

**Between the individual and the collective. *What historical-cultural context for psychologists?***

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*Abstract*

This article uses the category of individual/collective to examine the relation between the Italian identity and psychologists' professional identity. In Italy since the 1970s there has been a gradual emergence of cultures that privilege the individualist aspect. This cultural orientation and the crisis of faith in the institutions and in systems of mediation have led to phenomena of social disintegration and contributed to the spread of anomie and social conformism. An analysis is given of three situations where psychologists deal with the issues considered: the first refers to an intervention of consultancy carried out in a Mental Health Center; the second concerns the psychological intervention in prisons. Lastly, the third case focuses on the dynamics characterising the relation between the professional Order and its members.

*Key words:* individualism, belonging, solitude, mediation, living together.

In this article we use the individual-collective dialectic to talk about the relation between the processes of constructing the national identity and the professional identity of Italian psychologists. We refer to a dichotomous aspect to mark out the area of our thinking; we also think that the movement from one extreme to the other can account for the oscillations in the cultural pathways characterising the process of identity construction. The two sides, *individual* and *collective*, refer to two ways of conceptualising identity. In the first case it is considered a characteristic of the single individual; in the second case, it is through social ties that identities are developed. The polarity we have chosen highlights two models of living together in society that over time have influenced processes of participation and sharing: in one case the social is seen as a sum of single individuals, while in the other case the place of interaction and exchange is privileged. The relation between individual and collective is related to the definition of the very purpose of psychological work. We feel that the oscillation between attention to the individual or to the collective and the social bond has accompanied the definition of the problems, strategies and aims of psychologists' interventions. Psychology has traditionally shown ambivalence towards explaining social phenomena as the responsibility either of the individual or of the community. In our opinion, taking the historical processes of change into consideration can contribute to an understanding of the different intervention models.

We think that the process of constructing our professional identity is connected to and influenced by the process of constructing the national identity. Let us start from the interest in "investigating" the psychological profession, conjuring up that investigative spirit with which we read a thriller<sup>1</sup>. We wondered how certain events in the history of the Republic produced changes in the models of living together, in the representations of the psychological profession and in professional action.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail on the concept of evidential paradigm, see Ginzburg, 1986.

We are therefore interested in reconstructing lines of connection between the present and the past and developing knowledge and hypotheses that are useful in orienting our interventions<sup>2</sup>.

Our article is organised into three parts: in the first section we recall some passages in National history that have helped to change the representations of the individual and of the collective. In the second part, we comment on the evolution of demands made to psychology and clinical intervention models. We present two cases: the first concerns a demand addressed to the Mental Health Center and the second is about psychological intervention in prison. The third part is devoted to reflecting on the professional psychologist: what do psychologists feel they belong to, and how do they use this? Starting from the analysis of a specific event, we propose to discuss which representations organise our relations with the professional Order.

### *The individual/collective continuum in the identity of Italians and of psychologists*

By individual/collective polarity we are trying to underline the identity-based aspects that develop through the sharing of experiences and contexts (Carli & Paniccia, 2003). Specifically, we are interested in exploring how the capacity to construct and participate in systems of living together on the one hand, and the drive towards individualism and social disintegration on the other, has contributed to the construction of national and professional identities. The hypothesis underlying our interest is that the demand for intervention that psychologists are dealing with is connected to such historical processes. Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a gradual weakening of the aspects of social participation and of “collective values” (Crainz, 2009, p. 73)<sup>3</sup>. After the season that led to the victory in the referendum on divorce in '74<sup>4</sup>, to the movement of '77<sup>5</sup> and the violent tensions of the end of the decade<sup>6</sup>, participation in political life seemed to die out, especially amongst the younger generations, along with the possibility of change.

In *Autobiography of a republic*, the historian Guido Crainz describes the Eighties as the decade of the “return to the private” (2009, p. 122). In 1985 the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, referring to the United States, captured the spirit of an age with the expression “reaganian hedonism” (2011, p.1): he was signalling the arrival of a new, distinctly individualist social model that valorised free competition. The individual came into contrast with the collective.

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<sup>2</sup> On the relation between past and present and on marking out the area of intervention in historical research, see Gentiloni, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> By collective values Guido Crainz means the set of experiences and aspirations collectively shared designed to promote common causes. With this expression in particular he wants to underline the shift from a politicised Italy, where issues of collective interest were shared and aroused participation, to an Italy that has lost faith in a change in the society, and that has shifted its attention to private issues and personal needs.

<sup>4</sup> The referendum on divorce is considered a moment of deep cultural change and extraordinary participation by the citizens in public life. The referendum confirmed the Fortuna law that in 1970 had introduced divorce, or the possibility of dissolving a marriage in the eyes of the civil state. The referendum recorded an extremely high participation by the population: over 80% of the Italians voted and “No” won with 59% of the votes.

<sup>5</sup> The movement of '77, linked to the crisis of the leftwing groups and to the advent of what was called University for the masses, grew as a student movement opposing the system of the political parties. Different readings have been given of the movement. For instance, in the words of Silvio Lanaro: “In February of the same year [1977] there reappeared at the university of Rome, spreading in March to Milan and Bologna, a student youth movement now clouded by violence and openly close to the terrorist organisations” (1992, p. 414). In contrast, the historian Robert Lumley states: “it is however misleading to read the events only in the light of political violence: the new aspect of this movement was the affirmation of a ‘youth identity’ that had been removed during student and worker militancy between the Sixties and Seventies” (1998, p. 274).

<sup>6</sup> The violence and terrorist acts characterising the end of the decade, culminating in the kidnapping and murder, on 9 May 1978, of the leader of the Christian Democrats, Aldo Moro. In the same year at Cinisi, Peppino Impastato was assassinated by the mafia.

It was in the 1980s that the myth of the self made man<sup>7</sup> was born and more value started to be attributed to competition and personal success than to social solidarity. This cultural process is connected to an institutional crisis whose effects would be seen especially in the following decades. At the end of the Seventies there was a collapse of faith in the State, seen as being incapable of guaranteeing social and political development<sup>8</sup>. At the same time a process started to reorganise the relation between central administration, local administrations and citizens<sup>9</sup> with great emphasis on the role of the intermediate bodies, social organisations whose job it is to mediate relations between the citizen and the institutions. We wish to underline that the institutional crisis facilitated the spread of new forms of association, often of a voluntary kind, which make up the Third sector. The spread of such organisations seems to correspond to the growing loss of faith in the institutions, which were seen as an expression of a remote, self-referential power, not willing to take on the interests of the community. In 2004 Franca Olivetti Manoukian wrote: "In our society, for several years now there has been a crisis in the 'shell institutions' (family, parish, mass party, factory, school), which had the role of organising the smooth running of the society. It is a crisis that leaves individuals more alone with greater burdens of responsibility, because they are more demanding towards the remaining institutions" (2004, p. 52). Think of the family. In the past year in the School of Specialisation we have started working on analysing and planning interventions that respond to the needs of families living in the city of Rome. The people we have spoken to have described their experiences of isolation and loneliness: each family seems to find itself alone in facing daily problems and in the hard work of constructing relations in the neighborhood, the area and the city.

About this crisis, we would like to emphasise two effects. First of all, we underline that some of the institutions indicated by Manoukian have for many years organised the Italians' behaviour and life style. Think, for instance, of the profound influence catholic culture and organisations have had on the social, sexual and political practices of Italians. The citizens' life styles would become more and more differentiated and the prescriptive lines of political and religious organisations would lose their power. Since the Eighties the identity of the Italians has not been rigidly defined by ideological anchorages, by membership of a party or a religious organisation. No longer identifying with *macro* memberships hinders, or rather, reduces the possibility of feeling *together with* others. A process has developed that has led to people today feeling prevalently alone and detached from contexts, instead of being involved in relationships of trust with others: there has been a loss of faith in the function of *mediation*, especially the kind exercised by the political parties. Systems of mediation and representation are seen more and more as being a crushing burden, forcing people into a passive position. The parties' general loss of credibility started in the Eighties, with a gradual but inexorable decline in support for the PCI and DC; the collapse of the party system would arrive after the Clean Hands inquiry of 1992. As well as the demand for renewal coming from society, there must be added the deterioration of the social system represented by the mass party: after the disintegration of the PCI and DC and the disappearance of the PSI and the lay parties, new political forces developed, valorising their discontinuity from the previous tradition. On the one hand there is the case of Forza Italia, created around and identified with the charismatic figure of its founder; on the other, the case of the Northern League, whose strong point is its continuing tie with the local area and its ability to interpret the disillusionment of a part of the country, to the point of demanding secession.

The recent local administrative elections and the subsequent referenda<sup>10</sup> show a further step, linked to the spread of civil lists and of movements that stand as an alternative to the political parties, in order to give voice to public opinion. There is more and more talk about direct

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<sup>7</sup> With the expression *self made man* we refer to the American myth of the man who, relying only on his own abilities and his spirit of initiative, manages to reach positions of success.

<sup>8</sup> On this see Baraldi, Bernardini, Bonavita, Civitillo, De Bellonia, Giornetti, et al., 2011.

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of administrative federalism see Brescia, Bucci, Conti, Crisanti, D'Alessandro, Gasparri, et al., 2011.

<sup>10</sup> We are referring to the administrative elections of 15 and 16 May 2011 and to the referenda of 12 and 13 June 2011.

democracy: where the function of political mediation is not perceived as being based on a specific competence, the politician ends up being replaced by the citizen.

*Looking at the psychological intervention: the demand for psychotherapy in a mental health center*

Thinking about this has led us to observe that since the Eighties a severe crisis has developed in systems of living together and anomie<sup>11</sup> tends to prevail. There has been a collapse of the sharing of the system of rules needed to regulate social behaviour. This happens in a phase of cultural change that results in the individual having difficulty in making sense of his/her own actions and linking them to collective aims. One of the possible reactions to anomic confusion is the a-critical following of conformist models. The word conformist refers to conforming, having the same form, i.e. uniformity in individuals concerning opinions, ideas and socially or politically pre-defined expectations. Conformism enables the individual to feel he belongs to the social milieu he lives in, by sharing the most common ways of acting and thinking. In the cultural transformations of the past forty years we see a specific mode of conformism that seems to be supported by omnipotent fantasies of annulling inter-individual differences and to encourage the reassuring illusion that everyone is equal and has the same desires. In this sense, conformism is in contrast to the experience of solitude linked to perceiving oneself as an outsider in the community or opposed to its typical values. The relation between anomie and conformist demand seems to be especially strong: when people do not identify with the systems of shared rules that organise the living together, they end up seeking invariant, a-contextual solutions to their problems, *solutions* that are socially desirable; the same ones that in the relationship with the psychologist organise the conformist demand.

What happens if the psychologist colludes with the demand and decides to work with the single individual? We will describe the case of a young woman who went to a Mental Health Center in Rome. The CSM in question is situated in quite a busy neighborhood, which means a large proportion of the resident population passes through and this somehow makes it easier for the people of the local area to know about the Service. Over the years the Service has increased the area of intervention concerning psychotherapies, which has now become considerably larger than the area of psychiatric intervention<sup>12</sup>. This tendency has meant that the CSM over time has developed an *extended* reception service, feeling entitled to deal with a great number of new demands from the surrounding area, without necessarily dividing them by type of problem. It was in this frame that Maria, a 30-year-old woman, arrived at the CSM after having broken off an experience of private psychotherapy that lasted only a few months, following the onset of panic attacks, which had become very frequent recently. Maria tells the CSM psychologist that years before she had a very intense experience with a boy, Alessandro, that she had gone to live with, moving to the north of Italy. After some time the relationship had taken on a difficult aspect, marked by constant episodes of violence, physical and otherwise, by Alessandro. The patient reports that she felt a strong ambivalence in that relationship, by which she felt swept away and attracted but at the same time, which continued to make her suffer intensely. After an abortion that Maria felt she had been *forced* to have, she made the very difficult decision to end the relationship, which she

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<sup>11</sup> Émile Durkheim considers anomie to be a lack of social norms, of rules that can maintain, within certain appropriate limits, the behavior of the individual (1897). Anomie does not take the form only of a lack of social norms, but above all a lack of moral regulation. Anomie is about the relation between the behavior of the individual and values and social norms, in other words, the rules of the game.

<sup>12</sup> The gradual establishment in the 1980s of psychotherapy in the CSM, allowed the Services to lose their name as the place exclusively chosen for taking on psychiatric pathologies, helping to promote a culture of psychic distress as not necessarily associated to mental illness. There is the emergence of a new way of viewing psychic distress, which is covered by the definition of common emotive disorders, generally used to indicate all those forms of distress in the category of anxiety and depression that seem to affect most of the population and that represent a new, unexpected type of demand that is not clearly defined. They are demands that are made in new ways: the clients are starting to contact the Services directly and present a wide range of problems (cfr. Baraldi, Bernardini, Bonavita, Bucci, Conti, Crisanti, et al., 2011).

calls *sick*. For about two years she has been in a new relationship with Pietro, a young man she describes as caring, understanding, conscious of her needs, constantly trying to give her space for what she wants, a man that we could call in commonsense terms, *the ideal type*. Maria however feels unable to fall in love with Pietro the way she was in love with Alessandro and wants help in *solving* and eliminating *the obstacles* that, in her words, *do not allow her* to feel passionately about this relationship as *would be right*. She says that Pietro has everything a partner should have to be perfect, but this is not enough. Maria says that in the previous therapeutic relationship she felt under pressure, in a totally personal, individual dynamic, to solve a conflict between her rational part, which underlined the senselessness and unsuitability of her relationship with Alessandro, and an irrational part that instead supported it. We want to stress the conformist dimension in which Maria's demand is organised, crushed in an experience of deep anguish towards what is perceived as a strong social pressure. Responding collusively to this demand, accepting the conformist vision offered by Maria, would have meant interpreting the problem by referring to a-contextual, individual characteristics: an interpretation centered on the need to transform what is into what should be. The CSM psychologist suggests Maria should explore the meaning that the *overwhelming* relationship and *ideal* relationship assume in her relations, in her experiences, in her life, trying to cast light on the collusive dynamic she experienced and that she continues to offer in her relationships. Maria seems to understand the uselessness of the line that keeps her in contact with different parts of herself and of others, and that makes her feel less strongly the need to eliminate parts of herself in the name of an expected and correct normality. For months she works in a psychological process that gradually loosens the bonds of invariance and a-contextuality (Carli & Paniccchia, 2010). In the intervention at the CSM, Maria works with the psychologist to show the transversal nature of the questions explored and the meaning they acquire in her particular story, allowing her to emerge from the situation of being made to feel guilty and judged, and to try to construct an alternative.

With demands of this kind, think of those psychotherapy interventions that focus on the stable characteristics of the personality, that collude with the client's fantasy that the work to be done is on the individual rather than on the relationship, on reaching a socially desirable aim rather than on understanding the demand within the system of relationships where it emerged, so as to open the way to original outcomes. We are saying that psychology seems to have given up choosing its path by starting from a reading of the social reality in which it is intervening and encouraging a development by playing a role that foresees integrations. In our interpretation, psychology has become increasingly detached from the social context, dealing with individuals instead of their relationships: for this reason it has neglected demands that involved an intervention on relationships. This process started with the tendency to assimilation and moved nearer and nearer to psychotherapy: remember that the National Health System was created and is organised around a mission that seeks to intervene in the local area to activate the resources of the area, that is, by activating the community. The creation of psychotherapy schools in the Eighties helped to introduce the idea of the psychotherapy intervention as a possible response to the demands arriving at the health services. The mass entry of psychologists into the health facilities in those years and the development of psychotherapy interventions based on the individualist model progressively came to be the organising principle of the service supplied, and therefore of the demand, consistent with these assumptions. From a culture that valorises the collective and belonging to a social context in which to seek and develop resources, to a culture that is entrenched in individual interventions (Carli & Paniccchia, 2002): the consequences, for the health services, seem to be an inevitable feeling of impotence and the perception of the inadequacy of its resources.

### *The psychotherapy intervention in prison*

Let us try to go into greater depth by exploring another context: the New Complex of Rebibbia prison where some of us did our practical traineeship.

Since the 19th century, re-education has been recognised as the central element in prison treatment, designed to recuperate the *deviant individual* and allow him/her to re-enter society. The concepts of re-education, recuperation and social re-entry are closely tied to the positivist vision of

deviance, which saw a linear relation between the crime and precise organic, psychological and social causes. Considering such variables as explanatory factors has ended up shifting the attention from the crime as a *juridical fact*, action or transgression of shared *collective* social norms, to the person who committed the crime and to the *individual* variables underlying the deviant act. At the micro level, which we are interested in here, a result of this way of interpreting the criminal phenomenon was the introduction in the prison system of figures specialised in theories and techniques of a psychological-social kind, able to carry out specialist interventions designed to identify the causes of criminal behaviour, to remove them through re-education and to see to the re-entry into society of the individual that had deviated<sup>13</sup>.

At present, when the detainee enters prison there is a psychological interview designed to assess the likelihood of his committing self-harming acts including suicide, or of his/her being subjected to violence. On the basis of this scenario and of the experience of practical traineeship at Rebibbia that some of us had, we wish to show that the individual interviews which are the chosen practice of the prison psychologist, are supported by a psychological model that recognises individuals as objects of intervention, with detainees taken singly for treatment, for the control of their supposed suicidal tendencies and for the reduction of the damage caused by the experience of detention. In the current phase however, also in view of the recent pretext of the transfer of responsibility for detainees' health care from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Health<sup>14</sup>, the prison institutions seem to be intending to rethink their organisation and their intervention aims. The response to the mandate of re-education is an interesting challenge for psychology: the disparity between the models offered by the literature to those experienced in the work done by some of us in the Rebibbia prison seems to suggest the failure of the individualist, normative aspect of the psychological intervention. There are various critical aspects that are ignored: the relapse rate suggests the failure of the re-educative role, the ratio between the number of detainees and staff challenges the idea of an individual relationship with each detainee, the isolation of the staff and the health Services indicates the failure of the educational project.

The staff of the psychology services in the prison complain of the lack of sufficient resources to do their job properly. This experience shows the fragility of an intervention model that considers the context only as an obstacle to the pursuit of re-educational aims. In this case the organisational aspects are not taken into consideration as constraints guiding the intervention.

#### *A comment on the professional psychologist*

Thinking about the cultural, social and historical changes that have influenced the type of demand addressed to psychologists also means asking ourselves what representation the psychologist has of himself/herself and how it has changed over time. We also wonder what specific representation of belonging can be found in the way of participating in the community shown by the professional

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<sup>13</sup> The appearance in prisons of the figure of the psychologist had to wait until Law n.354 of 26 July 1975 which also introduced psychiatrists, educators and social workers and would soon lead to the creation of the Service of Observation and Entry Treatment. Teams were set up made up of referents for prison management, educators, social workers and experts in psychology with 3 tasks: taking on each sentenced detainee and constructing a project designed to modify his deviant attitudes and to facilitate his re-entry into society; writing reports for the Surveillance Court designed to guide the Magistrate in deciding to grant or withhold benefits or alternative measures; being part of the internal disciplinary committee presided over by the prison management which in cases of transgression of the rules, establishes the punishment. A further step came with the Amato Circular of 1987 (circular n. 3182/5632, *Protection of life and physical and psychic safety of detainees and internees*), which set up the 'New Arrivals Safeguards' (Presidio Nuovi Giunti), addressed to new entries, including temporary transfers from other institutions. As one of its purposes was to protect the safety of detainees, this gave the psychologist a new role, stressing his/her supposed specialistic-predictive competences.

<sup>14</sup> See Law n.244 of 24 December 2007, *Measures for the formation of the State's annual and pluriannual balance sheet* (budget 2008).

Order<sup>15</sup>, set up by law n.56 of 18 February 1989, known as the Ossicini law after its sponsor, senator Adriano Ossicini (Ossicini, 1994). The passing of the law was part of a lively debate on the meaning of the psychology profession, on the contexts where it can be applied and on the role the psychologist can play in these contexts. This debate led in 1971 to the founding of the first degree courses in Psychology and later, in 1989, to the founding of the professional Order<sup>16</sup>. The establishment of the Order, however, marks a sort of stultification, in which the fervor of ideas and debates, serving to foster development and discussion of the professional identity, ended up waning. In this phase what prevails is the psychologists' need for normalisation and social recognition, a demand, in other words, for assimilation and membership of systems of power as the strategy to foster professional development. Let us try to look more deeply into these aspects starting from the analysis of a specific event in December 2010 that some of us participated in. It was a conference organised by the Order of Psychologists of Lazio on the History of Psychology in Italy. During this meeting a young psychologist, after telling us of her many thwarted attempts not only to work but also to do practical traineeship, made a heartfelt appeal to the Order for newly graduated psychologists to be able at least to find places as practical trainees in any affiliated facility. The president of the Order tried to reassure the psychologist by underlining the efforts made to solve the problem of work; however he stated that to deal with the employment problems of psychologists it was necessary to get into politics, attributing our profession's employment problems to this lack of power.

This event, which at the conference created quite a fuss amongst us psychologists, still makes us reflect. We wonder what representation of the psychology function emerges from such an exchange but also what type of relationship can be found between the Order and its members. The psychologist's request seems to highlight some critical points: firstly, the idea that a psychologist can work regardless of a project that makes his/her presence meaningful; the idea, that is, that he/she has in himself/herself the right to exist, independently of his clients' demands that organise his/her interventions in contexts. Moreover, this request highlights the way the Order is symbolised as a system to whom we attribute the power/duty of finding work opportunities. How have we reached the point of culturally sharing this representation whereby the Order on our behalf should guarantee us the chance to work? Remember that the professional Orders were created with the task of guaranteeing the quality of professional services in the interests of the citizens and of the psychologists themselves. A similar representation of the Order seems, on the one hand, to have encouraged the idea of a system that takes the place of its members in participating in the construction of job opportunities and on the other, to have relegated us to a relationship with the Order that swings between crediting it with idealised, omnipotent features, or in contrast, aspects of impotence and denigration. Let us now consider the Order's response and the reference to lobbying and entering politics as a way of counterbalancing the experience of lack of power and of thus dealing with the profession's employment problems. We feel we can say that the desire and the need to be connected to systems of power is a shared feeling amongst representatives and members of the Order, a feeling that reflects a representation of one's profession as being weak and not recognised on a social level. Thus the need was created to regulate, establish, and officially tie the psychologist to contexts so that he/she can rightfully work (think for example of the *compulsory* psychologist in schools, a figure that, during this conference, the President of the Order stated he wanted to introduce officially). We think that the more a psychologist expects a job guaranteed by law, the more he/she finds it difficult to use criteria to identify the problems and demands of the context, thus promoting a mismatch between demand and psychological intervention.

We remember the bitterness and disillusionment felt at the end of this conference towards our professional Order, as well as having acknowledged our membership of this community and our

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study of matters connected to the establishment of the Order of Psychologists, see the article by Pietro Stampa, in this issue.

<sup>16</sup> We are referring to the thesis by Andrea Civitillo (2006), *Esplorazione della cultura locale dell'Esame di Stato per Psicologi. Legge 56\89 ed identità professionale dello Psicologo* [Exploration of the local culture of the State Examination for Psychologists. Law 56\89 and professional identity of the Psychologist] – Chair of Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology 1, "Sapienza" University of Rome.

responsibility for what it promotes, which is not to be taken for granted, since from our point of view it emerged that the commonly shared experience was that of either ignoring or complaining about the Order of which we had been members for years. We think this case serves to show how complicated it is to construct and maintain aspects of participation and exchange in the professional domain. In our experience we face the difficulties connected to using this membership to take part in a debate on issues that are still open such as identity and the psychologist's mandate.

### Conclusions

Through history we have shown that since the 1970s, social systems have evolved in the direction of a greater sense of solitude amongst people, citizens, families, and workers. Social organisations that in the past were the major interlocutors were unable to maintain the confidence of the Italians. We feel we can say, with a historical reading, that people feel alone and detached from contexts and that psychologists have often intervened in the Services without knowing or using this experience, instead using models of an individualist type and giving up the attempt to deal with systems of relating. In this way psychology loses the opportunity to deal with intervention contexts that require an interpretation of the relationships, leaving space for figures such as *trainers*, *counsellors*, *life coaches* and *mediators*. We feel it is important to underline that the present phase is one where new forms of social participation are being organised. Our professional development is connected to the competence to explore these transformations and to deal with them. It is about this possibility that we are interested in thinking in our intervention contexts and on which we want to debate with you.

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