

## On national and professional identity: a proposed reading using categories of conflict

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### Abstract

The article examines the relations between national identity and psychologists' professional identity by trying to interpret some events in Italian history since the Seventies by means of categories of *conflict*, used in many disciplinary fields with different meanings and taken here in one specific sense. Hypotheses are made about how the socio-cultural changes that affected the national community generated changes in modes of social adaptation, which make us see the demand addressed to the psychologist in different ways. The way aspects of conflict are symbolised in Italy at the end/beginning of the millennium are considered, and interpretative criteria are suggested for some issues in specific contexts (Mental Health Services, Public Safety Services, School) where the psychologist is called on to intervene by various organisational figures: staff member, risk prevention officer, cultural education assistant.

*Key words:* identity; conflict; living together; psychological intervention.

In thinking about the national identity and that of the professional identity of psychologists, we have tried to interpret some events that have taken place in our country since the 1970s, using the category of *conflict*, often used in many disciplinary areas with various meanings, but used here in one specific sense.

How are psychology, identity and conflict related?

As the professional identity that we are promoting is grounded on the competence to deal with the relation between individual and context, it cannot be excluded from making hypotheses about the underlying aspects of living together. To identify the relation between living together and conflict, let us take up some of the hypotheses put forward by professor Carli (2010) in an editorial of the *Rivista di psicologia clinica*, where he suggests seeing conflict as an uneliminable reality in social systems:

The problem is not conflict, a potential resource for social systems, but the way conflict is experienced, symbolised and implemented. Conflict is the indicator of diversity, of otherness. Conflict, therefore, underlies exchange and reciprocity. Without contrasting diversity it is not possible to have a reciprocal relationship, but only a relationship of idealised identification (p.1)<sup>11</sup>.

The possibility of using social conflict is not stable over time in Italian culture: our country has swung between times when conflict was acted out, talked about and denied. We feel that the way a society symbolises and deals with its inner conflicting aspects is related to the ability to recognise and integrate differences, through a dialectical competence which is the prerequisite for the development of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Carli, R. (2010) Editorial. *Rivista di psicologia clinica*, 1, 1-3 [<http://www.rivistadipsicologiaclinica.it/english>]. The editorial, which gave us the idea of continuing an examination of the category of conflict, mentions some events since the second war and comments on the times of harsh social conflict Italy has lived through and the different ways of experiencing and using this.

An orientation towards the *exploratory/knowledge-getting dimension* is interested in the desires and ideas of others, and allows one to see, amidst this multiplicity, a potential for productive change in relations. In contrast, if ideologies are taken as models organising living together, they seem to produce fixity, disavowal, negation of knowledge and of differences, insofar as they convey a single proposal and demand a-critical support for a single idealised model. *Fixing vs knowing* therefore seem to be the possible outcomes of a relation in cases where conflict is denied or recognised.

In the same way, we think that the historical-cultural changes affecting a national community generate changes in the way of adapting to social demands and build up an ever-changing sense of the demand that can be presented to the psychologist.

In our experience in the health services, we experience the way some demands in psychotherapy are emblematic of this changing request for social adaptation, which produces a change in the demands themselves. Let's think for example of the so-called "common emotive disorders", an expression of those feelings attributable to a gap between the emotions that some events arouse in personal or working relations and the commonsensical expectations one has to conform to in order to avoid being unbearably excluded. The difficulty in dealing with conflicts between one's feelings and the need for social adaptation lies in a cultural context in which "being in conflict" becomes synonymous with being a social danger.

It is clear that psychology, especially if it is centered on individual dimensions, has not always been able to construct the psychosocial sense of this demand, and we believe that this is in part due to the way our profession has interpreted and construed its identity over time. In our experience of practical traineeship, we have seen that in admitting clients to the Mental Health Centers or the SPDC, the demand is interpreted in terms of symptoms, thus already establishing that the client has a chronic relation with the health services.

As this process, which often leads to cases being taken on indefinitely, insists on trying to eliminate the symptom and rehabilitate the client to normality, it refers to expected models of behavior. Psychology that deals with correcting deficits, that rules out the context of the relations in which the deficit is manifested, does not feel called upon to deal with the problem, as this would entail thinking within the context, namely the place of the conflict that generated the demand for intervention.

The place where conflict seems to be more clearly acted out is in the SPDC: here it is the psychiatric crisis that is behind the admission to hospital and this crisis is often seen as being closely tied to the mentally ill person, and therefore to the individual, rather than to his system of living together. We, instead, propose to interpret this crisis as the beginning of a breakdown in the system of living together which can no longer tolerate that which is diagnosed as being different and removed from patterns of normality, often felt to be unpredictable and therefore dangerous. So the conflict is acted out, with great force, and there emerges the urgent need to bring what is felt to be deviant and intolerable back within the established bounds.

But this medicalised approach, with the tendency to make the demand to relate invariant and to annul the contexts, can be found in the most varied spheres of living together.

On this point let us consider a situation in a Police station in a northern Italian city where one of us is in charge of Risk Prevention. During a regular meeting on assessing the security of outlying offices, with the participation of the heads of these offices, trade union representatives, the employer, the manager, the person in charge of the Risk prevention service and the relevant physician, the latter stated that there were no situations of work-related stress, since «no staff had ever spoken to him of problems of this kind». At that point one of the outlying office heads contradicted the doctor, expressing the difficulty he found in having to work alone due to being short-staffed. He said this was causing him anxiety and sleeping problems, and that he had already told his employer about the difficulties of his situation, to no avail. In the ensuing discussion with the employer, the latter argued that it was not the right place to deal with that type of issue and invited the office head to discuss it in private. The doctor, following the statements made before witnesses, announced that he «was forced» to proceed to an assessment of the office head's fitness to work and officially invited him to come to his rooms at the end of the meeting. Having ascertained that the employee was not taking medication for his anxiety and sleeping problems but

only a mild sleeping pill, he judged the matter closed and invited the person in question to come to his office for a chat.

The unexpected situation that broke the implicit *taken-for-granted normality* was seen by all present as a great provocation, almost a crime of lese-majesty, a deep split in a culture that tolerates conflict only in a form that does not challenge the institutional balance of the organisation itself.

After a few months the outlying office head announced his illness and sent in a medical certificate with a diagnosis of burnout syndrome. This immediately triggered the so-called Health Surveillance process with a compulsory medical examination on return from sick leave to ascertain his suitability to take up duties again. The conflict between the employee, who during the meeting had expressed his disappointment at being left alone, and the Headquarters who had refused to take this problem on board, led to a diagnosis of burnout and an enquiry into the employee's suitability for work. Moreover, this happened in a strongly hierarchical context where discussion between different levels is difficult, even in situations set up for this purpose like the meeting, where the heads of outlying offices had been called to discuss the problems connected to security on the job. Workers often experience in this context a marked imbalance of power between the organisation and the trade union representatives, who for instance, cannot use any bargaining tools, like a strike. It is a context where the appeal to a "sense of duty" almost totally non-negotiable, is the solution to any situation of conflict, forcing members to behave correctly in the name of the social mandate represented by the organisation. It is a context where, perhaps more than in other places, any deviation from expectations becomes pathological, therefore of the individual, or otherwise to be subjected to disciplinary measures. Even the psychologist, present in the context as the person in charge of security, did not feel able to offer an interpretation of what was happening in the meeting without "taking sides", insofar as it would not be in line with the collusive sense of "all's well".

This is a useful example where the culture of conflict, or rather of non-conflict that was desirable in the organisation, leads to expelling the foreignness of the *divergent* as a threat to *peaceful coexistence, esprit de corps*, with considerable costs in terms of productivity and efficacy for the organisation. Taking the problem presented by this employee not as an individual dysfunction, but as useful information for understanding the organisation's difficulties, acknowledging for a start that members are free to communicate their problems, differences and disagreement only through illness, might have prevented the employee's long absence. In this case, however, the management and all present only saw the challenging, threatening aspect of the employee's behavior.

Among psychologists who deal with interventions in organisations of production, it is common to attribute a negative image to conflict, thus helping to support an individual diagnostic approach to workplace problems (think for instance of the construct of burnout).

In our opinion, dealing with conflict means having the opportunity to deal with the problem starting from the relation: this implies that the organisation can think about its own working. In the meeting, if the purpose of coming together had been kept in mind, then perhaps it would have been possible to discuss the criteria for dealing with employees' problems. The fact of being ignored, which the office head complained of, if we look more closely, seems to be commonly used in this area of the organisation almost as protection of the employee. The only way the organisation has of dealing with work-related stress in fact seems to be a *fitness for work check-up*, potentially damaging for the employee who, in view of his anxiety, risks being suspended from work.

If conflict is not seen in a context, if it is lacking the third dimension that organises the functions and aims of relating, it can be symbolised as a power struggle, losing its potential for development. Without this *third* dimension, being in conflict can be seen as a threat to one's identity, if it is understood only as strict identification with the idea one has of oneself and others.

Today, but we also see traces of this in the past, conflict seems to be necessarily seen as a war that physically eliminates the final opponent. Otherwise, it is replaced by an idealised a-conflictuality.

By *a-conflictuality* we mean the mode of relating based on social conformism, or on the expectation that one dutifully sticks to a norm, to rules dictated by an unquestionable power which allows no space for autonomy and thought.

*Conflict as war and absence of conflict as the idealisation of living in peace are the two extremes that symbolically lead to the same result: the negation of otherness.*

Let's try to substantiate these ideas on conflict by looking at some events in the last forty years that we find significant as moments of passage that have given rise to new social demands. We therefore mean to explore these demands, the way psychology has dealt with them and how this has contributed to constructing psychologists' professional identity.

Italy today seems to be dominated as we said by a culture of a-conflictuality as the solution to the problems of the social system. «A-conflictuality seen as a-critical support for the monolithic will of a group of people in power; a group characterised by the strong will of a leader» (Carli, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. A particularly good example of this culture seemed to us to be, for example, the demonstration organised by the PdL (Popolo della Libertà)<sup>3</sup> in piazza San Giovanni in March 2010 with the slogan «love always wins over envy and hatred». Love proposed as “non-place” of identity, as a space for conformist, a-critical agreement, based on such general aspects of the ideal that they were over-generalised (one wonders: how can one not agree that love is better than hatred? And the answer would be obvious only from a commonsensical standpoint). The gathering in question, held after a statuette was thrown at the prime minister Berlusconi in December 2009<sup>4</sup>, seemed to be trying to show that conflict needs to be kept in control so that it does not become the expression of a dangerous impotent rage.

In the past year this unquestionable power and the conformist culture underlying it has given and is still giving obvious signs of weakness. Think, for instance, of the protest that began in October 2010 and lasted almost two months, of a group of immigrants in Brescia against the Bossi-Fini law. This law establishes that having an employment contract is the indispensable prerequisite for keeping one's permission to stay, therefore making the immigrants guilty of the crime of clandestine entry insofar as they have no productive role. Or of the conflict within the PdL, which resulted in Fini's followers leaving the party and setting up “Future and Freedom”; think of the protest against the Gelmini reform, which saw students and researchers occupying the universities and the symbolic places of learning, but also of the strikes in the show-business world and the media against the budget cuts and the “gag law”, or of the trade unions' reaction against Fiat for changing the workers' contracts, and the demonstrations against short-term contracts. These social and political affairs seem to have come to life out of a growing desire on the part of the society to rehabilitate the possibility of expressing conflict, of recognising differences and discontinuity, arriving in some cases at harsh clashes, verging on violence, experienced as the only way to get attention and to overcome the tendency to “keep things quiet” which we mentioned earlier.

Further indications of this crisis are the explosive results of the last administrative elections (15-16 May 2011) and the results of the referenda on the privatisation of the water supply, nuclear energy and on legitimate impediment (12 and 13 June 2011). This time by using their vote, i.e. in an institutional space, the citizens showed their desire to *get their voice back*, on issues of social interest, withdrawing a part of the power delegated to government in the previous years and denouncing the inefficiency of a self-centered political system that showed little interest in responding to the country's social problems.

But let's take a step back and try to find past hints of this conformist culture, marked by passivity in the participation in public life, borrowing an interpretation offered by the historian Guido Crainz. Crainz (2009) who sees in the 1980s the start of a phenomenon that he calls “return to the private”, interpreting it as a dimension denying the possibility of an exchange of ideas and social values. For the historian, this phenomenon is the outcome of two closely related processes: the loss of faith in the possibility of a radical change and the surfacing of less recent tendencies in Italian society<sup>5</sup>. Referring to the abandonment of politics and civil commitment in favor of entertainment, the body, and fashion, which reinforce support for models never rejected since the years of “the miracle”, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>3</sup> Italian political part.

<sup>4</sup> The attack on Silvio Berlusconi was by Massimo Tartaglia on 13 December 2009 after a speech in the Duomo square in Milano too open the party membership.

<sup>5</sup> Crainz G. (2009). *Autobiografia di una repubblica Le radici dell'Italia attuale*, pp. 130-131.

which seem to replace «solidarity as a fundamental ideal of social life with an aggressive, competitive individualism» (Carli, 2008, p. 258). Think of the march of 40.000 FIAT employees and executives in Turin in the autumn of 1980, which we find significant since it started the progressive but unequivocal loss of the trade union's political power. In this reading, it is as if the event of the march of the 40.000 opened a new season marked by the collapse of the link between politics and collective movements, by the weakening of the participation in collective life, in favor of culture centered on individual affirmation<sup>6</sup>. To find the meaning of this sort of social involution, let's go back to the 1970s, the years when the first signs were visible of what we are calling a *culture of negation of the conflictual aspects in social exchange*.

We are referring to the acting out of violence in the season of bloodshed, from piazza Fontana to the station of Bologna, to the assassination Aldo Moro, Walter Tobagi, Giorgio Ambrosoli, Alberto Dalla Chiesa, to mention just a few. These attacks tell us of the violence of a power aiming to stabilise the Italian political order, to dictate the political balance of the country, to exert social control. With these events, emblematic of the atmosphere of those years, the history of Italy encountered a violent mode of keeping conflict quiet, exasperating it into a social clash and in this way repressing the divergent aspects of difference and also of possible evolution and change. The conflict was in fact expressed *outside the law*, espousing a rejection of the rules of the game which were challenged in their very principles, being based on an order whose legitimacy was not recognised.

The loss of faith and the disappointment in the State, seen as being incapable of<sup>7</sup> supporting the social and political change promised by the numerous reforms of the period and the contemporary radicalisation of political struggle, which became armed struggle, are some indications of the shared representation of conflict as being necessarily linked to a violent acting out and not as a possible producer of social change. *Culturally the idea began to come across of conflict confused with violence and coercion, that is, the idea of conflictuality and a-conflictuality as synonyms of war and peace*.

In those years, as we said, there opened the great season of reforms that, while on the one hand show how commitment and political conflict can produce major legislative changes, on the other, as Crainz (2009) underlines «they were largely empty reforms when they called for the operation of adequate institutions» (pp.107-108). On this point, we would like to recall an example very closely related to psychologists: law n. 180 of 1978, which proposed replacing the Psychiatric Hospital with "Compulsory Health Treatment", and the later health reform Law 833/78, setting up the CIM (Centers of Mental Hygiene, today Mental Health Centers) to offer services in the local area dealing in a multidisciplinary way with mental distress, and the SPDC, (Psychiatric Diagnosis and Treatment Service) in hospital divisions to take acute cases. The innovative idea of this reform had not however taken into account the needs of a system of facilities designed for mental illness and serving as an alternative to the psychiatric hospital. These facilities were not ready, and they were not designed adequately to cope with the implications of such social upheaval.

The innovative impetus of the Seventies was therefore followed by a period marked by lack of confidence and disillusionment with the partial nature of the hoped-for social change. It was a period that appears residual, an appendix to the post-war past. With the Eighties, the social movements and forms of activism in Italy seemed to be based on a shift from issues related to the power of the state and the government towards questions with a transnational scope, to political and social interests of a global kind. Think of the way the women's movement, the environmentalists and the pacifist movement opened to what lay beyond the national borders. (Montagna, 2007).

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<sup>6</sup> On this, see in this issue of the *Rivista*, the article *Between the individual and the group. Which historical-cultural context for psychologists?*

<sup>7</sup> From the bloodshed in piazza Fontana in 1969 which opened the "strategy of tension" designed to favor authoritarian solutions to the conflict, but that also marked the end of trust in politics and the State and in great social changes. Illuminating in this respect is the psychological pathway described by Fabrizio De Andrè in 1973 in *Storia di un impiegato* in relation to the development from a desire for generational change to the acted out solution of armed terrorism to fight against power for power's sake. He reaches the bitter conclusion that describes very well the widespread feeling of loss of trust at that time: "that there is no good power".

On this, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was significant, marking the end of the cold war and thus a turning point compared to a model of conflict and social mobilisation closely connected to the logic of national self-determination. We now wonder how far the transnational mobilisation which grew in strength in the 1990s, is a trace of a culture of conformism centered on the search for universal values, made concrete in ethical principles and in this way protecting from the exchange and discussion that can come from social conflict.

Starting from these points, with reference to the representations of conflict as exchange between diversities, and of absence of conflict as conformism, and still thinking about the tendency of the past decade to solve conflict by using individual medicalised categories, let us consider another context, school, which will also let us explore the way psychology has interpreted the demand addressed to it by the social context.

One of the reforms tied to the movements of '68 concerned the school context, and the closure of special schools and differentiated classes.

Student movements denounced the backwardness of the school in general and the presence of serious injustice, along with the affirmation of society-based values including the valorisation of diversity and the growing sensibility towards weaker and disadvantaged categories of citizens such as the disabled.

In 1971 our parliament passed law 118 marking the end, at least on paper, of the separation in school between normal and handicapped pupils. Their entry into classes in the state schools was the first act in the process of integration. In this legislative climate the problem of schooling for the disabled was made the subject of a widespread campaign to sensitise public opinion against the highly discriminatory ghetto effect of special schools, and in favor of the instrumental, social and behavioral recuperation of disabled children.

Stimulated by this new consciousness of integration, the Minister for Education appointed a commission headed by senator Franca Falcucci<sup>8</sup> with the task of preparing measures for the integration and social and scholastic inclusion of disabled pupils. The document produced by the Commission states the need for a transformation of the state school system and, in order to bring about a gradual opening to the diversity of experience and language, to valorise the learning path of all pupils by structuring what is offered, and envisages among other proposals, the presence of *specialised* teachers who can promote the integration of disabled pupils. The new professional figures such as the *support teacher* were envisaged as resources whose purpose was to make interventions of integration in the school, which was undergoing a process of change. Over time, we have seen a passage from this hoped-for change in the school towards a culture of integration, starting from the problem of the exclusion and inclusion of disabled children, to an increasing individualisation of the problem. This has led to identifying integration with disability and to paying less and less attention to the question of developing a culture of differences in the school context. The specialised teacher, who in common parlance becomes the support teacher, would be gradually assisted by the figure of the Cultural Education Assistant<sup>9</sup> through a series of important measures, which however seem to have lost sight of the school context and to have shifted the attention to the rights and protection of the differently abled.

The role of the Cultural Education Assistant is increasingly filled by psychologists, called on to deal with the problem of disability at school and who, starting from this role, can promote thinking on the problem of integration at school. The school system has often tried to eliminate diversity by means of conformism based on the obligation to complete the institutional syllabus and on rules of

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<sup>8</sup> The *Falcucci document*, the "magna carta" of integration, envisaged the following:

1. Accept and teach all children, not only the normal ones, but also those with difficulty in growth and learning, and make them active protagonists in their own growth; 2. Encourage the development of each child's potential, through a structured learning process aimed at forms of expression for the disabled; 3. School is the most suitable place to overcome any form of exclusion; 4. School must have the role of preventing and solving the difficulties that may impede the pupil's psycho-physical development. <http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/didattica/falcucci.html>

<sup>9</sup> The decisive turning point came in 1992 with law 104, for the assistance, social integration and rights of the disabled. In its main articles this law envisages the following: art. 6-11 health and social integration: prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and social integration; art. 12-16 education and training; art. 17-22 vocational training and employment; art. 23-31 barriers, housing, transport; art. 32-33 various concessions: fiscal, parental, disabled employees; art. 39-41 the responsibilities of the State, Regions, public bodies.

behavior in class. In this sense, the disabled pupil becomes a cause of conflict since he seems to prevent the *regular* running of lessons, based almost purely on the fantasy that the teacher explains and the pupils listen. Disability challenges the scholastic culture that sees the teacher only in the service of a pre-established syllabus, without dealing with the relations in the class as a group, with the aims and strategies necessary to enable learning that includes the diversity of the pupils and of classes. From our experience in schools, it seems that many psychologists have colluded with the school system in interpreting *the social mandate of integration as the obligation for the disabled pupil to adapt to the norms* rather than trying to think about and make sense of the meeting of different learning demands in relation to the aims the school sets itself.

In sum, following the thread of this report, we feel that since the 1970s the social context has presented psychologists with a demand for which most of them were found wanting. Since the '80s there has been a conformist tendency throughout Italian culture and throughout that of psychologists. This tendency has meant that our professional identity has been in the hands of *conservative* values designed to maintain a sort of social stability rather than to lead towards knowledge and promote development by identifying resources. This was made possible by the emotional premise of the danger of expressing positions that are different and therefore conflictual, and of the difficulty of conceiving of these positions by identifying a third dimension. Hence the use of models that pathologise the individual or interventions in organisations that regardless of the demand and the relation established with the psychologist in the contexts, aim to reach a desirable state thanks to interventions designed for instance to improve the communicative or cooperative capacity in a generalised, a-contextual way.

Starting from what the meeting of differences produces, the demand that we call *for the integration of diversities* could be an interesting issue for the development of our professional competence. It has to be rethought so as to offer a commentary on the processes of living together that substantiates the demand itself, in order to promote a culture that recognises differences from shared standpoints. As professionals, will we be able to take this opportunity? Our professional identity is a process that we are constructing in part thanks to these comments, by looking at the past, trying to "give voice" and seriously challenging some collusive aspects that we often support, encourage, and lead towards in our professional practice in contexts.

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