leave their homes. In 2022, Africa had 28 million, Syria 7 million, Yemen 4 million, Afghanistan 4 million, Armenia 600,000 displaced people (Pavoncello, 2024).

What can we learn from critical, liberation and decolonization community psychologists of the south of the world

Critical community psychology

Critical community psychologists developed theories inspired by the critical philosophy and critical sociology of the Frankfurt School, wherein, in the second and third decades of the 20th century, Mark Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jurgen Habermas worked in the Institute for Social Research. They explored how social structures and culture influence human actions, creating oppression of some groups through the diffusion of practices and social, psychological, and linguistic customs that are assimilated in subjective experience. Critical community psychology, like liberation community psychology, is concerned with addressing social injustices and promoting liberation from oppressive systems. It focuses on analyzing power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures aiming to uncover and challenge oppressive systems that marginalize certain groups and promote needed social change.

Critical theory supports social constructionism, which emphasizes the role of cultural, social, and psychological factors in creating

individual and collective experiences. It highlights how meanings are built through social interactions, and how these constructed realities can increase or challenge oppression. Oppression can be internal and external. When oppression is felt internally, a person may become the worst critic of his or herself, and feel guilty and powerless. When one understands that perceived problems are created by external social structures, this new awareness fosters resilience and hope that one can fight dominant ideas and enter a path of liberation from oppression.

In the sixties and seventies, critical philosophers in France (Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Darrida, Julia Kristeva and Jean Baudrillard) explored the role of language and of social norms in promoting oppression. They criticize positivist theories and empiricism and argue that only a pluralism of theories, methods, and perspectives can be useful in research in social sciences.

Critical community psychologists adopt this pluralistic constructivist model because the constructs used to make research are cultural and not a representation of objective reality (Teo, 2012). They prefer to use a "transformative paradigm" that uses participated qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze social systems that produce injustice and inequality and consequently oppression, offering in their action research, individual and social empowering and transformative opportunities (Mertens, 2009).

One of the tools most used by critical community psychologists is Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves collaborative research efforts between researchers and community members to address community issues and enact social change. It aims to empower communities by giving them control over the research process and facilitating collective action.

Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) have explored modes of personal, interpersonal, organizational, and community well-being, listing the factors that promote the different kinds of well-being. Community or collective wellbeing, for example, requires equity or social justice in the distribution of resources and duties and rights of community members. In 2015, Prilleltensky and colleagues (Prilleltensky *et al.*, 2015) published ICOPPE, a multidimensional model with six specific dimensions of well-being: Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic. These models increase the critical awareness of the variety of potential oppressive

powers, but do not indicate how we can compel the oppressors to share the resources necessary to satisfy the needs of many oppressed people.

Critical community psychologists have been more successful in making mainstream moderate community psychologists become more aware of how most community psychologists work in universities or research centers supporting neoliberal ideologies, marginalizing women and nonwhite people, and promoting the entry of women and black and brown people in academia (Teo, 2005).

Building also on feminist theory, critical community psychologists challenge traditional ways of knowing and emphasize the importance of diverse voices and experiences in knowledge production. They highlight the intersectionality of oppression and the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to social change. Critical community psychologists often also draw on principles of community organizing and activism to empower communities and challenge oppressive systems through grassroots organizing, advocacy, and collective action. They underline the necessity to liberate oppressed people from both internal and external oppression using a "transformative paradigm" that includes both quantitative and qualitative participatory methods to analyze the social systems that produce inequality, injustice, and oppression and to offer marginalized people opportunities to transform their lives promoting personal, interpersonal, organizational, and community wellbeing as theorized by Prillentesky *et al.* (2006). These methods cover a wide range of goals aiming to develop capabilities and self-esteem, participation skills, and resilience, but also to take responsibility for decisions that involve personal and community life.

Critical community psychologists' ideas have been welcomed in New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa, where Decolonization psychology has emerged, and in Latin America, where Liberation community psychology has gained a prominent space (Stevens & Sonn, 2021; Tebes, 2017). In the next paragraph, both are discussed because they share many points in common.

Decolonization and Liberation Community Psychologies

Decolonization and Liberation community psychologists aspire to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression, colonization, and

marginalization. They both aim to address social injustices and promote liberation from oppressive systems.

Several theoretical constructs and frameworks guide both decolonial and liberation practices in community psychology:

1. *Critical consciousness:* Rooted in Paulo Freire's work, critical consciousness involves raising awareness about power dynamics, privilege, and oppression. It encourages individuals and communities to analyze and challenge social structures and ideologies critically.
2. *Postcolonial Theory*: Postcolonial theory explores colonialism's enduring effects on societies and cultures. It underlines the importance of recognizing and addressing colonization's legacies, including power imbalances, cultural hegemony, and epistemic violence.
3. *Indigenous perspectives*: Indigenous scholars have contributed significantly to decolonial, and liberation thought in community psychology. Their viewpoints highlight the intersectionality of oppression, emphasize the importance of listening to marginalized voices and experiences, and value local indigenous knowledge. They prioritize understanding and respecting diverse cultural worldviews and knowledge systems. They challenge Eurocentric norms and promote indigenous and community-based ways of knowing.
4. *Feminist insights*. A special place is also given to both decolonization and liberation approaches in feminist ideas about males' domination over women and the use of violence to force women to submit to patriarchal rules. The feminist theory highlights the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and other identities, emphasizing the importance of addressing multiple forms of oppression simultaneously since individuals may experience multiple intersecting forms of oppression that shape their experiences and identities (Marcomin & Cima, 2018; Vandana Shiva, 1988).
5. *Community Empowerment*: Both colonization and liberation efforts often focus on promoting community empowerment and self-determination. This involves supporting communities in reclaiming control over their narratives, resources, and decision-making processes. This approach focuses on building the capacity of communities to identify and address their own needs and challenges, promoting self-determination and collective action. Emphasizing the importance of considering multiple levels of influence, from the

individual to the societal provides frameworks for understanding and addressing the complex dynamics of oppression and liberation within communities, guiding efforts to promote social justice and empowerment (Carolissen & Duckett, 2018).

6. *Structural Transformation*: Decolonization in community psychology advocates for structural transformations that address the root causes of inequality and injustice. This may involve challenging neoliberal policies, advocating for redistributive justice, and promoting policies that prioritize the needs and rights of marginalized communities (Mignolo & Wash, 2018).
7. *Decolonizing Research and Practice:* Decolonization and liberation both critique standard psychological research and prefer transforming research and practice paradigms that are more inclusive, participatory, and culturally responsive. This includes challenging traditional research methodologies, promoting community-based participatory research, and valuing indigenous and local knowledge systems.

Both liberationists and de-colonialists have created pedagogical, political programs to favor liberation from prejudices and to promote the full development of oppressed persons and groups. Moreover, they both favor a "relational epistemology" where individual freedom is less important than the caring relations Indigenous people have always practiced, promoting mutual aid and a sense of community. They argue we should follow these indigenous ways of life, of caring and of accompanying the other and being responsible for the growth of the relationship instead of the ontological separation of human beings, that our "selfie" consumer society preaches through media and socials to convince us we should pursue the beauty of competing with one another (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Montero, Sonn Burton, 2017; Francescato, Tomai, 2023; Sonn *et al.*, 2002).

Maria Gopel (2016) thinks that in order to make sense of the world, humans invent ideas and stories about why they are here, what is the aim of their life, and how to relate to their natural and human environment. This process develops individual mindsets that lie at the heart of identities and social paradigms that structure socio-political development but also canonized knowledge and cultural narratives that become structural and even material features. Subjective ideas and intersubjective narratives are intricately linked with the "objective" world

and they also impact future thinking. Therefore, they can be a source of vision, innovation, creativity and flourishing progress, but also a source of mental barriers, strategic power or even forceful domination.

According to Maria Gopel (2016), neoclassic economists have sustained the principle of "utility maximization", which is regarded as a fundamental universal law that humans selfishly, insatiably, and rationally pursue the never-ending maximization of pleasure. All other concepts and explanations derive from this core idea, and the prime source of pleasure is considered to be consumption. Reflexivity is an empowering and emancipating activity: it helps us to assess the underlying assumptions and unstated ideas upon which social processes and institutions have been built, justified, maintained, and adapted and, therefore, empowers us to break free from them if necessary.

Original viewpoints of decolonization and liberation that we, Westerners, can use when working with marginalized groups in our society

Decolonization community psychology has explored in depth the consequences of colonialism, which used the concept of race to justify the oppression and discrimination of natives, whose dark skin was a visible sign of their inferiority. They underline that colonial experiences and prejudices still influence also contemporary social and psychological dynamics. Colonial experiences are transmitted through collective memory to other generations and they shape the identity and the conscience of colonized people.

Decolonization community psychologists have examined existent power relations and dominant narrations that maintain the oppression of colonized communities even today. They have promoted the diffusion of new viewpoints, especially from indigenous epistemologies. They have also underlined the importance of community people's active participation in pursuing social and political changes.

Decolonization has underlined the importance *of Healing historical traumas and fostering reconciliation between colonized and colonizer communities.* This requires acknowledging past injustices, addressing intergenerational trauma, and working towards healing and reconciliation processes. Decolonization's supporters want to undermine the

competition that leads to conflicts and wars that characterize countries as the Western neoliberal nations and even state capitalists governed by autocrats like Russia, China, and North Korea.

Liberation theories focus on empowerment promotion, social justice, and liberation from oppressive structures through social action and active participation of community residents. Liberation community psychologists favor the promotion of the rights of women and the demolition of patriarchal norms as a crucial part of social liberation. They fight racism and promote the empowerment of people of color. Moreover, they promote sexual freedom and dignity to people who have different sexual orientations, gender identities, and modes of loving. They aim to achieve a planetary liberation and to rehumanize persons considered inferior and nonhuman in different parts of our world. These viewpoints have found an ally in a philosopher, Joan Carl Melich (2024), who maintains that metaphysical philosophy has neglected the body as feminists have affirmed; we should recognize the fragility of our bodies and pursue empathy, pardon, compassion, care of ourselves and others with embraces and caresses to comfort each other. We need to dissolve the duality of metaphysical philosophy between body and soul because it is the body that feels, enjoys, and suffers. We need to caress our bodies more to make life bearable in spite of all the suffering that our bodies experience.

Melich suggests we have to stop reasoning using a metaphysical dualistic configuration, in which there are opposing poles: the first pole is positive, the second negative and the second is subordinated to the other. Soul and body, sky and earth, right and left, male and female, light-shadow, science and poetry, reason and passion, depth and surface oral and writing, high and low, absolute and relative, objective and subjective, reality and fiction are some of the most common dual opposing poles, that have built a totalitarian philosophy.

Melich is convinced we need more ethics, and if we recognize our condition of vulnerability, we can promote patterns of care of self and care of others based on caress, compassion, and consolation. He thinks we should no longer ask the Kantian question "What should I do"? But "How can I respond to the call of another?". Listening is crucial to understanding the requests of the other.

Liberation community psychology has also focused on *Black liberation theory and Liberation theology.* Black liberation is based on the

experiences of Black individuals and communities and focuses on understanding and addressing the psychological effects of racism and oppression while also promoting empowerment and resilience. *Liberation Theology* emerging from within religious contexts, advocates for social and economic justice, often emphasizing the liberation of marginalized and oppressed groups.

The guiding principles that we Western community psychologists can adopt are: epistemic justice, humanization of oppressed people considered less than humans, a relational ontology that promotes care of self and other, conscientization that reveals the tie between social struggles and empowerment, the role of narratives that can promote generative communities, the need to examine historical origins of a problem, giving more voice to narratives of marginal groups, and plan interventions pinpointing at what levels can desire changes be promoted (small groups, territorial organizations, local communities, regional, national European Union, planetary level).

Recent textbooks confirm that critical community, decolonization, and liberation ideas are now discussed and compared within European and American community psychology literature. Carolissen and Duckets (2018), for example, criticize European and American epistemologies and make a long list of good ideas coming from decolonization literature: refusal to pathologize marginalized persons, rediscovering forgotten historical events, creation of new archives, promotion of new narratives and especially of Indigenous knowledge, using reflexive and ecological modalities. Other authors (Fernandez *et al.*, 2021) underline the importance of promoting epistemic justice, universality, inclusion of indigenous traditional knowledge, promotion of ethical and historical awareness, and critique the subjective bases of power and privilege, but they especially recommend that we should focus of problems which have worsened in this new 21first century: increasing worldwide racism, class and gender inequalities; the widespread use of violence, and the surge of migrants escaping climate change disasters and wars and armed conflicts.

Manuela Tomai and I (Francescato & Tomai, 2023) underline in our introduction that in the last decades, a plurality of factors, including the Covid pandemic and media and social, have increased a global cultural rise of narcissistic individualism at the expense of relational connectedness. We, as clinical community psychologists, think that

we desperately need the growth of relational ontology that promotes care for self and others, downplays the merits of individual freedom, and enhances the values of caring relations, promoting mutual aid and a sense of community. Many family therapists worldwide share our concern as described in their Assisi Manifest

The Assisi Manifest

In July 2023, over a thousand psychotherapists from over 50 countries and of every orientation gathered in Assisi (Italy) for three days to celebrate family therapy, its impact and potential, and to exchange ideas. They decided to publish a Manifest that documented how mental health was worsening in the world and what could be done.

They wrote that

> the overreliance on hospitalization and overuse and at times abuse of labels and medications have increased due to the search for a quick and inexpensive fix. Financial pressures on underfunded mental health systems also played a role as did the global cultural rise of narcissistic individualism at the expense of relational connectedness. Family fragmentation compounded by atrocities and wars all over the world, displacement and forced migrations, gender and wealth inequality, and climate change pose huge challenges for families and ultimately individual wellbeing.

They were gravely concerned about the dramatic rise in adolescent mental health issues since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. Teenagers were more at risk in a fragmented society "where family disintegration, single parenthood, and absent fathers are becoming a norm". They wrote that "unresolved parental and intergenerational conflicts, and marginalization along with the deleterious impacts of social media, are damaging adolescents "healthy development", and that children and adolescents should be heard in therapy for family healing, without prejudice and labeling and without parent blaming. They underlined "the interconnectedness of couple crises (including those of same-sex and non-traditional family units) with the broader family structure offering a path to couples for healing and resilience within the family with a multigenerational approach as a component".

With this Assisi Manifest, they declared

the need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of individuals, families, communities, and societies, and incorporate family therapy as a vehicle for accessing resilience and healing. With the fresh perspectives and enthusiasm of the younger generations of family therapists and the emerging movement of therapists in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, along with the lessons we learned through our history, we seek to reinvigorate an understanding of families and communities, their cultural values and resources.

In the Manifest, they also state that death and trauma are inevitable conditions of our existence:

However, we die and suffer in different ways according to our cultural traditions, religions, and spiritual beliefs. Categorizing mourning as healthy or pathological based on outdated individual, temporal, and linear stages of grief is inaccurate and reductionistic. As family therapists, we can facilitate relational processes that strengthen families and facilitate coping with expected life events as well as traumatic losses linked to the violence, wars, and forced migrations we are currently witnessing on an unprecedented, global scale. As multigenerational systemic and community therapists, we understand how such experiences impact families over generations, and intervene to help them overcome current and historic traumatic and painful experiences by promoting reconnection and forgiveness.

The proponents of the Manifest also underline that social and cultural discrimination create many problems but that by bringing family therapy outside the therapy room in the streets, shelters, churches, and community centers we can increase resilience in coping and surviving: "Our world is increasingly divided and fractured by cultural discrimination, economic injustice, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, political repression, warfare, and natural disasters; we must recognize not only the vulnerability of families and children caught in these difficulties but also their resilience in coping and surviving".

The Manifest ends with a call for action:

advocating for social justice via empowerment, inclusivity, and the recognition and establishment of basic human rights. Considering the current political and religious divisions in our world as evidenced by growing populist political movements, devastating wars in Eastern Europe, the Middle East,

Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, as well as waves of migrants and refugees, now more than ever, it is time to recognize and strengthen the family as the foundation of society and thus an important vehicle for healing.

Conclusions: for constructing a plurality of better futures

Critical, liberation, and decolonization community psychologists are mostly members of small groups who believe very strongly in what they are doing and share their ideas and experiences worldwide. We, as clinical community psychologists (Francescato & Tomai, 2023) believe so much in the power of small groups that in our last book, all the methodologies we proposed: to work empowering individuals and groups; improving associations and institutions; developing communities; building social networks to increase social support; offer empowering training for young people who dream for a better future or older persons who lost or want to change their job; promoting affective educations for kids and adults who need to enjoy more positive emotions and deal better with negative emotions like rage, jealousy, envy, which increase episodes of violence against women, children, migrants; to fight climate warming, and basically to do well participatory action research; and self-help groups are all based on small group work. That is why we give large space in discussing small groups as behavior setting and intervention tools and the need to train people to be good participants and facilitators of group work.

We are not the only ones, Robert Putnam (2023) documents that in the last 120 years there has been in the United States an alternation between: "the society of I", strongly individualistic, socioeconomically, politically polarized, that promotes private and public narcissism and the "society of we", more egalitarian, more collaborative, that values social responsibilities more than individual interest. Putnam examines all the changes that have brought on the two different kinds of societies in different historical periods. For instance, our contemporary "society of I" has been promoted after the Sixties by right-wing and left-wing activists who have been elected at the local, state, and national levels and have become more extremists, increasing political polarization. This has created a situation in which instead of behaving like adversaries, they often perceive the members of the

opposite coalitions as enemies, and sometimes they physically fight when trying to pass controversial laws. Putnam believes that since so many elected politicians no longer respect one another it has become very difficult to pass laws for collective interests.

The contemporary "society of I" has been shaped by technological innovations, in particular, according to Putnam, by social media that have greatly expanded the fragmentation of "identity groups" and increased the opportunities to find occasional sexual partners but diminished relational capabilities developed in face-to-face communication, and especially lowered the desire and the ability to engage in long-lasting relations. In fact, in many countries many adults live now alone. Moreover, individualist consumerism has been increased through influencers, promoted by financial capitalists who distribute high profits to those who convince their followers to buy their special products.

Putnam also found that in all historical periods, political alternances have been brought about by small groups, who create experiments from below and built networks to spread the desired changes. Nowadays, many small groups are tired of living in a society that is unequal and violent against women, the homeless, and migrants. According to Putnam, thousands of small groups in the United States are pushing for welfare at the community level. This is also happening in Europe: Di Maria has explored the unconscious power of small groups in group therapy (Di Maria & Falgares, 2021), Arcidiacono *et al.* (2021) document how small teams of researchers have found how social sites like Instagram, or online platforms can also promote a sense of community. They have examined projects that use the web to reach men who tend to use violence against women or use the metaverse to have men become aware of what causes them to lose control of their emotions. Menegatto and Zamperini (2018) investigate the problems of detention and security; Gatti and Procentesi (2020) explores how Instagram use develops a sense of community in open neighborhoods, and again, Gatti and Procentese (2022) examine the social added value for neighborhood-related social media. In the last two chapters of our last community psychology handbook (Francescato & Tomai 2023), about forty community psychologists narrate their professional history. Some work with women victims of violence or women forced to become street prostitutes, others bring local volunteers in retirement

centers for poor elders. Still some innovators create well-being among fighting tenants of condominiums. Most of these projects have been done by small groups of students, supervised by one or two community psychologists.

Several European academic community psychologists have formed international groups in common projects to help the homeless through Housing First (Ornelas 2008) to assist persecuted migrants (Esposito, 2017) in fighting climate warming and creating energetic communities (Francescato, 2020; Francescato & Tomai, 2023). Other community psychologists try to diminish school dropout, drug abuse, bullies, and cyber bullies and promote democracy through circle time and other effective strategies. (Francescato & Putton, 2022) and preventing violent political radicalization (Meringolo, 2020).

Promoting Community Centers ("Case di Comunità") in every neighborhood to foster psychological well-being and caring relations

In the introduction of our manual, we propose that community homes should not have only doctors, nurses, social workers, and clinical psychologists who will promote health but also wellbeing, offering a variety of workshops, from yoga, meditation, affective education, and empowering training to forge new futures. (Francescato & Tomai, 2023, chapters 11 and 12). Moreover, the homes will also have actors, musicians, and singers who will run theatrical, singing, and dancing courses. Various studies have confirmed that these workshops promote well-being and a sense of community and develop caring relations, and generative relations (Lavanco & Novara, 2013) that nourish the "we" needed to balance the individualism and the "society of I" that separates us from others.

These community centers ("Casa di Comunità") will develop a new form of prevention, limiting the polarization that now prevents people from even listening to different viewpoints. The centers will be a place where citizens, diverse in age, gender, class, and political orientation, can develop the art of feeling well together and create a web of caring relationships among each other. They can be inspired not only by what Indigenous communities have done for centuries but also by what self-help groups and feminist groups have done in

the last decades (Vandana, 1988), (Thunberg, 2022), (d'Aubonne, 2022), and (www.Effe_rivista_femminista.it.) Only if we build places where everyone is welcome, people with different values can begin to talk and listen to each other and take care both of themselves and their communities. In these community centers ("Casa di Comunità"), citizens can find ways to acquire new members for community projects; share different narratives (Rappaport, 2000) can discuss local issues and global problems like climate change, developing a planetary sense of community that diminishes antagonism among rival identity groups, reminding us of our common humanity and of the frailty of our small planet.

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Reciprocity and prosocial behavior in democratic dynamic

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Abstract

Prosocial behavior (PB) currently presents some conceptual overlaps with the construct of reciprocity, understood here as a lubricant of democratic dynamics. The analyses presented in this study are partial and concern the sample of Palermo, consisting of 307 subjects, residing in the eight districts of the city. The proposed study is based on a research agreement between the Universities of Palermo and Malaga, to test the relationship between PB and reciprocity and the multiple dimensions that intervene on the two constructs at the individual, interpersonal and community level. A structural equation model (with the Lisrel method) was used. From the analysis of the data, it emerges that the principle of equity, belief in a just world, sense of community and neighborhood norm increase PB and that together with worldview and social trust, in turn, they increase positive reciprocity and decrease negative reciprocity, even if the effect of the sense of community is not significant. The results suggest working at a level of proximity in which the other is recognized as competent to reciprocate what he has received,

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overcoming the asymmetries of power and resources that would harm the democratic process.

Keywords: prosocial behavior, reciprocity, social trust, normative aspects, structural model, democratic dynamics.

Introduction

In the introduction to this issue, it is argued that the exercise of democracy implies a number of key elements, including trust in social ties and civic coexistence, a system of shared rules, and a sense of similarity and difference between peoples. The latter enhances the uniqueness of each citizen in a cooperative choice. Conversely, a decline in trust and social cohesion has been identified as a significant factor contributing to the overall weakening of communities and democratic systems (Volpato, 2019).

Democracy, as a continuous creative act (Alberti, 2018, p. 62), necessitates the renewal of the socio-affective bond between citizens within a collective conversation of trust. This does not preclude the potential for conflict between individuals; rather, it is conceived as an event that can be crossed and modified according to a particular worldview.

The literature on reciprocity is vast and rich in contributions from different disciplines. In this study, the term "reciprocity" is defined as the exchange of goods and services, not necessarily mediated by money, established between two or more individuals in an interaction that can be historicized over time (Lietaer, 2001; Polanyi, 1965; Raddon, 2003; Stanca, 2009; Stanca *et al*., 2007; Zamagni, 2006). The construct is based on the significance of the intangible and symbolic advantages associated with the relationship, which are also contingent on group affiliations and shared beliefs (Amerio, 2004; Zani, 2005).

Other studies, more recently, recognize the importance of the construct of reciprocity to ensure democratic balances (Schedler, 2021). A comparable observation has previously been made regarding the role of online reciprocity in facilitating citizens' engagement in the civic and political discourse of democracies (Kobayashi *et al*., 2006). Schedler (2021) asserts that democracy is not founded on absolute

values, but rather on reciprocal norms that necessitate mutual commitments. The historical development of democracy has established a relationship of reciprocity between rulers and citizens. This implies that if rulers fail to address the needs of citizens, citizens have the power to remove them from office. In contemporary representative democracies, those who emerge victorious in political elections and represent the population, even if only temporarily, assume that no action taken will impede the right of others to govern in the future (Schedler, 2021). Similarly, citizens accept the binding rules of the politically elected, provided that they are valid for all. The construct of reciprocity is therefore closely linked to that of equity and respect for the rules. However, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples, it can be declined in both positive and negative ways.

Empirical evidence exists to support the fact that these are two distinct constructs and not a general reciprocity norm (Eisenberger *et. al*., 2004). Consequently, positive reciprocity implies a willingness to treat those who treat us well in a favorable manner, whereas negative reciprocity assumes that one will be treated unfavorably in response to a previous unfavorable treatment (Becker, 1986; Schedler, 2021). When democracy is at risk, the bonds of positive reciprocity are weakened, and the practices of negative reciprocity increase, resulting in a series of defections from shared norms and an escalation of violence (Schedler, 2021). The construct of reciprocity thus has the potential to either reinforce or erode democratic balances in a dualistic manner. The democratic system of reciprocity is, in fact, an "almost stationary" dynamic, which, under certain conditions, can have different outcomes. For example, a social contract is insufficient to guarantee its durability over time. Citizens must recognize themselves as a community and share a sense of collective identity that serves to maintain cohesion, both in terms of interpersonal and intergroup relationships and in terms of the relationship between citizens and institutions (Riggio, 2024). The health of democracies is thus largely contingent upon the affective bonds that exist between the members of a given territory. The sense of community represents a commitment to remain united, recognizing the negotiation of individual and egoic needs as the primary means of achieving mutual integration and connection.

Another fundamental aspect of democratic societies is the helping behavior towards the other. Rawls (1971, p. 108) describes this as a

"positive natural duty" to help others and a "negative natural duty" to refrain from causing harm to others. In particular, prosocial behavior refers to helping actions carried out by an individual or a group free of charge, aimed at improving the general well-being of another person or group, and reducing social injustices (Cattarinussi, 1994; Salfi & Barbara, 1994).

As outlined in the psychological literature (Batson, 1987; Marta & Scabini, 2003, 2012; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1985), a range of activities can be considered helping behaviors when no direct benefit is calculable for the individual engaging in them. These behaviors enable prosocial action while also pursuing personal goals, such as the realization of one's moral prerogatives or social approval. However, they are still attributable to actions that benefit the wider community. Two aspects bring us back to the contribution that this kind of behavior can provide to the democratic dynamic. The first is the search for equity, which motivates people to act in order to restore justice and distribute costs and benefits. The second is attention to the needs of others and the assumption of their perspectives in an empathetic way. This is in contrast to authoritarianism of Adornian memory or the need for dominance of the other (Gray *et al*., 1991).

The present work explores the construct of reciprocity as a "democratic lubricant", in relation to other psychological variables. We present an integrated model of reading prosocial behavior, which postulates that it is the result of the interaction between personal, interindividual, and contextual dimensions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). The objective is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between prosocial behavior, reciprocity, and the multifaceted individual, relational, and community dimensions that influence these two constructs involved in democratic dynamics.

The research

Purpose and proposed theoretical model

The research project originated from an agreement between the University of Palermo and the University of Málaga, as outlined in a memorandum of understanding developed by both academic

institutions. The innovative contribution is to consider prosocial behavior as an antecedent of reciprocity, which is contrary to previous studies (see the review by Bartolotta, 2012).

A substantial corpus of literature exists on prosocial behavior (PB). For the purposes of this study, we define PB as proactive behavior that involves direct interaction with other people who want to benefit through one's conduct (Marta & Scabini, 2012). As previously stated, it includes «actions directed at helping or benefiting another person or group of people, without expecting external rewards» (Mussen & Eisenberg, 1985).

The concept of reciprocity, which can be defined as the exchange of goods and services between two or more individuals in a transaction that is not necessarily mediated by money, has recently emerged as a topic of growing interest within the field of psychological studies. This interest has been largely absent from the field of psychological studies, but has been extensively explored by social economists (Lietaer, 2001; Raddon, 2003; Polanyi, 1957; Zamagni, 2006). The two constructs, prosocial behavior and reciprocity have areas of overlap. In general, the characteristics of both can be referred to as follows:

- gratuity: prosocial/reciprocal conduct is gratuitous, i.e., spontaneous and not solicited by another individual;
- proportionality: when people receive an action towards them (positive or negative), they feel "stimulated" to reciprocate in a proportional but not necessarily equivalent way. This implies a willingness to reciprocate with something other than what was initially received, even at a later time, and to involve a third party in the exchange, thus establishing a form of deferred reciprocity (Stanca *et al.*, 2007).
- ability to produce relational goods. The relationship is not a means to an aim; rather, it is the aim itself.

It is our view that the variables which can explain this relationship are situated at multiple levels. We posit that PB functions as an antecedent to relations of reciprocity, representing the primum movens towards the other and the recognition of his existential dimension.

At the individual level, beliefs and personal worldviews can be significant factors. The belief that a sense of justice governs the world, rewarding those who deserve it and punishing those who do not, appears to be a key driver of prosocial behavior (Furnham, 2003).

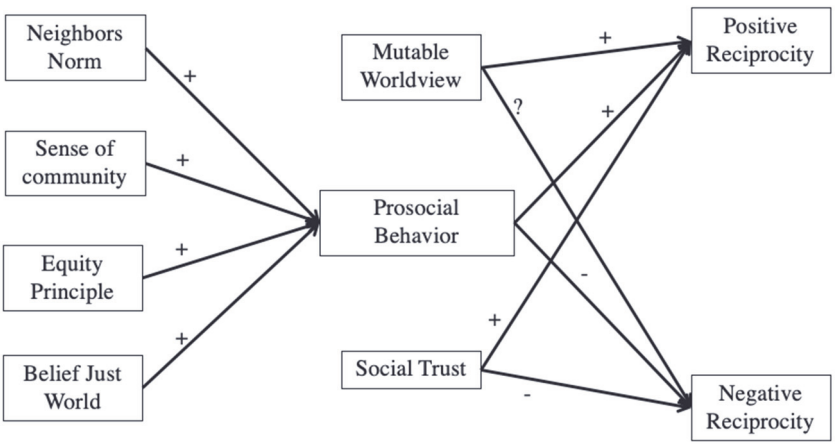
Additionally, the belief in a just world is correlated with positive reciprocity in instances where an individual has received a gift without having requested it (Edlund *et al*., 2002). Conversely, individuals who perceive the world as modifiable, rather than fixed and immutable, are more inclined to act and transform their surroundings through their own actions (Dweck, 1986; Heyman, Dweck & Cain, 1993). At the interpersonal level, we have previously discussed the importance of trust in maintaining certain relational balances. As evidenced by the literature, the relationship between trust and reciprocity remains unclear (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000). In some studies, no correlation is identified between the two constructs (Abbink *et al*., 2000). In other studies, reciprocity is conceptualized as cooperative and non-trusting behavior (Cochard *et al*., 2004). Additionally, the relationship between the two is proposed to depend on the duration or sequence of actions (Cochard *et al*., 2004). In this context, trust is understood as generalized trust based on commonly shared norms and moral values among members of a community (Fukuyama, 1995). It can be reasonably assumed that an increase in trust leads to a corresponding increase in positive reciprocity. In other contexts, it has been defined as «the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to others in a matured state under conditions of uncertainty» (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). This emphasizes that even in the presence of reliable institutions, it can become an expected and "regular" behavior. However, this does not imply that it is possible to predict it with absolute certainty.

At the social level of analysis, we considered both the normative and the affective aspects, at the micro and macro levels, and identified respect for the rules of a specific neighborhood and the sense of community as variables capable of eliciting prosocial behavior. With respect to the former, it has been demonstrated that if the inhabitants of the same neighborhood of residence consider prosocial behavior to be important and are willing to assume it, they will come to view it as a social norm, and thus be inclined to assume it (Lenzi *et al*., 2012). Furthermore, individuals tend to engage in behaviors that they believe are approved of by others, a phenomenon known as normative social influence (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) and this occurs without conscious intention (Aarts *et al*., 2003). In conclusion, a stronger sense of community should lead to a greater sense of cohesion with other citizens, a greater willingness to provide social support as a result of that bond,

and thus a greater likelihood of prosocial behavior (Novara *et al*., 2021). In general, it has been demonstrated that the sense of community exerts a positive influence on the willingness of individuals to pursue constructive solutions to conflicts, thereby counteracting the onset of violent and abusive conduct (Fisher & Sonn, 2002; Hombrados-Mendieta *et al*., 2013; Novara *et al*., 2023).

The extant literature demonstrates that the aforementioned variables are directly or indirectly related to one another. However, no definitive model has been proposed to elucidate the nature of these relationships. The present research aims to address this gap in the literature. The model, illustrated in Figure 1, postulates that neighborhood norm, sense of community, principle of equity, and belief in a just world increase PB (H1). This, in turn, increases positive reciprocity and decreases negative reciprocity (H2) to which social trust and the mutable worldview (H3) are also related.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Participants

The theoretical model was tested on a sample of 307 participants, aged between 18 and 28 (M = 24.30, S.D.= 9.5; 42.4% men and 57.6% women), residing in Palermo (Italy), extracted from the registry list of the city's eight districts. The survey was conducted using a random-

route sampling method. We established limits for the selected neighborhoods, and random-route sampling designated the blocks, streets, sidewalks, and so on. Trained interviewers administered the questionnaires in different places of city.

Measures

The variables under investigation were gathered through the self-report administration of a protocol containing the instruments described below.

- The *Prosocial Behavior Scale* (PBS; Caprara *et al*., 1991) was assessed using the 16-item version of the scale (Caprara *et al*., 2005). The scale employs a three-point Likert scale (ranging from "never" to "many times") to assess the tendency to act for the benefit of another person in an altruistic manner and with trust. Examples of items include "I try to help others" and "I trust in others" ($\alpha = .92$).
- The *Neighborhood Norm Scale* (NNS) was constructed on the basis of the PBS, comprising a 16-item scale in which participants were requested to estimate, on a 3-point Likert scale (ranging from "never" to "many times"), the probability that a specific normative behavior would be adopted by the inhabitants of the neighborhood (e.g., "The people who live in your neighborhood, how likely are they to help other people?"). ($\alpha = .84$).
- The *Brief Sense of Community Scale* (Peterson *et al*., 2008) was employed to assess the sense of community (SoC) within a particular neighborhood or district. The scale employs a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") and is composed of four subscales, corresponding to the four dimensions of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model: memberships (eg.: "I feel like a member of this neighborhood"), influence (eg.: "People in this neighborhood are good at influencing each another"), emotional connection (eg.: "I have a good bond with others in this neighborhood"), needs fulfillment (eg.: "This neighborhood helps me fulfill my needs"). In the study we considered the total score on the scale ($\alpha = .84$).
- In regard to the *equity principle* (EP), we used the brief version of the *Merit Principle Scale* (Davey *et al*., 1999) through which

participants indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with the idea that it is just to distribute benefits in the community services via the equity principle (eg.: "Sometimes it is appropriate to give a reward to the worker who needs it most, even if he/she is not the one who worked the hardest"). The 6-point Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") includes 9 items (α= .69).

- The construct of *General Just World* was measured using the 6-item version of the *Personal Belief in a Just World Scale* (PBJW, Dalbert *et al*., 2001). This scale valued the belief that events in one's life are just (e.g., "I am usually treated fairly", "Overall, events in my life are just"). Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale (from "totally disagree" to "totally agree") (α= .80).
- The *Social Trust* was measured with an adapted version of the *Social Wellbeing* by Keyes (1998). The scale was composed by 8 item that value the answers using the 5-points Likert scale (from "not at all' to "totally agree") (e.g.: "I think people deserve trust"; "I think people are more and more dishonest nowadays") (α= .71).
- The *Mutable Worldview Scale (WS*), as developed by Dweck (1986), comprises 3 questions answered on 5-point Likert scale (from "not at all" to "totally agree") (e.g.: "Even if we can change some aspects of it, the essence of our world is unlikely to change; "Our world has its fundamental traits and really not much can be done to change them") (α= .77).
- The *Reciprocity* was measured trough the scale developed by Eisenberger *et al.* 2004); the Scale consisted of 14 statements concerning the advisability of retribution for unfavorable treatment and others 10 items concerning actions of positive reciprocity. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), obtaining two measures one for positive reciprocity (Rec+) and one for negative reciprocity (Rec-) (e.g., Rec+: "If someone does something for me, I feel required to do something for them"); (e.g., Rec-: "When someone treats me badly, I still act nicely to them") (respectively, α= .83 and .82).

Data analysis and results

The four independent variables in the model were neighborhood norm, SoC, equity principle, personal belief in a just world whilst pro-social behavior and reciprocity (positive and negative) were dependent variables. Descriptive statistics (mean, s.d, α-Cronbach) and relationships among variables (Pearson's r) are reported in Table 1.

As we know, starting from a certain theoretical causal relationship (hypothesized) a theoretical covariance matrix can be produced which, when compared with the analogous observed matrix, will allow us to understand how much the theoretical model is compatible with the observed data.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, α-Cronbach and correlations

		M	*SD*	*α*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*
1	PBS	5.57	.91	.92	1.00							
2	NNS	3.87	1.11	.84	.21**	1.00						
3	SoC	3.27	1.33	.84	.15*	.56**	1.00					
4	EP	5.19	.59	.69	.33**	.17**	.02	1.00				
5	PBJW	4.05	1.27	.80	.30**	.27**	.26**	.05	1.00			
6	WS	4.61	1.34	.77	-.04	.04	-.00	.13*	.03	1.00		
7	ST	4.38	1.03	.71	.17**	-.04	.05	.21**	.07	.15**	1.00	
8	Rec+	3.15	1.02	.83	.21**	.08	.11	.14*	.01	.23**	.10	1.00
9	Rec-	5.61	.97	.82	.20**	.02	.24**	−.00	-.05	.09	.05	-.04

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

The theoretical model of the relationships between the variables was then tested by analysis of the Structural Equation Model, using Lisrel (version 8.8, Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). The theoretical model, graphically represented in Figure 1, included 6 exogenous variables (X 1-X6) and 3 endogenous variables (Y1-Y3).

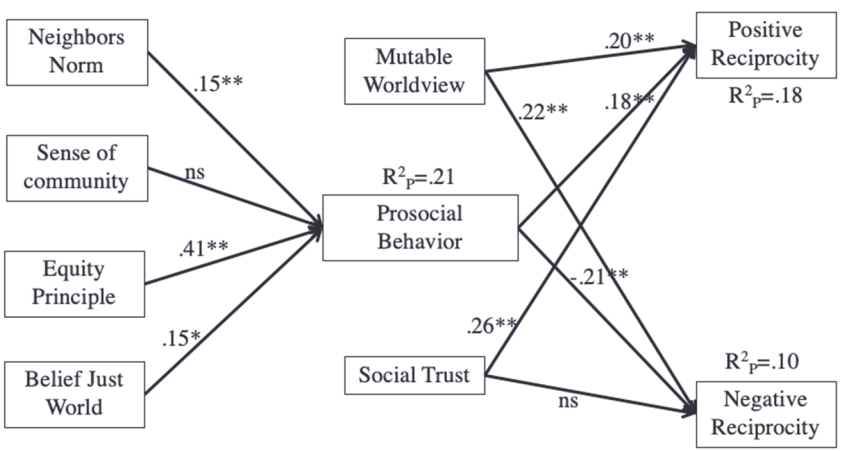
Since the Chi-square is heavily influenced by sample size (Bollen

& Long, 1994), two indices have been taken into consideration to model fitting (Bentler, 1990; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1981):

- goodness of fit index (GFI), where the value of the statistic T is standardized with the maximum value it can reach; consequently, this measurement takes values between 0 (bad model-data fit) and 1 (perfect fit). We can consider a good fit if > .90.
- the Root mean squared residuals (RMR), i.e. the square root of the average of the residuals squared. The index indicates a good fit when < .10, a sign that the theoretical residues are similar to the empirical ones.

The hypothetical model, although rather complex, reaches satisfactory adaptation values (GFI=.98; AGFI=.92; RMR=.044; χ^2 =84.10; p=.00; df=7). Essentially, the model seems to show that neighborhood norms, fairness, and belief in a just world correlated with prosocial behavior, which, in turn, related with reciprocity behaviors that can also be influenced by modifiable worldview and social trust. LISREL estimates graphic is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Model with structural coefficients ($^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$)



In detail, the model presents good explained variance percentages for all dependent variables:

- prosocial behavior (R2=.21), whose antecedents are neighborhood norm (r=.15), principle of equity (r=.41) and belief in a just world (r=.15) but not SoC as hypothesized.

- positive reciprocity (R2 = .18), whose antecedents are worldview (r=.20), prosocial behavior (r=.18) and social trust (r=.26), as hypothesized;
- negative reciprocity (R2=.10), whose antecedents are worldview (r=.22), prosocial behavior (r=-.21), but not social trust as hypothesized.

Conclusions

With regard to H1, looking at the coefficients, all variables except the SoC were statistically significant. The results therefore indicate that the sense of cohesion and connection with other citizens does not directly connect to the PB which was found to be related to the reciprocity. On the other hand, neighborhood norms, which are shared at the level of a specific social context or group, are correlated with prosocial actions. This is because they are not as expansive in terms of their physical and relational boundaries as those of a metropolitan city. The recognition of another individual's need, which is a prerequisite for initiating a helping behavior (Bartolotta, 2012-2013), may be influenced by the circumstances of crowding and anomie prevalent in large cities. This is not the case, however, with regard to the neighborhood norm, which is a norm shared in a more intimate context in which people recognize themselves. Indeed, as evidenced by prior research (Aarts *et al*., 2003), the mental representation of behavioral norms is more accessible when the tendency to act in accordance with the norms is proximal to the subject, thereby confined to a recognizable environment of value to the individual (Quinn *et al*., 2002). In such an environment, adults and significant others may serve as prosocial models (Lam, 2012).

The tested model indicates that personal beliefs in a just world and the principle of regulation based on equity would also favor PB. The conviction in a just world provides the individual with the assurance that they will receive what is rightfully theirs, given that the world is perceived as fundamentally stable and ordered. This belief is, in fact, conceptualized in the literature as a personal resource (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2000), as a necessary condition for maintaining a sense of fairness (Dalbert *et al*., 2001). It is antithetical to discriminatory treatment

and serves as a guide for social interactions, promoting, when feasible, helping actions (Furnham, 2003), in accordance with the model tested here. Similarly, PB is related to the principle of equity, which posits that investments made in accordance with fair expectations will be duly rewarded (Furnham, 2003).

With regard to H2, the relation between PB and positive and negative reciprocity is confirmed, although with the latter no significant inverse relationship is observed with social trust. The second path sees, in fact, a modifiable worldview related to the positive reciprocity, as well as social trust and PB. In accordance with this result, in literature we find that a world change orientation predicts prosocial actions to make the world a better place (Oceja & Salgado, 2013). As previously stated in the introduction, this result addresses the necessity to distinguish between the two constructs, PB and positive reciprocity, which are frequently confused or conflated. In the tested model, PB is identified as the antecedent of a specifically reciprocal relationality that is no longer regarded as a means to help the other, but is instead conceptualised as an end to be achieved in itself. In the context of reciprocity, the objective is to establish and maintain a positive relationship with another individual. This entails recognizing the other person as a capable and deserving counterpart, with the intention of reciprocating their actions and contributions in a mutually beneficial manner (Bruni & Faldetta, 2012). The crucial aspect of reciprocity, which makes it a democratic lubricant, lies precisely in this characteristic: to give people access to a relational dimension that includes the other (Novara & Varveri, 2021). As Moghaddam argues in *The Psychology of Democracy* (2016), this movement towards the other has a democratic potential as it rejects the possibility of monopolizing power and resources as well as fueling stereotypes and relative social immobility. A capacity that sees the recognition of the characteristics common to all human beings together with the value of their differences. In contrast, dominant leaderships frequently engender a hostile attitude towards the other, thereby devaluing any potential for constructive engagement (Moghaddam, 2016). According to Brooks (2012), reciprocity serves as an indicator of mutual recognition based on a shared bond between citizens. This is why a vision of a modifiable world is related to both positive and negative reciprocity.

Schedler (2021) posits that democratic reciprocity is a "self-

limiting norm" that strives to maintain equilibrium in social relations, predicated on the dynamics of giving and receiving. It is anticipated that both cooperation and conflict will occur, but they must be proportionate and congruous in order to preserve the democratic balances that are essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy. It is not the case that conflict, or a hostile response or retaliation, is excluded a priori. Rather, what is required is an interpretative code that the reciprocity model can offer us. Schedler also indicates that retaliation may be a justifiable reaction to transgressions against fundamental democratic norms (Schedler, 2021, p. 258). In such instances, political leaders may be removed from their positions by the popular will. Additionally, negative reciprocity serves to safeguard against unilateral aggression and channels competition within the context of a recognized dynamic. The theoretical model posits that social trust functions as a social thermostat, regulating the threshold of possible injury while maintaining the reciprocity inherent to democratic systems. However, empirical evidence suggests that social trust does not exert the opposite effect on negative reciprocity that was hypothesized. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is confirmed, with the exception of the role of social trust. It seems reasonable to conclude that this is due to the fact that, in addition to generalized trust, it is social responsibility that ensures that negative forms of reciprocity do not emerge, which could otherwise put democracy itself at risk. One potential explanatory variable is reliability. In contrast to generalized trust between citizens, it would necessitate direct and historically informed knowledge between the actors involved in a particular relationship (Delgado-Márquez, 2012; Serva *et al*., 2004).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the tested model, while reliable, remains susceptible to improvement. It is important to note that the findings of this study are specific to the context of a city in southern Italy. Further research should be conducted in other contexts, with a view to comparing the findings. For this reason, the study was conducted in two European countries, Italy and Spain, although the results are limited to the Italian sample.

Additional methodological constraints include the relatively modest sample size, the restricted age range of the sample (young people), and the cross-sectional design of the study, which precludes the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the value of the contribution in the discourse on the care

of democracy and the attention paid to the dynamics of democratic reciprocity as a relational system to be developed in community contexts remains. With regard to intervention, the fostering of processes of social change, the regeneration of bonds of trust, and the deconstruction of fixed and stereotyped representations of the world have the potential to make a significant contribution to collective growth and the construction of responsible coexistence (Lavanco & Varveri, 2008; Mannarini & Arcidiacono, 2021). At the same time, leveraging greater equity and a sense of justice already in the norms that are shared at the neighborhood level, so as to solicit prosocial behaviors of help towards the other and therefore of reciprocity, could outline a program of collective intervention to accompany the democratic development of entire countries (Salvatore *et al*., 2018).

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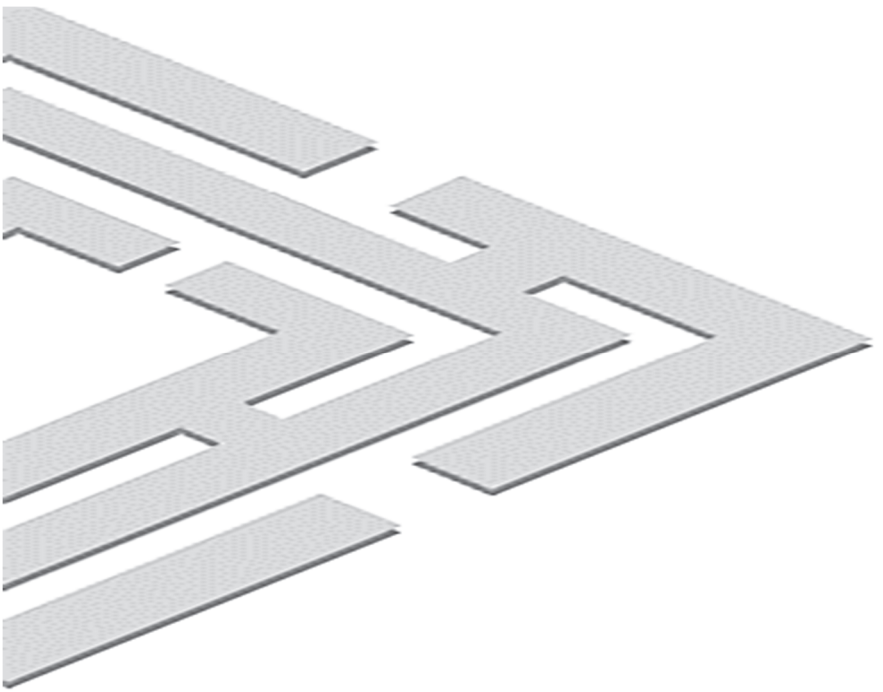
COMMENTARIES*



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Three approaches to overcome compartmentalization in psychology: A brief epistemological analysis

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Abstract

The authors of the target article (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022) provided an in-depth analysis of the features and the causes of professional psychology's fragmentation, generally referred to as compartmentalization. The present contribution is a critical reflection on the three approaches aimed at overcoming it. In conclusion, some preliminary remarks are presented regarding the primary components that a theory of practice should encompass.

Keywords: Unity in psychology, conceptual analysis, professional psychology, theory of practice.

Introduction

The article by Salvatore and colleagues (2022) touches upon extremely important topics regarding the link between theory and practice in psychology. The significance of such topics lies not only in the social and ethical implications of professional practice, but also in the fact that the interaction between theoretical and practical aspects is

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rarely debated within the psychological community. Indeed, professionals and academics tend to show off a reciprocal attitude of indifferent independence, with no interest in sharing ideas and visions of the field. From this perspective, I sympathize with the analysis provided by the target article about the reasons for discontent with the current state of psychology's hyper-compartmentalization. Before assessing the viability of the three identified approaches to overcome compartmentalization – as indicated by the title – I will provide some brief additional remarks about the causes of professional psychology's disunity. As the reader will notice, such remarks are consistent with the general frame traced by the authors.

First, in the last few decades, we witnessed an enormous expansion of the social mandate for the psychological community. This is not a bad thing per se: the number of stakeholders has been increasing because psychologists have gained more social respect and scientific credibility, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the broadening of psychology's range of action raised problems concerning the borders of psychology to other disciplines and, consequently, the issue of the autonomy and specificity of psychological interventions; many "grey areas" developed (e.g., counseling). This growth has been fostering the proliferation of assorted techniques and approaches of intervention, whose peculiarity (i.e., as psychological techniques) and solidity (i.e., as effective techniques) in responding to complex social problems may frequently be questioned. From this perspective, compartmentalization might promote methodological fragmentation and fragility, and, in the long run, it may be associated with a progressive dissatisfaction with the efficacy of psychology by the side of the general public. So, this issue should draw further attention of the psychological community. Second, psychologists have done very little to limit the critical consequences of the above scenario: indeed, we have been witnessing an uncritical acceptance of varied social mandates by the side of psychologists. On the one hand, this uncritical attitude is likely tickled by flattery: where social demands increase, psychologists might have easily taken advantage of the opportunity to increase their credibility and thus validate their presence in society. On the other hand, such an attitude risks hampering theoretical analysis and favoring the design of interventions based on extemporary methodological/technical tools (e.g., framing situations via common-sense categories, lack of proper

theoretical reformulations, blind application of old tools to new situations, etc.). This, in turn, may facilitate compartmentalization, understood as the fragmented development of numerous specialized subfields centered around either selected methods/techniques or unreformulated demands for intervention. Third, the link between scientific and everyday psychological categories should not be overlooked, when discussing the causes of compartmentalization. Indeed, the sources of scientific and professional categories cannot be located except in everyday language. Both languages, common sense and scientific-professional, express various forms of interests and preoccupations and thus may frame reality in numerous ways (Richards, 2022). For example, the same object or concept may be framed differently depending on diverging local interests[1] or according to different degrees of detail[2]. These, and similar, remarks show the irreducible plurality of the sources of scientific and professional psychology, as well as its dependency on the way the lay community of speakers frames the constituents of reality. To this, it must be added the variability inherent to the processes of "translation", from everyday life to disciplinary language: these processes are also value- and interest-dependent and, as such, generate further variability. From this point of view, compartmentalization may be understood as a consequence of the strong link between the ways laypeople define the constituents of various aspects of social reality and the way psychologists organize the discipline and its concepts.

These aspects, together with those described by the authors of the target article, contribute to the phenomenon referred to as compartmentalization. Clearly, this phenomenon appears to be multilayered and prompts crucial questions for psychologists: first of all, one may wonder if it is an inevitable indicator of scientific and professional growth or a worrying sign of disciplinary vulnerability. Accordingly, should it be limited or promoted? How does it affect the advancement of psychological knowledge? How does it influence the development of the professional community? The present contribution will attempt

[1] Consider moths: the common-sense category and the biological order to which these animals would belong are far from overlapping (Duprè, 1993).

[2] Consider the popular myth regarding the number of words Inuit would use for "snow".

to provide suggestions for inciting reflection in response to these and similar inquiries. Unfortunately, the reader will hardly find some sort of answer; that is not the purpose of the article and, perhaps, the topic does not lend itself to such definitive conclusions. Rather, the article's limited objective is to critically evaluate the three approaches identified via the analysis of the literature by the authors (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, pp. 15-25) as possible responses to the problem of psychology's compartmentalization.

Some critical remarks on the three approaches aimed at overcoming compartmentalization

The first approach to unification regards the identification of the ultimate causal explanation. In my opinion, this cannot be a defensible approach, if considering the specificity of the object of interest of psychology, namely human subjects (see Gaj, 2021). The traditional scientific method, heavily reliant on causal explanations, aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships to predict and explain phenomena; this approach has been immensely successful in understanding various natural phenomena. However, when applied to human psychology, it encounters challenges due to the subjective, intentional, and teleological nature of human beings (see Brinkmann, 2022; Von Wright, 1971;). A phenomenon like an action, for example, could be understood in terms of causal processes, within a framework whose aim is to reduce the phenomenon to its physical or chemical constituents (e.g., behavior as the outcome of nomic connections between stimuli and effects). This is the perspective adopted by those who promote an understanding of psychology as a natural science. However, this is just half of the story and, more precisely, the less interesting part of the story for those who strive to understand humans from a psychological perspective. In fact, to get the whole story, we have to supplement the causal explanation with a teleological explanation that considers that action as a meaningful expression of the subject's intentionality. From this point of view, an action should be understood as a means to obtain a goal that the subject considers desirable. Such remarks recall the traditional divide between causes and reasons. When referring to the former, we appeal to brute physical forces whose outcome is the

phenomenon at stake: this is the approach of the natural sciences. When referring to the latter, we appeal to what a person takes to be a rational course of action given her beliefs and desires (Von Wright, 1971). Reasons appear to be different sorts of things from causes and provide an alternative, irreducible framework for the understanding of individuals. This is the position of those who advocate for the autonomy of psychology from the natural sciences, in the wake of the human sciences. To summarize, if psychology is understood as an autonomous endeavor with a distinctive level of inquiry, it is imperative that psychological explanations encompass dimensions such as subjectivity, intentionality, and meaning. Otherwise, expunging these dimensions would mean collapsing psychology's level of inquiry on the level of some other disciplines such as, for example, biology, medicine, or ethology.

The second approach described by the authors would entail the progressive extension of the explicative capacity of specific theories on multiple phenomena. According to my opinion, this is also not a defensible approach in that it entails a problematic form of reductionism. Following a traditional account of reductionism, two forms of it can be distinguished. One of them is referred to as *homogeneous* reductionism, which deals with the broadening of the scope of a theory. Once formulated for a specific type of phenomenon, the theory is then extended to cover the same phenomenon when manifested by a broader class of objects. This is an unproblematic form of reductionism since the two classes of phenomena are similar, if not identical, so it is generally associated with scientific progress. The approach illustrated by the target article might look like a case of homogeneous reductionism because it deals with phenomena pertaining to the same field, namely psychology. Nonetheless, at a closer look, it is not. Indeed, it follows from the premises that psychology is a fragmented field characterized by diversity in many domains, first of all, theory and methodology. Indeed, psychological theories refer to various ontologies, that is, various classes of objects requiring different theoretical and methodological treatments: arguably, each ontology[3] reflects the specific quality of the domain under investigation. That being

[3] By ontology I refer to the class of entities a scientific theory recognizes as existing (Fraser, 2005).

considered, a reductionist approach such as the one described by the target article (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 18) should be more appropriately labeled as a case of *heterogeneous* reductionism. According to it, the class of objects of the secondary theory, i.e., the theory to be reduced, is somewhat assimilated to the class of objects of the primary theory, i.e., the superordinate theory formulated in another domain whose explicative domain is extended to that of the secondary theory. This is an untenable form of reductionism since a certain class of objects is treated *as if* it were similar (or identical) to another one, even if it is not (see Nagel, 1961). In this way, the qualitative specificity of the secondary theory's class of objects is rejected in the name of its (arbitrary) assimilation to the primary theory's class of objects. Turning back to the example proposed by Salvatore and colleagues (Nagel, 1961), extending operant conditioning theory to different domains such as individual psychopathology, career development, macro-economy, etc. would mean illegitimately applying a theory originally formulated for explaining a specific class of phenomena (i.e., learning processes in specific conditions) to classes of phenomena (e.g., those above mentioned) whose postulated qualitative homogeneity with the former is, to say the least, arbitrary and highly questionable. However, an objection may be raised: one might oppose that the classes of phenomena candidates to be reduced are associated, broadly speaking, with learning processes, so the reduction would turn out to be justified. Even if we concede this objection, it is evident that the content of those classes *exceeds* the domain of learning processes and displays qualitative specificities that require ad hoc conceptual treatments. It is precisely this specificity that attracts the interest of practicing psychologists. For example, what is interesting to psychologists studying psychopathology is the specific quality of the investigated phenomena, that is, what makes psychopathological expressions significantly different from other phenomena with which they might share some features. In other words, professional psychologists are mostly interested in what constitutes the *specific quality* of the classes of phenomena investigated, with the intention to provide a full account of them and to design sound interventions. These remarks ought to be taken into consideration when evaluating the viability of an approach entailing the extension of the explicative capacity of a certain theory on multiple phenomena.

Let us now move to the third approach described in the target article. It involves the building of a metatheoretical framework, which would serve as the foundation for unification. In this regard, I agree that psychology lacks a shared conceptual framework specifying the fundamentals of the discipline; therefore, I think this may be in principle a promising route (see also Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). My perspective aligns with the proposal of the authors, who assert that psychology ought to prioritize the theoretical level over the empirical one, as the former provides the framework for interpreting the latter. In my view, what they call "empiricism" ("Empiricism's preference for constructs close to experience has been accompanied by the downgrading of abstract constructs (…)") (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 23) may be rather reframed as common-sense: psychologists tend to subscribe to definitions whose source is the lay community of speakers to which they belong, which endorse a form of naïve realism. Accordingly, their approach may often appear to be unsophisticated and based on constructs that closely mirror our lay understanding of reality. This may lead to the thinning of the theoretical space in favor of common-sense thinking, promoting the adoption of common-sense categories as basic elements of psychological theorizing. In summary, I am sympathetic to the third approach and consider it to be the most viable.

Nonetheless, the proposal to identify the professional intervention as a criterion to compare the different approaches to overcome compartmentalization is not completely clear to me; probably it would need further development. Even if briefly presented, my feeling is that the authors' perspective can be referred to as a form of pragmatism, based on the belief that the validity of a theory coincides with the practical effects achieved via its adoption. Assuming that this is the perspective adopted, some aspects need to be clarified. For example, it should be elucidated what may be the relationship between the theory's practical implications and its explanatory power, and in what manner the explanatory and transformative properties of a theory intertwine in justifying its adoption over other theories; these and similar questions remain open. From my perspective, pragmatism is not an inevitable outcome for those who aspire to place professional practice at the center of the stage. Surely, the outcomes of practical interventions have a justificatory role for the theory on which the interventions are based. Nonetheless, the success or failure of a practical

intervention, or its adequate or poor fit within specific contexts, are not the exclusive determinants of the justification or falsification of all the theoretical ideas on which the intervention is based. Indeed, practical failure may not mean that the grounding theory is flawed or poor; rather, practical failure may also be derived from other factors, such as erroneous knowledge of the conditions of practice or of the means it is supposed to achieve (see Gaj, 2018). From this viewpoint, a pragmatist perspective may contribute to the erosion of theory in favor of uncritical practice, relegating the justificatory function exclusively to practical outcomes. Therefore, it appears that adopting such an outlook may not be a promising avenue, particularly if the aim is to broaden the scope of theoretical reflection.

As already noticed, I disagree with the suggestion that metatheoretical frameworks can be validated via the notion of intervention: in what follows, I will outline the main reasons. First, it should be remembered that the level of practice (pertaining to the notion of intervention) is logically and pragmatically subordinate to the level of theory (pertaining to psychological concepts and constructs). So, even if they are inherently connected, the practical domain cannot precede the theoretical domain (Gaj, 2017); in fact, the description and explanation of phenomena (i.e., level of theory) logically precedes the design of interventions aimed at manipulating and transforming aspects of those phenomena (i.e., level of practice). The argument is not empirical here: no empirical data can be found for or against it. Interventions at the practical level are designed employing theoretical principles, which fulfill the function of leading the professionals' acts toward desirable objectives by following prescribed steps: in other words, theoretical principles provide knowledge informing experts' actions toward transformative goals. This sort of "translation" from the level of the theory to the contingencies characterizing the level of intervention is provided by so-called bridge theories, whose role is to fill in the gap between the abstractness of theoretical knowledge and the concrete particulars characterizing real-life contingent situations (Gaj, 2017, 2021; Nelson & Stolterman, 2014). Bridge theories aim to make the knowledge formulated by the theoretical principles available on the practical level (Sternberg, Grigorenko & Kalmar, 2001). In brief, the cognitive aims of theorizing are to be prioritized, even considering that practical outcomes play a justificatory role for the theory at the basis

of the intervention. In my opinion, founding a metatheoretical framework for professional psychology on the notion of intervention would contradict one of the premises of the diagnostic outlook proposed by the authors, namely that «we need general theories in order to complement the specialistic understandings with interpretative frameworks (…)» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 14). What we need is to restore a major role for conceptual reflection, in order to develop an effective theory of practice that can successfully guide professional actions in various contexts.

The second reason for discontent with the thesis at stake is that I think that the main problem of psychology does not concern primarily the direct devise of a metatheoretical framework; rather, its devising may be a possible consequence of the formulation of shared assumptions regarding a. scientific inquiry, and b. psychology's object of interest. Regarding psychological inquiry (a.), I support the general idea that fragmentation in psychology is mostly concerned with the «*absence of coherence with respect to the logic of science*» (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022, p. 2, italics by the authors). The events that any science, including psychology, investigates involve both form and content. On the one hand, the form concerns a logical scaffolding[4] that is constant across situations, and whose universality should serve as a major unifying counterpoint to disciplinary fragmentation. On the other hand, the content involves different kinds of situations of interest to psychological inquiry. From this perspective, psychological (qua scientific) investigation necessarily navigates between invariant elements *and* features of a particular kind or type (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). The fact that empirical investigation involves many logical presuppositions in the process of conceiving, designing, and conducting research emphasizes the priority of logic over empirical investigation: the latter requires the former, but not vice-versa. Nevertheless, the empirical side of research is frequently given precedence over logical and conceptual analysis, to the extent that discourses on methodology hold a primary position in the field of scientific psychology (Danziger, 1985, 1990; Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). Such a reversal of the relationship

[4] It is not possible here to delve into the complex issue of what principles underpin coherent inquiries. For a summary of their proposal, see Hibberd & Petocz (2022).

between form and content may be read as a sign of disciplinary immaturity underpinned by conceptual incoherence: arguably, methodology provides anchorages when inconsistencies at the conceptual level abound. From this perspective, one of the main problems pertaining to psychological inquiry is that research is mostly driven by the selection of methods, rather than by conceptual reflection based on psychology's subject-matter (see Danziger, 1990; Hibberd & Petocz). Conversely, a mature, subject-matter-driven approach to research would involve selecting methods according to the features of the objects that generated the investigators' interests. Accordingly, what the target article suggests about psychological constructs is accurate: they are generally investigated using established methods widely accepted in the scientific community, while their formulation is frequently standardized with common sense. This "method-driven" approach is indicative of a serious lack of conceptual and theoretical elaboration, which encourages the proliferation of psychological subfields around common-sense-defined objects, rather than their development centered around conceptually sound reflections.

Let's now move on to the second issue I raised, namely psychology's object of interest (b.). Salvatore and colleagues (2022) quoted Gregg Henriques (2017), who proposed that unity of professional psychology can only be accomplished by providing «a theory of the person, a theory of psychopathology, and a theory of psychological change processes» (p. 393). The quote is acceptable, but it does not explicitly state a hierarchy among the terms. Nonetheless, their relative positions are telling: indeed, the formulation of a theory of the person logically precedes the development of theories concerning psychopathology and change processes. Again, this is not an empirical argument, that is, an argument that can be defended or defeated by gathering empirical data. Rather, it is disputed on logical grounds. In this direction, it is my opinion that a metatheoretical framework should primarily revolve around the specification of the features attributed to the objects of interest of psychology, that is, the formulation of a theory around its objects (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). From the formulation of such a (meta)theory, theories concerning all the other domains can be devised accordingly. Hence, the primary concern pertains to the subject matter of psychology: what is psychology about, then? Surely this is an immense topic that cannot be exhausted here nor cannot be

simplistically reduced to the formulation of «a single, clear definition of the basic concepts of the discipline – e.g., mind, self, behavior» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 21). Nonetheless, it is worth providing some clues for promoting preliminary reflections on the topic. Psychology as a scientific discipline has frequently been conceptualized around two concepts, namely the mind and the brain (Brinkmann, 2022). However, both alternatives have inherent flaws. Whether it is a biological organ whose functioning is necessary for the existence of our mental life, or a broad concept to which complex capacities are attributed, both alternatives involve a form of reification, that is, the process according to which a concept is treated as a thing (Blackburn, 2005). When it comes to the first option, tracing the object of psychology to the brain would mean reducing what we call mental life to the workings of a biological organ. So, the psychological discourse would fade into the biological. In this case, reification would also mean mistakenly attributing states and processes to an organ (the brain) that is just a part of the whole (the individual), while they can be appropriately attributed solely to persons: this is a logical mistake that has been referred to as the mereological fallacy (Bennet & Hacker, 2003). Indeed, only individuals can be sad, not the brain; only a person can think, not a brain. Similar remarks also apply to the second option, namely believing that the object of psychology is the mind. To reiterate, only individuals can be sad or can think, not the mind. Rather, this term stands for «the person's abilities to feel emotions, remember things past, plan for the future and much else» (Brinkmann, 2022, p. 22): the mind is not a thing, like a tree or a car. In other words, the subject of similar statements is inevitably the person, not the mind, much less the brain. From this follows that the notion of a person seems to be a promising route worth exploring. Nonetheless, even if scholars supporting a personalistic perspective are far from absent from the scientific debate (see, for example, Brinkmann, 2022; Corradini, 2017; Gaj, 2021; Lamiell, 2010; Martin, Sugarman & Thompson, 2003), the problem is that there is no consensus on the nature of the notion of person. Eventually, what is the link between these sketchy remarks and the issue at stake? What has been affirmed so far has solely served to underscore the difficulty of unraveling the issue of the object of psychology and to underline that frequently it has been attempted to be resolved via the adoption of reductivist perspectives,

thereby denying or betraying the autonomy of the psychological level of inquiry.

Lastly, we should consider another aspect inherent to psychological theorizing that is potentially relevant to the endeavor of building a metatheoretical framework: the historical nature of theories in psychology. As the works of Kurt Danziger (1997), Ian Hacking (1999), and Graham Richards (2002) demonstrated, the relationship between the objects of inquiry of psychology as a scientific discipline and the ways human beings understand their world is particularly tight. This is strikingly clear when considering the ways other cultures frame psychological phenomena. For example, a well-known emotion in Japan is "amae", a feeling of dependence on another similar to that of a baby towards her caregiver. In Samoa, "lotomama" is an emotion usually expressed in terms of "having no angry feeling". It is clear that different cultures fragment and frame subjective experiences according to prioritized values: avoiding conflict is emphasized in Samoa, just as dependence on others is in Japan (Brock, 2015). The dependence of psychological theorizing on a common-sensical categorization of the experience doesn't only pertain to exotic cultures: it also characterizes Western psychology and psychiatry, even if not in such an obvious way. For example, think about the history of psychological objects such as intelligence, motivation, and memory traced by Kurt Danziger (1997; 2008). Or the history of multiple personality disorder, whose overtime development and progressive disappearance was successfully illustrated by Ian Hacking (1995). Or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whose invention as a disorder played a central role in the opposition to the Vietnam War (Brock, 2015). According to the historian of psychology Adrian Brock, all these phenomena are «as culture-bound as the disorders that have been traditionally regarded as such, with the main difference being that they are subsequently exported to other countries while the disorders that are traditionally regarded as culture-bound tend to remain within their cultures of origin» (2015, p. 155). It follows that the objects to which psychology is devoted are not independent of anything laypeople might say about the mind, its contents, and its processes (see Fletcher, 1995). According to a historical approach to psychological objects, we couldn't have a scientific theory of memory, intelligence, or motivation without a common-sensical view that people have memories, that their actions can be

attributed to motives, and that some people are more intelligent than others (Brock, 2015). Using a computational metaphor, we might say that the input of psychological theorizing cannot be anything except the output of a common-sense categorization of (psychological) reality as it is formulated by laypeople. This suggests that psychology – and human sciences in general – is influenced by, and in turn influence, the objects under investigation in ways that natural sciences do not (Hacking, 1999). In conclusion, in what sense does this pertain to the matter at hand? These arguments suggest that any formulation of a metatheoretical framework should include reflections concerning the relationships between the content of commonsensical categories – historically and culturally situated – and the scientific level of inquiry: in fact, the changing nature of the former have inevitably primary effects on the development of the latter. So, if the aim is to set a metatheoretical framework for psychology, psychologists should cultivate awareness about the contingent and situated roots of their subject matter.

Finally, the authors have put forward two separate strategies to tackle compartmentalization, with the aim of rediscovering the significance of "super-ordered abstract concepts" and opposing the primacy of «empirical concepts» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 24). Despite my agreement with the general framework, I will provide a few critical remarks regarding the two strategies in what follows. To start with, the claim that «physics share the same meaning of concepts like quantum, atom, gravity (…)» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 24) has to be downsized, and thus the idea that psychological science and profession require single, shared definitions of the discipline's core concepts. For example, Morrison convincingly reported about nuclear physics that "there are over thirty nuclear models based on very different assumptions, each of which provides some "insight' into nuclear structure and dynamics. However, none offers more than partial «truth' and each is in conflict with claims made by the others» (Morrison, 2011, p. 547). Hence, despite the widespread acceptance of a broad theoretical view about nuclei[5], theoretical models in nuclear physics embody important theoretical assumptions and exhibit significant variation, reflecting an

[5] Usually, they are referred to as being entwined by the residual strong force which is a minor residuum of the strong interactions that bind quarks together, resulting in the formation of protons and neutrons (Morrison, 2011, p. 547).

idea of physics as a "mature science" that is more complex than commonly expected. Such brief remarks suggest the need to increase our ongoing efforts in conceptual and theoretical research, to foster the confrontation of theories and models on common grounds without expecting to hastily unite the field under the same theoretical umbrella. Even a shallow glance at physics shows this is an ephemeral hope. Secondly, I think that the problem with the definitions of psychological concepts needs to be slightly reformulated. I sympathize with the authors' suggestion that these definitions «need to be made at abstract and generalized level» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 25). Indeed, this pairs with an attitude toward conceptual analysis, promoting the development of theoretical perspectives capable of reformulating common-sense categorizations; however, it is important to underline that this is not exclusively a matter of abstractness or generalization. Particularly in applied psychology, psychological inquiry navigates between the abstract level (e.g., the notion of a person as an abstract concept) and the concrete level (e.g., the particular contingencies related to specific individuals). In other words, the interplay between the general and the particular, and the abstract and the concrete, constitutes the pivotal aspect of psychology (see Gaj, 2016) and vindicates, once again, the centrality of conceptual analysis as a way to integrate those dimensions[6].

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that practice is a crucial component of psychology, as it represents the junction point between two fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, the theoretical understanding of psychological objects and the conceptual framing of the processes oriented to change; on the other hand, the demands arising from society, which justify the social mandate received by psychologists. From this perspective, psychological practice offers an invaluable vantage point for analyzing the interaction between common-sense categories – which

[6] To my understanding, the authors are referring to similar dynamics when they mention the interplay between short-range theories and the meta-theoretical framework (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 25).

channel the demands for intervention to psychologists – and the scientific categories – which constitute the conceptual scaffolding for designing competent, scientific-grounded interventions. For these reasons, accounts of topics related to professional practice in psychology are welcomed.

Attuned to many remarks made by the authors of the target article, I reiterate the primacy of theory over practice: the latter without the former is, at best, common sense and, at worse, malpractice. Hence, I suggest that scholars concentrate their efforts on the development of a theory of practice toward the unity of professional practice (Gaj, 2018). In general terms, such a (meta)theory should provide criteria for selecting and "knitting together" theories and methods that are significant for the design of psychological interventions. It should provide criteria for the development of sound interventions, clearly defining the steps between the starting point (state A) and the desired goal (state B). Accordingly, it should also provide criteria for assessing practical effectiveness. Moreover, it should provide tools for analyzing real-life contexts, that is to say, for conceptualizing contextual features that are relevant to the design of effective psychological interventions. Additionally, it should also foster the ecological adaptation of psychological knowledge to different contexts, promoting the practice of psychology based on a conceptual view of the portion of reality at stake, rather than on a view standardized on common sense. Finally, this (meta)theory should provide criteria for reformulating the issues for which clients asked psychologists to intervene. In other words, it should provide a conceptual toolbox for channeling common sense demands into a scientifically grounded framework, according to which psychological practices may be effectively delivered.

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