

## National and professional identity compared. The relation between public and private aspects

by Filomena Brescia\*, Fiorella Bucci, Isabella Conti, Pamela Crisanti, Giorgio D'Alessandro, Claudio Gasparri, Francesca Magrini, Luigi Verducci

### Abstract

This article proposes the relation between public and private aspects as a category of interpretation in construing the Italian national and professional identity. This relation has changed through time from a mainly "public" logic, with strong State interventions in mental health and employment, to an administrative decentralisation where various protagonists, branches of the State, intervene in the local area. The public administration itself has changed, adopting new parameters for assessing work. Using three cases that deal with changing institutions and issues related to living together, we have tried to find a link between the demands addressed to psychologists and the evolution of the representation of public and private aspects.

*Key words:* public; private; identity; history.

### Introduction

With this article we will offer some comments on the development the psychology profession in relation to historical and political affairs in our country, with the idea constructing possible interpretations on the current social situation and on living together in Italy.

In the year of the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Italy we thought it interesting to examine the changes in symbolic aspects, the enthusiasms and criticisms that have involved the political world and public opinion. The crisis, the new generation's loss of hope in the future, the growing lack of confidence in politics seem to us to be crucial aspects in order to understand which cultural models have been emerging in Italy for the last thirty years. In our perspective, the demands that are addressed to psychologists are closely connected to these changes.

We will analyse work experiences in a period of historical transition that seems crucial in Italian history and culture, namely the *emergence of the private alongside the public in managing social questions and public services*.

Today the relation between public and private is the focus of many debates that are trying to rethink the use of the common wealth, from a standpoint that aims to underline shared issues in peaceful coexistence and that involve both public and private figures. What we are interested in dealing with is the evolution of the representation of the concepts of public and private in Italy in the transition from a guaranteed welfare-based logic which marked a public way of construing living together, to a sharing by public protagonists and private local businesses tendering for social and employment services. In the last thirty years, this relationship seems to have been marked by a growing split between the public and private aspects, by the dominance of private interests and by a devaluation of public life which has difficulty conceiving and building a sense of belonging in collective contexts. In this sense Gabriella Turnaturi, in an article from 1999, talks about a reciprocal abandonment of the public and the private. The sociologist refers to the recognition and production of "virtuous circles" in communication between the public and private spheres in conceiving of the common wealth – material and immaterial resources, such as the use of urban space, work and living together – as questions we need to examine in order to produce a

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\* Specializing in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, clinical psychology intervention and analysis of the demand.

relationship that is useful for living together; an examination that we think refers to the construction of relations and of a new meaning compared to the confusion of changing systems of reference points.

During the 1990s in Italy there was an intense process of economic and administrative decentralisation, in the form of the transfer of administrative powers from the central state to local bodies, Regions and Municipalities, in managing functions and services like schools, health and social services, and employment<sup>1</sup>. The local health units became businesses, taking over management models typical of private enterprise. The running of public functions spread gradually to the private sphere, to a range of private figures. Social and health services started to be entrusted to social cooperatives and other organisations from the third sector; these were the years of the privatization of Enel and Telecom and the deregulation of the employment market.

The idea behind these reforms was that of shifting the decision-making centers, to bring them closer to the citizens and to the local sphere in order to improve their efficiency and transparency. They were reforms designed to orient towards renewal and to improve the governability of problems in relation to the emergence of a new social demand, to a change in models of living together, in the functioning of the family, and in the economy.

In this article we will examine these legislative events in greater detail and we want to focus on one aspect: the structural and organisational changes in the functioning of the services brought by these reforms were motivated by the intention of making a cultural change. Think for instance of the principle of administrative federalism that inspired the Bassanini law of 1997 on political-administrative decentralisation: it offered a new conception of the relation between the State and civil society, in which the State was assigned the task of promoting the competences of the civil society and above all, of its intermediate components (family, associations, firms), not replacing them but coordinating them and supporting their action also with economic aid. There was the desire to abandon a centralist model of government in favor of a decentralised model. We are aware that Italy took these steps prompted by its presence in Europe, by the comparison and the need to fall into line with the other members of the EU.

The changes that started in the 1990s did not translate into an immediate or linear effect on the lives of the beneficiaries of the services or on the staff and management. They are processes in which we are immersed and that have a great effect on us, right up to the referendum of a few weeks ago<sup>2</sup>.

Italian history is marked by profound socio-cultural contradictions that have undermined the emergence of a unified feeling and perspective. While in the 1990s we found events showing a renewal of the models and forms of governance and a search for more efficient solutions, coherent with the problems of a global society, in the same decade there was the explosion of inquiries and the Clean Hands trials. This experience marked a serious crisis in the credibility of the political parties, of the competence and legitimacy of their activity, *a breakdown of the differentiation between public and private interests* that seems irremediable because it corrodes the foundations of the rules of the game in a democracy.

The perception of a lack of shared rules governing living together has spread in the Italian population, which has been growing steadily in the last thirty years. This lack of shared rules would also help to make sense of the dynamics of conformist adaptation; when shared rules and public regulation are missing, the people fall into line, they conform, individually and privately, to norms of common sense, to a stereotyped system of expectations and conformist values. On the basis of these observations, what are the implications for the psychological intervention? Where can we find the symptoms of an evolution in the demands that are addressed to psychologists? We will deal with three cases that focus on how the organisational transformation of the services and the Public administration brought about the expected cultural transformation, and how psychology has

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<sup>1</sup> The Bassanini reform – introduced with law n. 59 of 1997. All responsibility for tourism, commerce, agriculture and artisanry, for instance, was transferred to the Regions.

<sup>2</sup> The abrogative referendum of 12 and 13 June 2011 about the management of public services in the local areas, the setting of water rates and the production of electricity using nuclear energy in the Italian territory.

played and can play a role in these processes of change. We will examine the Third sector, an agency of the public administration and the evolution of the Services of intermediation between employment supply and demand.

*A case of public and private sharing: the Third sector*

We are interested in exploring the state of the services operating in the Third sector in order to construct hypotheses of interpretation of the complex new forms of demand from and to the Services. With law n. 328/2000 on social-health integration, many activities previously organised by the public service started to be entrusted to cooperatives and associations, not only to carry out the services, but also to act as consultants in planning, and even an actual partnership between the public and private spheres in the overall design of the local welfare system (Demozzi & Zandonai, 2007).

In the current cultural climate there is a strengthening of the awareness that non-self-sufficient elderly people, the seriously disabled, long-term hospital patients, but also unstable families or those with problems, foster families, or parents grappling with growing children, are not able to perform their role in upbringing and caring alone, but need professional help of various degrees and kinds. Today the socio-cultural and demographic context calls for the direct provision of services by citizens and families, the so-called "fourth sector". We can see this process as an attempt by families and society to realign the services of assistance and care to the development of needs and of the demand. Family centers, mutual help groups, time banks, self-run centers for the elderly and the young became more common, though not systematically. This situation also led to a change in the strategies of public bodies and private activities in the social sphere whose task became that of providing tools, resources and opportunities to support these processes of self-organisation (Toniolo Piva, 2002).

In the present economic climate for instance it seems that the Third sector needs to set up modes of working that are different from those used in public contexts, which seem to work on receiving demands by means of *given categories*. Dealing with a demand undergoing change requires the capacity to relate in ways that cannot necessarily be categorised beforehand, but are in fact extremely variable in their types of expression. In the social-health services since the 1980s the term *the public* has been replaced by a new *client aspect* of the public. This was an important step in our opinion, prompted by events like the political and administrative decentralisation occurring in those years, by rigidity and invariance of the category 'the public' compared to the specificity of the *demand* that orients an equally specific provision by the health service. The services under attack that Franca Olivetti Manoukian (2004) talks about seem to refer to the facilities that are experienced in terms of the pressing *needs* of the public perceived as *individuals*, to whom the responses offered are always the same, and are thus chronicised and chronicising.

Let us give a case to exemplify what we are saying. The parents of a young man of 27, Matteo, suffering from tuberous sclerosis, go to a social cooperative in central Italy which, under an agreement with the Local Health Unit (ASL), runs a home for disabled adults. The family applies, through the ASL's Multidisciplinary Assessment Unit (UVM), to let their son enter the home for respite, that is, for a minimum period of a month, so as to enable the couple to restore the rhythm of life suited to their needs and at the same time to contact the Services for help in caring for Matteo. The family is already known, having used another residential facility run by the same cooperative, an educational community for minors, where Matteo stayed from the ages of 10 to 17. When he turned 18, the UVM offered Matteo the chance to enter the semi-residential Day Center, combined with returning home. The entry to the Day Center initially went smoothly; then Matteo started to attend less and less regularly, until he decided to stop. During one of the interviews that the head of the community and the staff member suggested to the family to organise his entry, the parents said that his refusal to go to the Day Center was finally expressed after the death of an uncle that Matteo was very fond of, almost like his father. The parents, concerned by this further closure by their son towards the outside world, contacted a private psychologist, asking her to identify the reasons why he no longer wanted to attend the Day Center. Amidst the difficulties of daily management of his presence at home and outside, the parents made an explicit request to

the psychologist to meet Matteo and persuade him to return to the Day Center. The attempt failed; after the first meeting Matteo did not want to see the psychologist again, or to go back to the Day Center. During the interview with the community's representative and the staff member, the father expresses the need to rest and to go back to work even if only for a week; if in the meanwhile Matteo feels like and is adequately encouraged and supported to return to the Day Center, for him it will be a great achievement, almost a dream. He also says that he knows there is a psychologist at the community, the one present at the interview, and hopes that through meetings with Matteo, she will be able to understand why he no longer wants to go to the Center and hopefully persuade him to return.

On that occasion it is agreed with the family that Matteo will initially enter the community for a month, in accordance with the request from the UVM of the ASL, and this can be extended after a verification of the efficacy of the intervention which will be offered to him, along with participation in the community's daily life, and social activities inside and outside the home.

We are examining this case because it is an illustration from two different points of view, insofar as it describes the dynamics of the demand presented to the services in the Third sector by the public sphere, the ASL, which asks for Matteo to be accepted into the community for a certain period of time, and the expectations of the family about the intervention that will take place in the community with their son. The ASL asks for an intervention that can give the parents immediate help, by relieving them of the hard and complex daily care for their son and leading to Matteo's gradual autonomy from the family. The cooperative offers the ASL and the family an opportunity for Matteo to make sense of what he experiences as a guest of the community and to connect his emotions with the external reality, which before his entry seems to have been a very confused experience. The intervention is also addressed to the parents: to rethink the usefulness of Matteo's entry into the community as a chance to verify the relationship with their son. In its relation with the ASL, the cooperative is constructing a collaboration designed to take into account the complexity of the social demand, in the perspective of becoming a reference point for the beneficiaries and for the local area. We see the Third sector as an area of psychological intervention half way between the public and the private sphere, which is required to have the *competence to construct and promote innovative cultural models that are able to interpret the demands of the public and of a range of different contexts*.

#### *An assessment process in the public administration*

The 1990s saw the start of major processes of innovation, such as liberalisation and the privatisation of Enel and Telecom and, at the same time, the transformation of the public bodies providing services in the National Health System into businesses.

As well as being a structural fact with laws 502/92 and 517/93, the processes of privatisation and transformation into businesses, brought in a new relational situation: the shift from the position of user of the service to that of client. User expresses a relation with the service that exists regardless of the demand made by the beneficiary: client evokes competition, decision-making power and choice by the beneficiary who does not necessarily use a service provided<sup>3</sup>. In parallel, there was the introduction of measures for assessing the *efficiency* and *transparency* of the management of the services. We will examine the application of a new system of assessment for assigning positions of responsibility within a public organisation which, on the introduction of the new system, has decided to hire 25 psychologists spread all over the country.

Psychologists are seen as being useful to help the assessors to be objective in their evaluations, distinguishing between observation and interpretation. The hypothesis is that the assessor's role is not to interpret the intentions of the person being assessed, but to observe his behavior on the job keeping in mind, as the parameter, the guide to competences drawn up by the Administration. How

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<sup>3</sup> SPS has reported on the consultancy activity carried out in those years when, for instance, Telecom went from being a monopoly business to competing with other firms. This entailed the reorganisation of the way the technicians had to deal with the customers, in a commercial role. They were dealing with the public who had become clients, with the crucial power to decide on the firm's success.

does this demand arise? How do psychologists become the guarantors of the objectivity of assessment?

Taking a step backwards, we will try to understand why the administration wants to introduce the new assessment system and which organisational needs it is trying to fill. We will do this by quickly reading the literature (Publications, Internal Communications...) that has been produced.

First of all, assessment is presented as being *inevitable*. To paraphrase the well-known axiom of communication, we could say that “one cannot not assess”. If anything, “the question is to decide whether we want an informal, hidden assessment or an official, transparent assessment”. Once the official route has been chosen, the central question is “how to assess” and it is interesting to see the way the administration deals with this. First of all, two ways of assessing are identified: direct or indirect assessment. The first is based on the “assessment of what the person actually shows he can do day by day”; the second uses elements that should indirectly attest the working capacity (seniority, qualifications, exams). With indirect assessment, the Administration writes, “we want to avoid the risk of non objective judgements, but the very high price to pay is the frustration, bitterness and anger generated by the awareness that daily work counts for practically nothing for the purposes of career”. Assessment is therefore read as an organisational problem, central in the relation between the organisation and those who work there. It is a vision that is open to a relational, contextual interpretation of the firm’s life, starting from the issue of the motivation of the personnel.

The distinction between direct and indirect assessment introduces a divide between an operation assessing individuals by taking into account their relation with the organisation and one that claims to choose the best people “regardless”.

The administration opts for direct assessment but in the step between theory and practice, in search of fairness in assessment, more and more importance is given to elements that make assessment objective, therefore freeing it from the subjectivity of the assessed and the assessors. It is therefore clear how the request to the psychologists to guarantee greater objectivity, came about; this is extended to the idea of introducing personality tests during the selection process. The administration seems to feel a relational problem (can an assessment system improve relations between the organisation and its staff?), to which it responds in an “individualistic” way. The step from relationship to individual happens in a taken-for-granted way, but is not without consequences: what is eliminated is the symbolic side of relating. In so doing, a separation between organisation and staff is introduced because representation, the bridging concept linking the two, is pushed into the background.

The introduction of assessment is only one of the episodes of the broader change that Italian public organisations have been undergoing since the 1990s, but it is of interest because it allows us to observe the way this change is being achieved, with the leaps ahead, pauses, and contradictions typical of a cultural process.

Let us now try to think about what has been said using the concept of anomie, in the sense not simply of lack of rules, but as a link between individuals and their environment, insofar as it allows us to interpret the behaviour of individuals by seeing the way they represent their life context to themselves. From this viewpoint we can regard as a critical point in the experience we are reporting the difficulty of translating a relational problem (the relation between working behavior and representation of the firm context) into assessment criteria that can be communicated and shared. By deciding to adopt a formal assessment, the firm wanted to construct shared rules. However, the rules introduced focus on assessment of the behavior (in the sense of individual characteristics) of the individuals. In this way the assessment system finds it hard to become, as was hoped on its introduction, a central point in organisational life and risks being seen as one more duty to be suffered by assessors and those assessed.

On the basis of these considerations, let’s get back to the question of professional identity. What role can psychologists play in this context? If we consider the process underway in the Administration as a tension between two ways of understanding internal selection, as an opportunity to verify the production process or as a time of assessing people, then our hypothesis is that the explicit demand (to make assessment more objective) addressed to the psychologists can be seen as a substitute for the hard work and competence needed by the assessed and the

assessors to constructively discuss the work done together. In this perspective, psychologists can be a resource if they manage to understand the process underway, helping the Administration to make assessment an integral part of organisational processes.

*The evolution of employment services. Work between the public and the private spheres*

Continuing our exploration of the contexts that seem (in the current economic climate) to bring demands to psychologists, it is interesting to look more closely at the question of the different meanings that work has taken on over time. In the services dealing with mental health, one of the emerging demands concerns the problems people experience in their workplace. These are problems linked to losing a job, to precarious short term contracts, but also to the difficulty of conceiving working relations.

Some important steps can be identified in the conceptualisation of work in Italy. Law n. 264 of 29 April 1949 establishes the public nature of work placement, with penal sanctions for private intermediation in hiring. The same law sets up the “Compulsory Placement”, a public system through which the State aims to provide unemployed citizens or those in search of a new job with the opportunity to find one by using public Placement offices.

Public management entailed the unemployed or those in search of a new position registering on the appropriate list kept at the Placement offices. The employer intending to hire staff, on the other hand, had to present a “request to begin work”, which stated the number of workers required and the qualification they needed to have. This was the so-called numerical call-up. The Placement office arranged for the worker to start work. His name was required only in cases of high level professions or for the family members of an employer. Every month the worker noted down in a special booklet, the *Tesserino rosa*, the fact that he was still unemployed, in order not to lose his place on the ranked list. If he found a job, he was cancelled off the list and re-registered at the end of the work contract, if he so desired. The working relationship was then transcribed in his *Libretto di Lavoro*<sup>4</sup>.

This rather static way of conceiving of employment was in force until the 1970s, when there was a reform, firstly with law n. 38 and then with law n. 300, introducing the Workers Statute, which went towards liberalising the hiring system, with the idea of encouraging the *matching of supply and demand*. This was an initial step of great interest, because it underlined that the social function of work was passing from a totally public management of employment to a management that also included the private sphere.

A series of laws continued to move in the direction of developing private organisms that could work as mediators in the relation between the employee and the employer. In 1987 the numerical call-up was abolished and in 1996 there was the liberalisation of hiring. With the Treu reform, law n. 197 of 1996, mediation and placement of workers was reformed, on the prompting of the European Court of Justice which found in the Italian system a lack of competition in the employment market. In addition, the Bassanini reform on decentralisation, with the principle of administrative federalism allocated the regulation of the working of the labor market to the Regions. The Regions would later entrust this task to the Provincial administrations. The actual setting up of private organisations dealing with work placement came about in Italy with law n.196/1997, which introduced temporary work; this meant that private organisations, temping agencies, were created which thanks to a ministerial authorisation offered mediation services between supply and demand. Temporary work contracts introduced contractual flexibility, reducing and fragmenting the employment relationship. Hiring is no longer direct, in the sense that temporary contracts establish a three-sided relationship, between the worker, the agency and the client-company that asked for a professional staff-member.

After the passing of law n. 196 of 1997 flexible contracts spread widely, and they found a further expansion with law n. 30 of 2003, the so-called Biagi reform which increase the flexibility on entry by means of the introduction of new types of contract: project assignment agreements, job on call, job sharing, staff leasing, entrance contracts, occasional work etc. This new picture of the Italian

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<sup>4</sup> Document recording a worker’s personal details and any previous employment [NdR].

employment market features no less than 21 kinds of working relationship different from standard employment.

Moreover, with the Biagi reform temporary agencies disappeared and Agencies for employment were created. The reform efficiently modified the intermediation system, establishing that completely private figures, even without ministerial authorisation, can deal with employment mediation.

Compared to the static system of compulsory job-seeking, these transformations should make the process more dynamic. The relation between the public and the private now seems organised around competing, and it seems that the private sphere can compete with the State in employment mediation and in offering services responding to the needs of the market. Liberalisation, decentralisation and flexibility should lead to a new definition of the role of work. Seen as dense words, these processes suggest fewer restrictions, localism, and the need to keep up with change and unstable reorganisations.

In 2005 a working group coordinated by Prof. Renzo Carli carried out a research project entitled *The a-typical working relationship: cultural models, critical aspects and lines of development* (Fanelli, Terri, Bagnato, Pagano, Potì, Attanasio & Carli, 2006), interviewing a group of “a-typical workers”: the aim of the research was to study the collusive cultural processes marking workers with an a-typical contract. One interesting fact that emerged was that the introduction of flexibility seriously challenged the meaning and the role of work as an aspect that determines the development of the pathway of personal and professional realisation: it is impossible to think of work as stability and development and it is not an element of integration into the social reality. It also emerged that the demands made by flexibility require the individual worker to mentalise a fragmentary experience: what he does in his professional activity can hardly be represented in a pathway of linear growth, he feels trapped in an eternal present, grappling with having to build his future alone.

The context of a-typical work is perceived as being false: this is another characteristic of flexibility, proposed as a tool favoring autonomy in one’s professional activity, but which in fact conceals an experience of a strong incompetent power in the hands of the commissioning figure/employer. There emerges the outline of a conflict between stability, for example, sanctioned by the workers’ statute of 1970, and the instability of the market. Finding a position guaranteed by the State today seems to be something private, for the individual, and supported by single organisations. The social function of work seems to have disappeared.

Psychology’s role, in our experience in this field, is to cope with the problem of favoring processes of *integration between supply and demand for work*. How? We are thinking of some criteria, categories entrenched in the culture, with which firms recruit professionals: “young” candidates are more sought after than workers “over 40” because they are thought to be more adaptable to the “firm’s culture”. We are obviously talking about feelings that however have a major pragmatic effect, insofar as they are often taken as facts, generating dynamics of conforming and *conformist adaptation*. In our work in the employment agencies and in training, for instance, we see that unemployed workers laid off by firms, often belong to cultural minorities that more or less consciously came into conflict with the firm’s culture. If they are treated as individuals with a deficit, it is not understood how far redundancy is a process that concerns not the individual but the cultural models underlying the firm’s decisions; it is symptom of the organisation and its cultural models, not of individual deficits.

The crisis that work contexts are going through concerns organisational models and the difficulty of matching expectations and resources. In this reading the psychological task of staff selection lies in the possibility of reading and interpreting the emotional dynamic underlying the aspects of crisis, like being residual, being discarded from the firm’s operation, in order to understand their potential as a resource for innovation. We have tried to make a hypothesis to make sense of what today is called the “precarious” employment market, where the worker has to be flexible and to respond to a plurality of requests. Taking it for granted that we know what we are talking about places great limits on us psychologists in working in contact with this situation. Offering creative possible interpretations based on a competence to understand the culture of the organisation we are working in is the specific service we offer.

### Conclusions. What professionalism is required of psychologists today?

Until the 1960s and 70s the employment market for psychologists developed mainly around the demand to recuperate outcasts and to treat psychic disorders. What followed in practice was a proliferation of the supply of psychotherapy. In 1986 Ambrosiano and Kaneklin wrote that psychotherapy is a social identity that exerts a great fascination for young psychologists. To their request to be trained to “treat-save the patient” the training response is almost always intellectualistic and comes down to the offer of learning a psychotherapy tool designed and tested in situations (eg. dual) and contexts (eg. Independent professional) far removed from the working reality of most of the trainees who nearly always work in distant, irrelevant contexts. And today? What is the demand we receive? Does psychotherapy deal more with treating the psychic disorder in a one-to-one relationship? Or what psychotherapy are we talking about? What is the feature of our intervention today?

During our training experience in the School of Specialisation, we have often seen our professional role as not being organised around a repeatable action, envisaging mastery of techniques, and in which scientific knowledge guides professional practice, as in medicine. Instead, we have worked in our training on thinking of a professionalism in clinical psychology based on the competence of producing knowledge, which we call “local”, namely concerning the contexts in which we work. In this sense we could perhaps hypothesise that our professional identity is a process that tends to be defined (little by little, not all at once) on the basis of the intervention that is proposed for specific problems that we find ourselves facing. Promoting knowledge means expressing our professionalism through the possibility of construing problems and creating a meaning in the relationship with our clients or the figures commissioning the intervention.

In 1993 R. Carli wrote that there was a collusive symbolisation of what a psychologist was and could offer. It was the client who asked for the intervention. Today the big challenge is to find spaces where one can work on the level of knowledge and of the social construction of problems. The competence we are training for has as its standpoint the possibility of promoting our intervention. We wonder, and we are trying to verify it also through this seminar, whether the market for our profession can be influenced by the way we psychologists/psychotherapists manage to make useful, interesting proposals about the problems emerging.

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