

Models of knowledge and psychological action

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The psychology profession is in a critical condition: training that is divorced from professional work, employment levels that are qualitatively and quantitatively inadequate; fragmentation and progressive impoverishment of skills profiles and levels; ballooning of the psychotherapeutic side; areas of overlapping and confusion between the practice of the profession and imitations with little or no deontological concern or competence (from card-reading to talk show style “psychology”); lowering of the social value of the profession; political, cultural and institutional weakness compared to other professions (in particular in the public health field, but also in the sectors of organizations, schools and social services); virtual absenteeism on strategic issues of national importance.

The scientific/professional system has not stood still before such a scenario. Universities, the professional Orders and associations have tried to deal with the existing problems in various ways. On questions like making training more professional (Bosio & Kaneklin, 2001; Romano & Quaglino, 2001; Salvatore, 2003a; Trombetta, 2003); fostering the social mandate (Carli & Salvatore, 2001; Carli et al 2004; Ponzio, 2005); the protection of the psychologist’s role in institutional contexts (such as in schools): AAVV, 1999); the elaboration of interpretative models and practices to be used in contexts where clinical intervention needs to be followed up by other forms of intervention (*inter alia*, Di Maria, 2005; Grasso, 2006), much has been said and a little has been done.

The continuation of this problematic situation reflects, in certain respects, the growing inadequacy of the strategies and efforts brought to bear so far.

The basic thesis underlying this article is that this inadequacy does not stem from a lack of effort or from the limited capacities inherent to the professional system, or from a given and unchangeable set of constraints, but rather from the obsolete way of conceiving psychological knowledge and therefore the professional function that this knowledge underpins and directs. In other words, this means— as most seem implicitly to accept – that the development of the scientific/professional system cannot be achieved cumulatively in reaction to critical situations, i.e. as an expansion of the local solutions put forward each time to deal with discrete elements of problems. Instead it requires a change of paradigm: a review of the models of knowledge underlying psychological knowledge and action. In the following pages I will try to examine this thesis in depth. In particular, I will discuss five general questions around which I believe the possibility of redefining the reciprocal links between scientific knowledge and professional practice rotates, and which are therefore focal points for the prospects for the development of the psychologist’s function.

The epistemological premises

Psychology’s scientific/professional system operates with a language that has a weak theoretical grounding. This weakness is reflected in the closeness of theoretical discourse and common sense (Gullotta, 2002). Without claiming to be exhaustive or systematic, I will indicate below some of the ways in which this closeness is manifested. First of all, there is the fact that psychological research has little capacity to reach counter-intuitive outcomes or at least results that are not obvious. This is true particularly in domains where psychology deals with problems that are not exclusively of specialist interest, on which other social figures express interpretations; in these cases the discipline tends to produce knowledge that systematises and/or gives an empirical grounding to what is already part of shared experience and sense. This statement is admittedly a generic simplification of the vast range of psychological literature. However, if one compares sciences like physics, chemistry but also linguistics, one cannot help being struck by the chasm separating psychology from the capacity of these sciences to produce knowledge not simply confined to deepening the furrow of what the person in the street is already able to experience and conceptualise, but which builds new worlds that revolutionise the very structure of the layman’s

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experience of the phenomena in question. Secondly, the closeness of psychology and common sense is reflected by the ease with which psychology becomes part of the communicative contexts of everyday life and by the corresponding permeability of psychological language to everyday discourse. One could almost formulate a kind of *Murphy's law* on this: the more trivial the subject (either because it is irrelevant or because there is no interest in intervention), the more likely it is that a psychologist will be asked to comment on it. It would be far too easy to cite the proliferation of psychologists and mannered 'psychologisms' in the mass media as proof of this law and more generally of the ease with which psychology tends to spill over into common sense. In the same way, one could recall the widespread idea that rather than being a skilled function based on constructs of knowledge, psychology is a personal quality that everyone possesses in varying degrees. I do not wish to waste time on these aspects, however damaging they may be for the image of the psychology profession. The problem is more general. The intertwining of psychology and common sense is a structural problem of the whole professional community, essentially connected, as we said above, to the weakness of the discipline's language.

From the point of view just mentioned, it should be realised that the language of psychology is characterised by two interconnected aspects. One is the tendency to treat (or rather, to imply a use of) the psychological categories in reified terms. In other words, to use psychological concepts not as constructs which, as the name implies, *construct* the objects of the discipline in modellistic terms, but to use them as pieces/states/qualities of the world. From this point of view, the professional community has been through the same process of objectification that Moscovici (1961) saw as characterising the relation between scientific knowledge and its appropriation by everyday discourse contexts. Ultimately, both psychologists and laymen have contributed to setting scientific psychological language adrift. Today, not only the construct of "the unconscious" referred to in Moscovici's study, but also many other psychological concepts are treated as if they described pieces of reality, perhaps hidden (and therefore within the psychologist's domain), but endowed with ontological substance. Examples of this way of treating psychological concepts abound, across the various domains of theoretical discourse, research and professional practice¹.

Think of constructs like *emotion, affection, anxiety, suffering, distress, collusion, demand, desire, culture, competence, context, intervention...* There is often no great difference between the way these terms are used in everyday language and by the psychologist; the discourses based on these concepts may change but the departure point is the same. Let me give one example for all: the concept of *demand*. When Carli put forward this concept, he gave a precise modellistic definition (Carli, 1987a, Carli, 1997, Carli & Panizza, 2003)². As the concept spread in the literature, it gradually moved away from this modellistic formulation, progressively assuming diversified meanings - all however characterised by reification³ - ranging from the representation of the demand as an element of distortion of the request to that of the "unsaid" present in the request⁴. In such different but essentially convergent modes of reification of the construct, one can see the concept being detached from the theoretical roots that are both its support and its constraint - in this case the psychoanalytic theory, or rather, the psychoanalytic theory founded on the semiotic, process reinterpretation of the basic principle, made by authors like Matte Blanco (1975) and Fornari (1979) - and being transformed in an experiential key: demand as the behaviour of the client going to the psychologist.

The second aspect that we wish to highlight here concerns the way psychology defines its object. Parallel to the tendency to use psychological categories in reified terms, psychology tends to choose its objects of disciplinary interest (both on a theoretical and a professional level) from phenomena taken directly from reality. This tendency is essentially a by-product of an epistemological approach of neo-positivist inspiration, which sees the categories of scientific

¹. For an analysis of the literature from this viewpoint, allow me to refer to Salvatore *et al*, 1997.

². Incidentally, while on the one hand the fact that the conceptual content of a modellistic construct develops over time reflects the obvious growth of the theory, on the other it clearly signals the non-immediate and substantial relation between the category and the phenomena to which it refers.

³. Whoever wants to examine this aspect in greater depth will certainly be interested in the heterogeneity of uses and even more, of epistemological angles applied to the concept of (and its correlate, analysis of the demand) in the collection "Analisi della domanda" (Carli, 1993)

⁴ From the latter point of view, it is not only psychology students who imply that analysis of the demand serves to understand what the client actually wants in reality.

language as the precipitate of a controlled process of systematic organisation of experiential data. On this point, one should think of the differentiation between north American social psychology (more strongly influenced by the positivist tradition) and that of the European school. As Ugazio (1988) and others have pointed out, north American social psychology gets its name from the fact that it deals with social objects (political attitudes, the idea of justice ...); however, the models used to deal with these objects are not specific, but use concepts belonging to cognitivism. On this point, Ugazio (1988) talks about *Social Cognition* of Anglo-Saxon inspiration as a general psychology applied to social objects. In contrast, European social psychology, based on Moscovici's fundamental work, constructed an object of its own in social representations, thus enhancing not only an area of interest but also and above all a modellistic view of the world, which interprets reality in terms of the circular connection between symbolic processes and social dynamics (Palmonari, 1989).

Another example comes from comparing the Italian psychological tradition and the international one. In the Italian context, when one speaks about "psychology of development" one is referring to the area of psychology dealing with a phenomenon of reality - *development* as the temporal unfolding of the stages of life. In the international literature the concept of "*developmental psychology*" is not used in the same way. The term refers more globally to the type of psychology that deals with elaborating models to analyse psychological dimensions from the point of view of their being processes that unfold/are constructed over time (Valsiner, 2001). In this sense, the "development" referred to by *developmental psychology* is a psychological construct, i.e. a point of view used to construct the objects of the discipline, well before questioning them.

At any rate, what most emblematically shows psychology's tendency to consider itself a science studying phenomena lies in the *sectorialisation* of the discipline in terms of environments: psychology of organisations, scholastic psychology, sports psychology, psychology of tourism ... The point here is not so much the differentiation itself, but its scope, the epistemological implications in its use. Sectorialisation, is not in fact seen as a conventional device to be used to identify a class of professional figures that have become homogeneous due to their shared professional context; instead, the sectors are conceived as specific autonomous areas of psychological discourse in that they are typified by peculiar objects and methods of enquiry: if you like, identificatory categories of psychology, not of psychologists. What I want to make clear is that as soon as an area of psychological discourse is defined, with its own particular object and method, based on and in terms of a certain sector of the social system and therefore of the phenomena making up that sector, it is clear that the discipline is being anchored not to psychological objects (that is to models based on a theoretical construct) but to phenomena of reality, as they appear on the historical plane, pre-scientifically – to the eye of common sense⁵ - due to the retentiveness of cultural dynamics.

The limitations of sectorialisation have been pointed out by all quarters (*inter alia*, Carli, 2002). I myself have criticised sectorialisation with particular attention to the meaning to be given to the idea of scholastic psychology (Salvatore, 2003a). Recalling this discussion may help to further clarify the issue at stake. In short, scholastic psychology cannot be interpreted as a specific, autonomous area of psychology in that the school is not a systematic domain endowed with psychological specificity. What happens in schools is obviously of interest to psychology; however, the phenomena the psychologist finds in school do not acquire psychological meaning simply by the fact of occurring in this context. For instance, the learning processes that take place in school do not follow different forms of organisation from other learning processes that may occur in other human domains. For another example, think of scholastic organisation. From the psychological viewpoint, the school's organisational operation is not a peculiar object but an example of a broader category: organisational operation. The fact that it is *scholastic* organisation makes it peculiar in some aspects of operation, but does not alter the logic characterising its manifestation as a psychological phenomenon. One final example: from the psychological point of view, the school class operates in a particular way in that it is a group endowed with certain characteristics

⁵ An example of this: adoptions. Adoption processes are not natural phenomena but social constructs; in other words, models of social practice generated by the dialectic between individual ways of organising action and historically determined forms of institutional control. Adoption is therefore not a psychological construct, by definition, but a phenomenon of reality, defined pre-scientifically.

(formality, dimensions, work goals; relationship models, socio-symbolic systems of reference...), situated in a certain institutional-organisational frame (school). However, it is the group as a cooperative, organisational microstructure that has to be taken as a psychological object, and not the class, which is in contrast, an aspect of a definite reality based on non-psychological categories (eg. as an organisational unit providing the school service).

Before concluding the discussion of this point, a clarification needs to be made. The fact that psychology tends to use reified concepts that can immediately refer to states of the world and therefore conceives its discourse as the construction of knowledge about pre-scientific objects, in itself does not necessarily imply that the language of psychology is weak. My statement to this effect is not prompted by comparison with other sciences (which I have also used, though for giving examples rather than establishing norms). Reification and naïve anchoring are modes that I believe should be classed as factors of weakness for two reasons. One is purely conceptual and I have already stated it in terms of the criticism of scholastic psychology. However, the strongest reason concerns the way these approaches place constraints on the intervention. They essentially tie the psychologist's action – in objectives and methods – to the world as common sense sees and construes it. This therefore rules out the possibility of the radical review of initial premises which is both the ultimate value of the psychologist's function and the basic requirement for those who go to a psychologist. I find it fitting on this point to mention a training experience I am involved in. Working with psychologists engaged in family assistance units that are part of the local Italian public health service (AUSL), it has become clearer and clearer that a basic difficulty they encounter in relations with institutional clients (mainly the judicial authorities) derives from the fact that they basically adopt the client's language, i.e. the categories the clients use to define the problem and therefore the substance of the request. As clinical psychology has shown (Carli, 1987b; Grasso & Salvatore, 1997; Carli & Paniccia, 1999), it is this language that is the problem, constraining the clients' possible development, in other words their competence in dealing with problems. Consequently, as soon as the psychologists adopt the client's categories to define the phenomenon they are dealing with, the results they claim responsibility for, the space-time methods and the related roles in carrying out the function, they find themselves exposed to the client's contagious impotence. This is always true. It creates such critical situations in particular cases that it is recognised as a general problem, when the psychological function has to deal with strong clients whose technical power cannot be controlled. An emblematic example of this situation is that of the judge who asks the family assistance psychologist to intervene in a family undergoing separation in order to reduce the relational conflict. As soon as – according to the logic of reification and naïve anchoring discussed previously - the psychologist treats this client's request not as the trigger for his/her own intervention, but as the official identification of the phenomenon on which he/she has to operate and the goal to pursue, i.e. s/he takes it for granted that s/he is dealing with a family undergoing separation, with a relational conflict, therefore with the phenomenon seen through the judge's eyes, then at the outset s/he is blocking the possibility of intervening, since s/he has surrendered the chance to construct the setting of his/her intervention, to model in a psychological key not only *how* to act, but also the *what* and the *why* of his/her action. In contrast, the importance placed on this type of fundamental operation will enable the psychologist to realise that while psychology does intervene in relational conflicts, it does not operate directly on these conflicts, in that they have a history and cannot be automatically related to the scientific models on which psychology has constructed its disciplinary validity.

All this leads to one conclusion: psychology must critically review the epistemological models on which it is traditionally based, so as to construct itself as a modellistic science, that is, a science that does not take the objects of its discourse directly from reality, but constructs them conceptually, therefore in terms of a language (syntax and semantics) that is validable, negotiable, and ultimately capable of developing and being used as a lever for development.

The theoretical frame

The restructuring of psychological discourse around transversal paradigmatic nodes

A feature of clinical psychology is that it has always been a highly plural field, with schools of thought (cognitivism, psychoanalysis, systemic theory, behaviourism, humanistic psychology) operating as self-referential systems (Carli, 1987b), at the same time capable of constructing themselves as theoretical paradigms and anchored membership.

In my view this description is no longer valid. It is not that there is no major differentiation between the schools' theoretical approaches, but rather that the variability *within* the conceptions of school is growing and therefore becoming more important than that between schools.

The fact that the various theoretical schools are highly internally differentiated is also acknowledged by the advocates of the various models. An obvious reference on this point in Wallerstein (1998), who states the need to recognise that there is not *one* but *many* psychoanalyses. Theoretical differentiation also characterises clinical cognitivism – as is clear if one compares the approaches of the clinicians following the rationalist-constructivist tradition (Castelfranchi, Mancini & Miceli, 2001) and those adopting intersubjective and dialogic type models (Dimaggio, Temerari, 2004) – and systemic theory: one can get an idea of the heterogeneity present in this school by comparing the positions taken by authors like Selvini Palazzoli (2004) and L. Hoffman (1981).

It is mainly around the issues of psychotherapeutic intervention, but also partly in the organisational, psychosocial and community fields (Lavanco & Novara, 2002; Gelli, 2002; Venza, 2005) that the progressive differentiation within models is leading to a gradual softening of the dividing lines between schools of thought, and therefore to the emergence of innovative transversal conceptualisations that cross over the rigid membership of a particular school.

Such movements should be seen in the light of the more general picture of development of psychological thinking, which from the end of the '80s brought general theories and the discussion of conceptions of the mind back to the centre of debate. After over a decade in which the units of observation were progressively reduced to focus on more and more specific and specialistic objects, harder to relate to a global vision (Harrè & Gillett, 1994), psychology again began questioning itself on its basic paradigmatic choices: on the epistemological and anthropological options qualifying the idea it has of the subject in its relations with the world. The 'glue' and the forum for this new direction was the debate which flourished from the early '80s onwards between the defenders of modern psychology and the advocates of opening the discipline to postmodern thought (Mecacci, 1999).

Those involved in clinical theory therefore find their interlocutor today is a general psychological theory which in the past was pulverised in the jungle of hyperspecialised micro-theories. There is therefore the encouragement to go beyond the confines of one's own clinical paradigm, to interact dialectically with a superordinate field of discourse which deals with – beyond and often across school boundaries – the foundations of clinical action: the conception of the mind, the model of the subject and of intersubjectivity, the status of clinical knowledge.

This new situation is having such a disruptive effect on the field of clinical psychology that in this disciplinary area paradigmatic issues of a transversal type are replacing the schools' theoretical projects as the reference anchorage. In other words, clinicians are reasoning and debating less and less as psychoanalysts, cognitivists or systemicists, and more and more as spokespersons – obviously within and through their own theoretical model – for basic conceptual options, therefore for *general theoretical projects*⁶.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to systematically discuss these basic conceptual choices. For the purposes of the case I am arguing here, it is however useful to briefly mention three general dichotomies which, in my view, have a central role in the paradigmatic dialectics within clinical psychology⁷.

⁶ An example of this tendency comes from the recent collection by Angus and McLeod (2004) on narrative approaches in psychotherapy. The interesting aspect of this book is that it collects articles by authors of varied orientations (psychoanalysts, cognitivists, humanist psychologists), all sharing the more general scientific project of affirming a semiotic, narratological, contextualist and non-medical vision of psychotherapy.

⁷ It is worth observing that the dichotomies mentioned below are not connected to one another by logical and conceptual needs. In other words, adopting a certain viewpoint on one of the issues does not necessarily imply a position on other issues. Hence the plurality of positions across contemporary clinical psychology discourse.

The first dichotomy concerns the unit of observation the constructs the object of analysis. On this point, the plurality of positions involved can be boiled down to two opposing points of view: *individualism vs contextualism* (Grasso & Salvatore, 1997). What we here call theories centred on the individual essentially share the assumption that the mind (in the broad sense) is contained in people's heads. These theories do not necessarily deny the importance of relational dynamics and the role - genetic, facilitating, eliciting - of the context. However, they attribute structural autonomy to the intrapsychic apparatus and consequently take the individual⁸ as the unit of observation. In mirror image, contextualist theories do not necessarily reject the intrapsychic; however, they do not consider the intrapsychic dimension to be autonomous, but part of a process organised in an environment that includes, but transcends, the individual. Contextualist theories differ in many respects (in particular, in the degree of dependence on the context attributed to the intrapsychic and in the way of conceptualising the context); however, they share the fundamental idea about the need to describe mental processes as intrinsically intersubjective (Salvatore, 2004).

The second dichotomy is related to the anthropological model of the subject characterizing the theory's goals of knowledge. On this level an underlying contrast can be identified between two visions: *functionalism vs textuality*. From the functionalist point of view, the subject (therefore the mind) lends itself to being represented as a device endowed with a certain function, the analysis of which constitutes the theoretical task and the change of which is the aim of the intervention. The textual point of view, instead, sees the subject as a constructor of meanings. From this angle therefore the interest centres on the forms and the symbolic products - i.e. texts - through which and in terms of which the subject (be it individual or collective) semiotises its presence in the world (Salvatore & Pagano, 2005).

The third dichotomy concerns the general model of knowledge that is assumed as the regulator of psychological discourse. Here I will distinguish between *universality vs contingency*, and at the same time show that this distinction ultimately recalls the traditional dialectic between the idiographic and the nomothetic approaches. The issue at stake is whether it is possible to presuppose the universal nature of the functioning of psychological dimensions. Insofar as this possibility is assumed as given, psychological knowledge can be conceived in terms of general laws describing psychological aspects in a-historical and a-contextual terms. If, on the other hand, as the contingency view maintains, psychological processes are intrinsically historical, not only in their products and manifestations but also in the way they are organised, then these processes cannot be studied in the abstract, but only locally, in the circumstance in which they unfold. This leads to the rejection of the idea of psychological knowledge seen as a repertoire of laws with universal validity, and towards the elaboration of interpretative and/or formal models (Molenaar & Valsiner, 2005; Salvatore, Tebaldi & Potì, 2006), of a methodological nature, capable of orienting the idiographic study of psychological phenomena and at the same time of making the local knowledge thus produced transferable, rather than generalisable.

Possible developments of the clinical psychology discourse

At this point one must wonder what evaluation to give of the disruption of the clinical psychology field whose features we have tried to outline in the previous section.

I will try to give my answer.

Firstly, a general comment: the weakening of the dividing lines between schools and the cogency of what I have called *general theoretical projects* must be considered and hailed as an important

⁸. Think for instance of relational approaches in the psychoanalytic domain, from Melanie Klein to the theorists of attachment. These models show the importance of precocious relational experiences in configuring the subject's mental structure, his inner world. However, once established, the inner world is just that, *inner*: it is treated as an intrapsychic structure. From this point of view, not even the most recent developments in attachment theory, which underline the plasticity of systems of attachment in current experience and relational tasks, constitute a change of attitude. The acknowledgement of the role of the context as a source of input capable of modifying the intrapsychic structure does not deny, but actually presupposes, the fundamental notion of psychic structure. As has been pointed out, this is the distinctive code of theories centred on the individual.

step forward⁹. This is for various reasons. Firstly, this cogency, as I have already pointed out, implies that clinical psychology is part of the general picture of contemporary psychology, and therefore accesses a superordinate level of discourse which makes available other interpretative models, methodological standards and conceptual categories (think of the growing links between culturalist, development and dynamic/clinical psychologists on the issue of narration (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Freda, 2002; Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2002)¹⁰. Secondly, referring to general theoretical projects, which implies a weakening of the current school anchors, gives the opportunity to overcome the fragmentation and staticity of the traditional clinical psychology debate centred on the trenchant defence of identities. Above all, the reference to general conceptual models sets up a conceptual frame that allows an understanding of the differences between the viewpoints involved, and therefore enables their dialectic relation to one another. In other words, general theoretical projects can constitute a shared meta-language operating as the reference code that can be used without bringing into question one's particular school anchorages.

This reasoning would however be incomplete if one went no further than the acknowledgement of the positive significance of the changes underway. An aspect which I believe is serious must be taken into account. Insofar as one concurs that clinical psychology is the area of psychology aimed at modelling the psychologist's action in relation to the problems in various ways raised by the social system, it must be recognised that the reasoning about the desirable direction of the field's development cannot but take into account a sociocultural criterion, basically related to the discipline's ability to shoulder the burden of the social demand. In other words, this means that as well as being judged from the internal theoretical angle, the theoretical and methodological advances must be judged on their usefulness for facilitating the encounter with the social system. From this point of view, it is clear that in the accentuated heterogeneity of models and professional practices, clinical psychology has a weakness. Such heterogeneity in fact makes it difficult for the social system to bring together an organic image of the psychologist's role that can act as a catalyst for the social demand (Carli & Salvatore, 2001). In a complementary way, the internal heterogeneity of the professional system actually hinders the definition of methodological and deontological standards to enhance the service on offer; to use a hyperbole, in the psychology domain it is very easy to find a way to state everything and the opposite of everything.

These considerations make me think that we should take into serious consideration the prospect of a unified clinical psychology capable of presenting a single theoretical and methodological face. This perspective sees clinical psychology's tendency to redesign itself in general theoretical dialectics as an important evolution to be supported and promoted, but not as the point of arrival, which is to be found in the paradigmatic unification of the discipline.

This need and this prospect has nurtured the scientific project around which the *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica* was created and has developed. This project implied a *strong* idea of unification: the definition of a theory of technique (Carli, 1988; *Circolo del Cedro*, 1991, 1992; Carli & Panizza, 1993) as a language that is both superordinate and normative. Being superordinate, it was believed not to be in competition with the schools' theories, but rather capable of valorising them in terms of intervention. At the same time, however, this language had to be - and as such was proposed and discussed - normative, i.e. capable of configuring the sense and structure of professional action: the 'what', 'who' and 'why' of psychology's function (leaving the question of 'how' to technique).

In my view this strong model of unification did not take root not because of conceptual limits, but for contingent reasons of a historical and cultural order; in particular due to the lack of attention given to two factors that are scientifically minor, but politically, culturally and institutionally

⁹. From this point of view, it must be acknowledged that the insight in Carli (1987; 1995) to shift the underlying anchorage of clinical psychology thought from the schools' theories (not to deny their value) to the paradigmatic dialectic between the individualist and the contextualist conception of the mind, set a precedent, anticipating in terms of the project, a tendency that clinical psychology today is starting to experience, through no choice of its own but as the outcome of a historical evolution that it did not help to promote.

¹⁰. The scientific and cultural need for a closer relationship between general psychology and clinical psychology has always been one of the foundations of the discourse promoted by *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica* and by *Psicologia Clinica* and by the cultural area surrounding this editorial project (Caviglia et al., 2001; *Circolo del Cedro*, 1991; Salvatore & Rubino, 1992).

essential: on the one hand, the re-reading from the within the schools' theories, of the relationship foreseen between technique and theory of technique, between first level languages and the regulative meta-language¹¹; on the other hand, the systematic depth-study of the technical component putting the theory of technique model¹² into operation at the level of professional action.

Today it would make no sense to repropose the same prospect of strong unification. Twenty years ago it was justified (and encouraged) by the virtual theoretical vacuum in the clinical psychology of the time¹³. Contemporary clinical psychology has a far different theoretical depth and vitality, so unification is not conceivable in terms of hegemony of one point of view. The only usable road is that of coalescing the active paradigmatic matrixes leading to a synthesis of the traditions that have proven to be capable of producing literatures, which while perhaps developing in parallel, cannot be dismissed. Obviously when I think of a paradigmatic synthesis, I exclude *a priori* eclectic or syncretic approaches; similarly, I do not think that the process of integration can be carried out in any other place than in scientific debate (although I am aware that scientific debate cannot be neutral and abstract from the institutional dynamics that support it). I am thinking of two complementary routes. Firstly, the search for a unified theory that is able to consider the paradigmatic options involved as coordinates defining points of view each of which is justified and consistent with certain functional conditions of observation of certain analytical objectives. In this sense the unified theory would have the basic task of identifying the criteria making the various viewpoints cogent each time (Salvatore et al, 2003). An example may be useful: think of the discussion between individualism and contextualism. Reasoning in terms of hegemony would mean trying to establish the validity of one point of view over the other. Entering the perspective of a unified theory means asking the conditions of validity of each of the two viewpoints, the type of knowledge that can be produced by each of the two, and what parameters can distinguish the observation_ frameworks and the analytical procedures as belonging to one viewpoint or to the other.

The conceptual statute of professional action

Firstly the *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, and later *Psicologia Clinica*, were created in a scientific project that can ultimately be traced back to the idea of grounding the psychological intervention as an object of the psychological discourse, compared to the dominant paradigm that sees professional action as a container/vehicle for the application of psychological knowledge. Ultimately this is the sense of the criticism of the applied-technical conception of the psychology

¹¹. In practice, it is as if this dialectic link had only been explored from the angle of regulative language, without being able to examine in depth the impact – let me repeat, political-cultural, rather than theoretical - of such language on the institutional and knowledge-producing dynamics active in the schools of thought (which, it should be remembered, are such insofar as they are also training centres)

¹². This is only seemingly paradoxical. The theory of technique is a meta-language that strengthens the first level languages insofar as it does not present itself as an abstract system that with a more or less persecutory air identifies the fallacies of techniques in controlling professional action; instead, it can be made to correspond – and therefore used as a resource – in professional action, in particular, as we shall see below, in the methodological aspect of constructing the conditions of the setting underlying technical performance. For this to take place, the theory of technique, as a general theoretical construction, must be translated into a model of competence. Think, for instance, of analysis of the demand. As a theoretical construct, it enables professional action to be represented as including a dimension that otherwise could not be recognised. However, precisely because analysis of the demand is a construct, it must also be translated into a competence profile: a repertoire of criteria, methods, procedures, standards, constraints and indicators the possession of which enables the psychologist to analyse the demand. In this sense, one fact seems emblematic of how this aspect has remained on the sidelines: Carli and Paniccia's book on Analysis of the demand, where theory is reinterpreted and updated through the reports on intervention cases, was published in 2005, almost twenty years after the publication of the first article on the construct.

¹³. This does not mean that Italian clinical psychology of the time produced no interesting results. It did so, however, from the inside and within the perimeters of a school. My evaluation is at system level. In support, see the comments on the theses and issues of the *Circolo del Cedro* (1991).

profession and the consequent idea of conceiving clinical psychology as a *science of intervention* (Circolo del Cedro, 1991,1992; Paniccia, 1992; Carli & Paniccia, 1999).

On the historical plane this scientific project did not have the success that it deserved, in my view. Its scientific value is however intact; in fact, developments intervening in psychological thought in the last twenty years – in particular in the gradual affirmation of the socio-constructivist approach, call us in the direction of overcoming the applicative vision of professional action, and therefore of modelling it in a psychological key (Salvatore & Scotto di Carlo, 2005). The following comments are intended to discuss this point in more depth.

The 'applied' logic sees the development of scientific knowledge as a process that is separate and autonomous from its use/implementation. The applied logic, above all, does not consider such a use to be conceptually important. From the applicative point of view, in fact, scientific knowledge as such is able to regulate professional action; in other words, it holds within it the parameters for its implementation. According to this assumption, the scientific community was clearly right in treating the psychology profession using categories and criteria of a socio-economic, juridical-institutional, political-trade union nature, *but not in a psychological key* (we shall return to this point in the next section).

The applicative conception of the psychology profession, however, lends itself to radical criticisms that undermine its conceptual plausibility and methodological usefulness. We shall look in particular at these two aspects below.

1. The applicative conception of the relation between knowledge and profession involves an idea of knowledge as definite, self-contained packages to be implemented through the exercise of a particular professional performance. In this sense, the profession is seen as a derivative of a system of knowledge that precedes it and from which it is separate (Romano & Quaglino, 2001). Thinking in this way, however, means failing to identify the *poietic* character of the contexts of professional practice, highlighted by psychology itself (Zuccheromaglio, 2002). It is particularly psychology of culturalist inspiration that has brought radically into question the vision of the expert as an actor applying his/her own individual set of discrete skills/knowledge, acquired *before* and *away* from where the procedure is taking place; in contrast, the professional action is always and in any case carried out as a function of the community of practices: the expert's knowledge is supported by and constantly reorganised due to the *distributed* heritage of *expertise* of which the expert is part. This heritage is the result of the continuous action of informal negotiation of meanings that distinguishes all situations of social practice (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; Iannaccone & Ligorio, 2001).

2. In different but convergent ways, psychology has shown – and this is not to deny the importance of the technical aspect – that professional action does not equate to performance (i.e. to the psychologist's technical conduct), but involves another dimension which with Carli and Paniccia (1999) we will call "intervention". By intervention we mean the dynamic of using a technique to serve a professional purpose defined in terms of the demand motivating the professional's action (Carli, 1988; Salvatore & Scotto di Carlo, 2005).

Highlighting the dimension of intervention therefore equates to acknowledging that the technical performance assumes meaning and value in terms of the context of psychologist-user relationship in which the performance is rendered. Ultimately, the logic of intervention highlights the processes of context in which the performance is rendered; it underlines the need to consider the governance of these processes as an integral part of professional action. This therefore brings into question the fundamental axiom of the applicative model which sees the context as a residual aspect: as a factor of disruption/constraint, but not an object on which to exercise psychological competence, i.e. as a process that the psychologist is called upon to organise/govern.

On the other hand, conceiving professional action in terms of intervention leads to a *two dimensional model of the psychology profession* (Salvatore, 2001). According to this model, the psychologist's professional action unfolds along two axes. On the one hand, technical operativity, that is, the use of *expertise* as a function of a certain intervention setting; on the other, methodological procedures aimed at constituting this setting. Therefore, on the one hand *technique* in established settings; on the other, the *method* as a psychological function of constructing the setting (analysis of demand, development of client base and shared definition of the goals of

professional action, design and governance of the intervention; processes of testing and validation). *Technical competence therefore involves the previous practice of methodological competence*, operating in conditions of variability and uncertainty (in that it is the demand of the user, by definition unpredictable). The outcome of the methodological competence is the construction/management of an environment (setting) which is consistent with the technique's requirements for stability.

The development of the profession

The last aspect I intend to deal with concerns the ways in which the scientific-professional system controls its own growth. Let me state my case at the outset: the scientific-professional system of psychology needs to deal with its own development, and more generally with the control of relations with the social setting, by using psychological models rather than by borrowing categories belonging to other discourses (and therefore mainly using criteria of a normative, sociological, institutional, trade union kind). I obviously do not deny the value of non-psychological criteria and strategies; however, I believe it is crucial for the scientific-professional system to see itself and plan in view of settings defined in a psychological key, capable of orienting the management modes of further devices.

The factors influencing such a position derive from the considerations put forward in the previous section, so it is not necessary to dwell on them. It will be sufficient to underline that the problem of continuity between the content/product of the psychological function and the way it is promoted in society exists insofar as one goes beyond the applicative conception and adopts a clinical psychology model interested in contexts both as the domain of intervention and as the dimension constituting the intervention. From this point of view, continuity is a necessity; it is unrealistic in fact to think that the strategies used to promote psychology have no influence on the modes in which the intervention relationships between psychologists and clients are constructed.

I have dealt with this issue in particular in the field of the function of psychology in the school world (Salvatore, 2002a, b; 2003b). Let me take it up again in that sector, for the purpose of further clarifying my point. In this domain there is an underlying division between the discourse on the profession and that on theorisation. These two worlds seem to proceed in parallel with little interaction. The issues of the profession have in recent years been treated as political problems and questions of institutional legitimation, to be pursued on the normative plane using lobbying strategies. Research activities with theoretical and/or technical aims have however developed while attaching slight importance to the criterion of the use of scientific results in and through the mediation of processes of professional intervention. This does not mean failure to understand the considerable usefulness generated by psychological research in the scholastic field (think for instance of the important criteria and strategies offered to teachers by the re-elaboration of the teaching-learning concept in a dialogic key); it simply means stating the difference and the non-superimposability between psychological knowledge of the phenomena (of which there is an abundance in psychology) and the psychological models needed for psychologists to professionally organise the activities for the use of this knowledge (of which there is a scarcity in psychology). In times 'above suspicion', when there was widespread expectation in the scientific professional community (in professional associations, the trade union world, in universities) of a law to guarantee a rapid, sure development of scholastic psychology, there were only a few of us that stressed the shortsightedness and the paradoxical effects that would derive from a strategy that treated the expansion of the social mandate as a normative problem, as the institutional legitimation of a role to be created (and essentially to be imposed on schools) *by decree*, failing to conceptualise and to govern this process with the tools of psychology. What has happened in recent years in the relation between school and psychology leads back paradoxically to this political-cultural choice. In fact, while it is undeniable that the explosion of interest in school psychology was substantially the reflection of the expectations aroused by the prospect of a law establishing the figure of the scholastic psychologist, it is equally obvious that this prospect in itself was not able to support and guide the debate; instead, it proved to be counterproductive, insofar as it did not bring a deeper knowledge of the school universe, of its demands and of the solutions of interpretation and intervention that can be offered by psychology. Essentially, today it is difficult not

to point to the political lobbying strategy as the main culprit for the present situation of aphasia: with the prospect of a law to establish the role having vanished, it seems there is not much else left worth discussing.

So as not to confine myself to criticisms, and as a conclusion, I will make some considerations below aimed at sketching out what it might mean to conceive policies of professional development in psychological terms.

To achieve a psychological strategy for the promotion of the social mandate

It is universally recognised that if psychology's scientific professional system is to develop, there must be a significant expansion – not only quantitative but also qualitative - of the social mandate. In other words, while on the one hand it is recognised that psychology needs to maintain and consolidate its presence in the sectors where it historically established itself, on the other there is the need to create new spaces and new opportunities to bring together the supply of psychology and demand for it. It is therefore up to the bodies involved in the development of the profession to define and implement policies for the development of the social mandate, for the purpose of, on the one hand, favouring the emergence of new forms of demand for psychology and, on the other, of generally enhancing the social demand.

From this point of view, we first need to establish the meaning to attribute to the term "social mandate". As has been recognised (Carli, 1996; Carli & Salvatore, 2001) it is useful to give this concept a purely psychological sense, seeing it in terms of the *symbolic connection that a certain population establishes between the representation of its own context (its goals and interests, adaptation problems, development expectations...) and the image of psychology (the issues it deals with, the type of role it plays, its clients...)*.

A strong social mandate is therefore that of a population that establishes a consolidated symbolic link between its particular conditions and the psychological function represented that can valorise these conditions. A qualitatively significant social mandate, moreover, is a mandate that establishes this link through strategic areas of interest which also valorise the role of psychology.

The above definition allows us to capture the difficulties, but also the opportunities, encountered by professional development policies. The process of the social environment becoming progressively more dynamic means that psychology's traditional social mandate – as in many other socio-professional systems – becomes gradually weaker and more peripheral. Social transformations and the spread of competing professional and cultural practices lead to the weakening of the traditional reference points used as anchorage for the relation between professions and social demand.

It needs to be said that while on the one hand this weakens the traditional social setup, on the other it offers an opportunity to extend the scope of using professional skills: organisational and institutional structures, the social players, in fact encourage professional psychologists to shoulder the burden of a growing number of processes, which, with the increasing environmental variability and uncertainty, move beyond their understanding/control with the means currently available.

This new scenario is leading progressively to the breakdown of the rigid division of work among the professional systems: today, precisely because they cannot be immediately linked to predefined models, many processes/problems are open to various possible readings and intervention strategies. In this sense, rather than appearing as a vegetable patch clearly divided into its various segments, the space of the professional action seems to be a battlefield where each professional area is engaged in enforcing the predominance of its own interpretation of reality and its own intervention (Grasso & Salvatore, 1997). Take for instance the issue of quality in business. Economists, engineers, organisational sociologists, psychologists, pedagogists: each of these professional systems has formulated a reading of the phenomenon, offering an interpretative key that emphasises a particular set of aspects, and in fact steers towards one type of intervention rather than the other alternatives.

These observations give rise to one consideration: the professions present themselves today primarily as *symbolic devices* (conceptions, points of view, hermeneutic perspectives), rather than mere operative models. In other words, a profession is such today insofar as it can put forward an

interpretative model of the phenomena indicated by the client that can constitute a *sense* for the potential users.

In short, in the present social scenario, developing the social mandate means understanding the emerging demands and providing potential clients with models to interpret the users' problems/contexts, that can give meaning and therefore be recognised by the figures involved as a resource for their development.

It is essentially this recognition that constitutes the growth of the social mandate and therefore the driving force for the development of the system of demand in psychology.

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