

## Training in the organization: a “new critical reading” by Paola Pagano\*

*"There's nothing so practical as a good theory".  
Kurt Lewin. Field Theory in Social Science (1951, p.20).*

### Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> was written thinking of trainers and of the students who are preparing to become trainers, with the aim of proposing a critical reading of some aspects of training. The article sets out to present some considerations on *training* seen as an intervention tool in organizations, to re-examine the implicit models and to propose a model based on the *individual-context paradigm*<sup>2</sup>. I feel that critical thinking can be useful to those building up their professional competence in this field, assuming that the trainer's main competence is that of continuously thinking of the professional role activated, in relation to the contexts, interlocutors, tools to use and goals to achieve. Training and self-training, in this perspective, means learning from experience, getting emotionally involved, thinking about who one is, where one is, what one's aims are, and at the same time, reflecting, *with reference to criteria*, on the emotions evoked by training relationships. All this has sprung from my experience working with the group connected to the Clinical Psychology chairs<sup>3</sup> of prof. R. Carli and prof. R. M. Paniccia. I am still developing these ideas, using them and thinking about them in my professional and training activity.

As I write I am thinking of the article by Cinti (2006)<sup>4</sup> and I have in mind what was put forward by Dragonetto (2006)<sup>5</sup> in the article published in FOR n. 69. Their proposal is for reflection on the sense of current training, which often seems to lose all meaning and be reduced to the sterile reproduction of patterns that are now empty. In their articles they focus on the words used in training: “a constant, continuous flow of words. But not many. In fact, a limited vocabulary, almost a jargon” (Dragonetto, 2006, p. 64). Dragonetto argues that “words become the terrain where the meeting and the *total, complex relationship with the other person's reality* is decided” and poses a question: “how far has training been willing to seriously risk relating with others (the trainees) or has it instead been concerned only with finding new ways of speaking, training, teaching and declaiming, but not of listening; primarily concerned with things to say, company messages to transmit, methods to “convince” and not with the interhuman relationship of men and women who, as they work in organizations, have something to say about the work they do” (Dragonetto, 2006, p. 65).

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from the final dissertation for the Master in Human Resources Management presented at Lumsa, Rome in November 2007. It therefore emerged at the end of a training process experienced as a trainee, but through the eyes of someone who for several years has been on the other side of the training process.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on the training model and the individual-context paradigm, see Carli & Paniccia, 1999; 2002; 2003; Carli 2006a; 2006b. This paradigm takes the relationship as the unit of analysis, not the single individual, and it is “a model based on collusive affective symbolization, that is, on the affective symbolization concerning the same context, which constructs the relationship between those who share that context. [...] a “cultural” context and not a “structural” one. (Carli, 2006a, p. 179).

<sup>3</sup> An experience that began in 2002, at the Faculty of Psychology1, “La Sapienza” University of Rome.

<sup>4</sup> Published in n. 67 of FOR, *Rivista di Formazione (Training review)*.

<sup>5</sup> Published in n. 69 of FOR, *Rivista di Formazione (Training review)*.

In this article I will use some theoretical definitions on training and refer to the literature produced on the issue, along with the considerations that have developed starting from my experience at work and in training. The latter experience is very varied in contexts, interlocutors and aims, in the functions adopted and in the different phases of the professional process of which they are part.

In this article I intend to put forward a critique of the current tendencies in the training field and to discuss a way of *thinking* of training, basing myself not on a “theory of man” – and I hope to clarify why – but on a “theory of the relationship” between the individual and the context where he works, based on the *bi-logical theory of the mind* (Matte Blanco, 1975). In this perspective the emotions are no longer considered the individual response to environmental stimuli, but are fundamental to the relations between individuals and the organizational context, shared modalities for “symbolizing” the contexts one lives in, in other words, *cultural models* (Carli & Paniccchia, 2002). *Words*, seen in their *emotional density* (according to Fornari’s principle of double referentiality<sup>6</sup>) are very useful clues for the exploration of such *cultural processes*.

### *Training failures*

For years there have been proclamations of the strategic importance of training, as the essential component in the Human Resource Development (DHR). Millions are currently being spent on training and development and according to some authors, a considerable part of this investment is being wasted on badly planned interventions that are not fully implemented (Awoniyi, Griego & Morgan, 2002; Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992; Bunch, 2007). Very few organizations try to show a satisfactory connection between training and positive change. The literature deals repeatedly with unsuccessful outcomes (for a survey on the issue, cfr. Bunch, 2007) particularly in the most fashionable training areas like *participation* (Wagner, 1994), *total quality management* (Bennett, Lehman & Forst, 1999), *leadership* (Conger, 1993), *outdoor training* (Badger & Sadler-Smith, 1997), *team-building* (Staw & Epstein, 2000), and *management development* (Clarke, 1999). Along with the waste of time and economic resources, the unsuccessful interventions produce costly legal controversies (Eyres, 1998) and a growing cynicism about the value of the efforts at organizational change (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). They also contribute to creating a constant devaluation of the training profession (Shank, 1998).

The extent of the failures in the training field cannot be established, but there is no lack of literature showing emblematic examples in both the public and private domains. On this, I will give several examples.

The publisher of *Industry Week* (Panchak, 2000 quoted in Bunch, 2007) has described training as “at the best ridiculously stupid and at the worst disrespectful and offensive to the workers’ intelligence”. The author states that virtually all the other areas of management spending require an analysis of the return on the investment and he cannot understand why this does not also happen for training. In various cases it is difficult to understand what advantage the organization can get from such expenditure and this leads to numerous attacks on the part of public opinion, especially if they are public investments. In other cases training verges on the ridiculous. Think of the hilarity aroused by articles of commentary and by the satire presented in the USA in a night-time talk show about Burger King’s “team-building retreat” in which a lot of workers had their feet seriously burnt when walking over hot coals (Burger King Workers, 2001). In the US press there is no lack of articles attacking training initiatives. Think of what was written by Feiden (2003) in the *New York Daily News* denouncing the “waste of millions of dollars” by the US Postal Service on “bizarre bonding and team-building exercises and playing goofy games that burn up millions of dollars — and appear to do little or nothing to curb postal inefficiencies”.

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<sup>6</sup> Fornari (1981). Simbolo e codice. Dal processo psicoanalitico all'analisi istituzionale [Symbol and code. From the psychoanalytic process to the institutional analysis]. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Scientific literature and the mass media deal with the spread of training that is considered unsuccessful, but if we look around, we see crowds of organizations offering training, a *training* that is so varied that it is difficult to connect to the same "object". It would seem to be a phenomenon produced by today's society...

### *The training phenomenon*

I will suggest some criteria to interpret the current tendencies of organizations in the training field, so as to understand what kind of *training* these firms offer. First of all, we find different names for the training that is to be provided: *experiential training*, *behavioral training*, *relational training*. We find reference to training that pursues teaching goals inherent to capacities, competences, behaviors and insists on attitudes. The aim of this training is not exclusively the acquisition of knowledge and contents. Two different teaching methodologies can be found underlying the different terms: one deriving from behaviorism and the other from gestaltism. Let us see in detail what they are about.

### *Experiential training*

To analyse *experiential training*, I use AIF<sup>7</sup> which defines it as "a philosophy and a method concerning both trainers and trainees, who when faced with direct experiences of various kinds, extrapolate elements that can be useful to increase one's knowledge and skill and to focus on new values". Here are the principles of Experiential Training:

- learning comes about when experiences are followed by reflection. Critical analysis and synthesis;
- the trainer's task is to pose problems, fix limits, support the trainees, guarantee their physical and emotive security;
- through the process of experiential learning, the trainee asks himself questions, tries out solutions, solves problems, takes a responsible role and develops his own creativity.
- The trainees are intellectually, emotionally and socially involved. This involvement produces the feeling that the learning task is authentic;
- the results of learning are personal and are the basis for future experiences of this kind in which in any case relationships are developed and cultivated;
- trainers make the effort to become aware of their prejudices and preconceptions and how these can influence the trainee;
- the learning process includes the possibility of learning from the spontaneous consequences, the mistakes and the successes of the various experiences (Paolo Viel, cfr. sito AIF).

Experiential training sets out to bring about a common experience on which to trigger a conceptualization and a generalization (Castagna, 1991). It uses a teaching strategy called by various names: gestaltist, experiential, inductive, or discovery, depending on the features that one wants to underline. This strategy is based on the comparison with direct experience followed by reflection, which is followed by an inductive process that sets out to discover relations, concepts, and facts through the analysis and interpretation of experience, of phenomena observed and of events (Castagna, 1991). Bion's *Learning from experience* springs to mind. The training method proposes the construction of a common experience through the structuring of a teaching approach designed to make the group live out a situation from which they can inductively learn a behavior. It is particularly

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aifonline.it/index.php?name=Sections&reg=viewarticle&artid=1115&page=1> – Consulted in September 2008.

suitable for complex, articulated behaviors and it is advantageous in situations where it is not possible to prescribe correct behaviors in contrast to incorrect ones (Castagna, 1991).

In the training generally carried out today, what experience are we talking about?

Exploring the internet sites of organizations offering corporate training it can be seen that in experiential training “the participants are immersed in directly experiencing processes and metaphorical situations that repropose the same dynamics as those that develop in the corporate context: they have to plan, decide and act in order to achieve the goals set, here however there is immediate feedback on the results of the behaviors adopted”<sup>8</sup>. For the moment I will examine the supply of training commonly found on the market. It would seem that the more creative and innovative one is, the better; what is offered ranges from sports experiences (rafting, rock climbing), to theatrical experiences, to those reminiscent of ancient fakirs like fire-walking (otherwise called walking on burning coals), to jungle adventures. The trainer’s role is that of an animator, a coach (in the literal sense), a guide. The “criterion” for selecting the experience could be: *any experience* is acceptable, provided it is a *metaphor* that repropose the same dynamics as in the organization...

Being able to plan, run and evaluate a *training metaphor* is for many authors one of the main competences for a trainer (cfr. Rago, 2006) and constructing training metaphors for experiential training is a complex activity. On the other hand, as a psychologist, it can be said that “finding metaphors” is related to an emotional, associative process, and that “thinking of metaphors” implies a productive process. Why, then, in training should we deal with metaphors that the trainer himself introduces and sets up? Why not explore the metaphors that the interlocutors *bring* to the training experience?

At this point one might wonder: why should a group that works together every day – for instance in a clothes shop, dealing in different roles with stocks running out, customers’ requests, the sudden arrival of the human resources manager from headquarters, the choice of garments to put on the mannequins and the rising sales of their direct competitor – improve its way of working after having shared an experience such as a jungle adventure? It seems to me that this is exactly what firms offering training services propose. If this logic held, then the opposite should be true, too...If for instance a group of friends who get on extremely well, after sharing extraordinary adventures, journeys and feats, decided to become a working group, it should be most successful. Facing reality, however, leads one to think that very probably the group might come to blows. Even if I use *psychological models* (Carli & Paniccia, 2002; 2003) I reach the same conclusion: the context organises different roles, functions, goals and cultures. For example, the psychological models that say that groups based on the feeling of belonging and affiliation are by definition without a product: they are groups based on values like friendship, equality, shared ideals. They organise *cultures* based on the non-differentiation and the assimilation of what is different from the self and they are positioned at the other extreme from the functional differentiation needed for the achievement of productive objectives.

Therefore it is not to be taken for granted that a group based on *affiliation* and *acted out emotionality*, perfectly *functional* in game-like contexts and when dealing with leisure and enjoyment, once the context has changed, will continue to function just as perfectly and create a “productive” organization that serves for the achievement of goals.

If our working group from the clothes shop moved into the jungle it would no longer have the customers, the mannequins, or the competitor’s label, but for instance, it would have a (real!) problem of group survival, of finding food, of defence against animals and the cold...

But there is the metaphor. The link between the two experiences could be in the construction of the group, in team-building. If our group overcame the challenge of survival and came back to the shop in the center of Rome, they would most likely have to deal with the same problems they had before. Certainly, they will have shared an exciting, emotionally significant experience, the workers will be better “friends”, perhaps, but for the customers in that shop what will have changed?

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mapsrl.com> - Consulted in September 2008.

It seems to me that in these cases, the construction of the group and the “group dynamics” are considered an entity in themselves, regardless of the context, the history, the functions, the aims of being in a group, the problems that have to be faced every day. What is neglected is the connection between the training experience and the solving of the problems of organizational operation, one of the aspects most harshly criticised by the media and by the literature.

It remains to be seen whether this area of training does in fact respond to a demand by the organizations for *training-entertainment* or *fun-training* which seems to be constantly growing today. In that case a broader question would be opened concerning the reasons why organizations are more interested in entertainment events than in training in the strict sense

### *Behavioral training*

Many training firms offer *behavioral training*, but they do not “define” it. To understand its meaning it is useful to refer to the theoretical conceptualizations of the behavioral training model used in psychology. In this sense, behavioral training is concerned with individual behaviors<sup>9</sup> towards the specific working context. It follows a pathway called behaviorist, deductive, expositive, receptive, depending on the characteristic or the viewpoint stressed (Castagna, 1991). The purpose of the training is to “guide the person towards the acquisition of pre-established behavioral models, teaching what needs to be done and how in terms of the right-wrong value polarization (Pediton & Sprega, 2008). The teaching method envisages the presentation, generally in an introductory lesson illustrating the basic components of the behavior proposed, its motivations and everything that can induce people to adopt such behavior, followed by a demonstrative example, and then an example of application, and lastly the development of the praxis with the application of what has been learnt to real situations (Castagna, 1991).

In the training process the person acquires awareness about what the organisation expects from him and about the best way to satisfy these expectations, taking the needs and goals of the system as his own. In keeping with the behavioral inspiration, this training focuses on the behaviors adopted by the individual in the various situations and follows the stimulus-response model. The trainer takes as his goal that of getting the trainee to develop a concrete and demonstrable behavioral efficacy, without going beyond this and without entering the sphere of his private psychological experience (Pediton & Sprega, 2008). This training strategy is particularly advantageous for reduced, limited and circumscribed behaviors (Castagna, 1991). These are prescribable behaviors for which a right-wrong behavioral pattern can be learned.

There is no doubt that acquiring pre-established behavioral models is useful and possible, and problems could arise within organizations if this did not happen. The criteria for defining what is meant by limited, circumscribed behaviors remain to be carefully discussed.

On this point, a possible example of such behaviors springs to mind. This is a dramatic situation that the head of team in the iron industry told me about: while off-duty, he had been called on the phone to come and deal with an emergency situation. The pump that controlled the water flow for the cooling of red-hot carbon-coke was not working and the iron wagon for transporting it was being melted: an enormous damage in economic terms and serious risk for the staff. He immediately asked who was on

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<sup>9</sup> On this, see Carli (2006b) in *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, n. 1: “Behaviorism, in the sense of a behavioral response to a stimulus, is the matrix of individualist conceptions in psychology: behavior, in fact, is an idea that has to do with the individual; the social system, in the behaviorist perspective, is the sum of the individuals responding to an environmental stimulus. In contrast, the relationship is typical of the Gestalt school, which envisages the construction of reality (perceptive but also emotional) based on elaborations of the stimulus, contemplating a relation with reality. Hence constructivism, hence the first Freudian topography, and French psychosociology, to arrive at our proposal of the construct of collusion and the analysis of the demand [...]. The former look at the individual and his/her mental system, the latter at the relationship and its clinical implications” (p.56).

duty and, hearing the name of the worker whose job it was to turn the lever, he remembered that during the *practice* (as he called it), that person had repeatedly tried to turn the lever anti-clockwise (instead of clock-wise), and had therefore had difficulty learning the correct behavior. At that point, it was enough for the team leader to firmly order “turn the lever immediately in the opposite direction”, that is, to prescribe the “correct” behavior, to avoid a dramatic outcome. In this case, learning the behavioral procedure was useful, meaningful and practicable because all that was needed was to turn the lever in one direction instead of the other.

But why is the term *behavioral training* currently used instead of *practice*, as my interlocutor called it? Basically the model underlying the two terms is identical!

It is probable that *behavioral training* indicates something more complex than has been exemplified here... Managing the relations with a client to whom a property or a service/product is to be sold, is more complicated than turning a lever, because it involves a series of more complex variables.

If one explores what the training services organizations offer, it can be seen that they concentrate on “certain” behaviors, almost on segments of working practice in specific contexts, but very often they offer a form of training that is useful in managing more complex situations where it does not seem enough to apply a pre-established behavioral procedure.

For example, *behavioral training* designed for call-center operators gives as its purpose the improvement and promotion of service motivation and the professional aspects that every operator needs to perfect, and offers behavioral training as “the deeper examination of some specific issues such as telephone manner and client management, Phone skills (use of the voice, correct speech, active listening), telemarketing techniques and sales techniques”<sup>10</sup>). I do not intend to look into the proposal to “improve and promote service motivation”, but to concentrate on the second part of what is offered, the more technical part.

Is it possible to train sales-staff (via telephone or face-to-face) so that they will learn pre-established behavioral models? And again, can handling a telephone contact with a potential customer be considered a behavior to learn in the right-wrong perspective through behavioral training?

What springs to mind is the phone-call from the call-center operator who wanted me to buy a 10-mega Internet connection at a time when almost everyone was going at 56k.

I had just come back from Turin where I had been staying with friends who had that kind of connection with the same firm and had enthusiastically, and with great technical expertise, described the service in detail and had let me try out its extraordinary convenience.

As soon as I heard the call-center operator say the name of the firm and the product, I was very pleased and said to myself with enthusiasm, let's see how much it costs, thinking of buying the product.

The operator knew the procedure: firstly, to present the service in detail, then to convince me how extraordinary it was by comparing it to other services on the market, then to make the commercial offer. As soon as she began the first step, I told her I knew the service very well, I had already tried it out and was very interested in knowing the price, but the operator continued doggedly with the description; I tried repeating my interest, begging her to get down to the bottom line, but the operator went ahead with her litany. When the second step arrived, I told her I knew the services of other providers and asked her to tell me about the costs, but she went on with the comparisons. Behavioral procedures!

At the end of that extenuating phone-call, I did not buy the service, and in fact when I hear the name of that firm, what springs to mind is that irritating call. Associative processes...

It might be an isolated case, but in this article I set out to think of critical aspects and I feel that what has just been described is a *critical event*. I do not mean ‘critical’ in the sense of abnormal, extraordinary, but as evidence of a cultural process. I am not referring to the operator's incompetence in dealing with me, but to the *culture* she was telling me she belonged to by behaving in that way.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.data-center.it/inostriop\\_formemonit.htm](http://www.data-center.it/inostriop_formemonit.htm) - Consulted in September 2008.

I am not talking about individuals, but about *cultures* and I suppose that the operator was immersed in the right-wrong culture, in a “dual” relationship with an authority (real or phantasmic) and the dutiful completion of a *task* (cfr. Carli & Paniccchia, 2002). If one is inside the experience of performing one’s duty, such as in a sales process, one does not see<sup>11</sup> the interlocutor of the relationship, one loses sight of him, also literally as in this case. Specifically, for that operator the task was to follow the procedure and it would be a mistake to indicate the price *before* describing the service and illustrating the advantages compared to the competitors. Basically it is not difficult to glimpse one of the basic principles of sales techniques, but also the total conviction, quite legitimate given the time, that the interlocutors contacted did not know the product in question. I could say that in that situation, I represented the *unexpected and induced the operator into error*. The operator was immersed in a procedural prescription. An emotional position that eliminates the unexpected and carries on with the task. In this example it is clear that the transformation of the sales process into a task to be carried out properly, to satisfy the evaluating authority, made the operator lose sight of the aim, i.e. selling the product.

This example shows how the acquisition of a behavioral model in the right-wrong perspective was counterproductive when a complex situation had to be dealt with, such as the sale of products/services. In this case, I think that organising the telephone contact required the operator to activate thinking on what was happening and to rapidly reorganise her sales strategies to satisfy the interlocutor.

### *Relational training*

According to the theory, *relational training* acts on the learning of techniques and capacities typical of behavior: communication and managing of interpersonal relationships, group work and social relations, relationship with work and organisation, motivation and energy, values, power and leadership dynamics. *Relational training* assumes particular importance when “turbulence”, “unexpectedness and critical aspects of the outside environment” call for the strengthening of the person (Pedito & Sprengel, 2008).

What then does *relational training* mean?

If we concentrate on the words and think of relationships, our whole life can come to mind: from the mother-child relationship, to that between teacher and pupils, to the relationship with school-mates, work colleagues, clients, one’s partner and so on... It is difficult to think of a relationship as an *abstract entity*, regardless, for instance, of the interlocutors that construct it and of the contexts in which they are placed. The relationships evoked do not exist outside the family, training, or working contexts that underlie them.

What relations does *relational training* deal with then? And again, is the relationship the product or the tool of the training? Does one do training *so as to relate or through relating*? The distinction is very important because it calls into play the use of contrasting teaching strategies and the possibility of pursuing completely different goals. In the first case, the emphasis is on the learning of techniques by individuals and the sense of the term *relationship* refers more to interpersonal *behaviors*. The source of the training model is to be sought in the behaviorist theory. The relationship is understood as a means for change strictly and univocally concerning the individual; one talks about the relationship using individualist categories and models.

In the second case, the emphasis is on the relationship that individuals construct with reality, and the term *relationship* refers to a psychological construct deriving from gestaltism.

If one thinks of the prevailing tendency in the training commonly offered, the relationship seems to be a product of training, and not the tool by which training is carried out. Training offers techniques

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<sup>11</sup> See in the emotional sense, not as perception.

through which individuals can manage their work relations. The trainer would seem to have the function of possessing and providing the *techniques for managing relations*. The relationship is therefore to be understood in its common meaning, not as a psychological notion, and the training model envisages the individual learning of techniques for motivating collaborators, managing the work group, managing conflicts and so on. The *technique* indicates the behaviors that serve to achieve a verifiable objective, according to criteria of scientific-ness. In other words, what indicates the behavioral strategies is not the experience accumulated in that particular working context. Experience therefore stays separate from technique and indicates the capacity to treat management problems “with common sense” and enables the sense of belonging to the work context to be promoted.

*Limits of training: the individualist “prejudice” and the split between emotionality and rationality*

In current literature, training, in the various meanings explored so far, has advanced considerably: it is not considered a mere tool to transmit knowledge, as it was in the traditional vision. It seems that the model that anchored training to education and considered it a process of knowledge transfer from those who know to those who are ignorant, in a sort of a-critical pouring from a “full container” to an “empty” one, has been made obsolete.

Now training is seen “as the motor of development of the individual’s technical, management and professional skills” (Pendon & Sprega, 2008, p. 29). It is credited with an important function “in increasing self awareness, awareness of one’s role and of the environment where one acts, according to the principles of metacognition. The person who participates in training becomes more knowing, more capable, more motivated to learn” (Pendon & Sprega, 2008, p. 38).

According to Bruscazioni (1998)<sup>12</sup> training means “helping people, groups and organizations to learn so as to change: to achieve one’s aims and the organizational goals that one sets in terms of the environment. Helping to evolve in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, as we usually say: at times transmitting precise contents, at times helping to reflect about experience; more and more often acting on both these levels simultaneously” (p. 21).

Training is no longer confined to the teacher-student relationship, or closed inside a classroom, but is considered “a process that starts with the identification of the training need, ends with the recording of the results and is never finished since, like a perturbation in a fluid, it produces circles that generate new circles, a chain reaction of individual, group and organisational processes that are structured in the classroom, reinforced and spread in daily operations” (Pendon & Sprega, 2008, p. 37-38). Training is therefore recognised as having a “productivity” that is not completed in the training phase itself, but continues through time.

It seems that training has made great strides ahead, but that some critical points can be found. Among these there is the focus on the *individualist perspective*<sup>13</sup> (Carli & Paniccia, 1999; Fraccaroli, 2007). This gives rise to the gap between individuals and organisations, which brings with it the contrast between emotionality and rationality, which I will deal with in greater detail below.

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<sup>12</sup> Bruscazioni M. (1998). Introduzione. Testimonianza di una professione [Introduction. A profession’s account]. In *AIF* (ed), *Professione training* (p. 15-25). Milano: FrancoAngeli.

<sup>13</sup> For more theoretical detail on the dialectics between the individualist and the contextual positions, see, among others, Grasso & Salvatore (1997) and Salvatore (2006). For Salvatore (2006): “What we call individual-centered theories here ultimately share the assumption that the mind (in the broad sense) is contained in people’s heads. Such theories do not necessarily deny the importance of relational dynamics, the role – genetic, facilitating, eliciting – of the context. They however attribute structural autonomy to the intrapsychic apparatus and consequently take the individual as the unit of observation. Conversely, contextualistic theories do not necessarily reject the intrapsychic; however they consider the intrapsychic dimension to be non-autonomous, but part of a process that is organised in an environment that includes but transcends the individual” (p. 126).

Training pursues an organizational change, a development in the organization by intervening in issues, skills or attitudes considered strategic to this end. The training intervention, as it is currently theorised and conceived, intervenes with *single individuals* and expects a change in the organisation as well. In other words, goals of organizational change are pursued by working on the individuals that make up the organisation. There is a growing individualism in the interpretation of relations within organisations (Garavan *et al.*, 2004). The individual level of analysis emphasises the human aspect of HRD and this emphasis is based on the idea that the goals of the organisation can be achieved by individual performance (Rummler & Brache, 1995).

Various authors underline this aspect. According to some, in fact, "training, in the methodological and procedural effort that codifies its practice, has remained an action directed to single individuals; organisations' demand for training can be linked to processes of change that concern organizational functionality as a whole" (Carli & Paniccia, 1999).

Exploring the literature, it is possible to find traces of what, in the perspective we are taking, is called the *individualistic prejudice*, in its various facets, and of the *split between emotionality and rationality*.

In this article I will try to follow these traces, concentrating, as regards the individualist prejudice, on three main aspects:

- the focus of some studies on *individual characteristics*;
- the emphasis on *personal development*, seen regardless of the organisation to which the people belong;
- the spread of studies on *cognitive and learning styles*.

#### *Individual characteristics*

In the literature in the field of Human Resources Development, most of the works focus on the level of individual and organisational analysis, separately. Think for instance of the widespread idea that the individual is responsible for planning and recording his own development, while the organisation is responsible for making sure that these opportunities for development are available; think of the proliferation of studies in the literature on training, dealing with individual constructs such as self-efficacy<sup>14</sup>, self-esteem, motivation to learn, personal development, the need and the expectations of learning. The participation in training activities is covered by the *individual characteristics* considered important; I am referring to the works about the motivation to learn (Poell & van der Krogt, 2003; Tharenou, 2001); the motivation of trainer and trainee (Baldwin & Majuka, 1991); the age and commitment of the trainee (Cleveland & Shore, 1992); the motivation to commitment (Bontis & Fitzenz, 2002); attitudes and beliefs about training activities (Noe, 1986; Noe & Wilk, 1993); motivation for the transfer of knowledge (Yelon, 1992); self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) and so on (for a detailed survey see Garavan *et al.*, 2004).

Another individual variable used in relation to the participation in training pathways is the degree of freedom individuals had in choosing to participate. It goes without saying that those with more freedom in choosing to participate show more favorable reactions to training (Hicks & Klimoski, 1987; Wang, 2004). In the literature there is no lack of studies on the interaction between these variables, for instance the effects of the degree of freedom on the choice of training have also been studied compared to motivation and learning. One of these studies shows that if participants do not get what they chose they will have low motivation and low learning (Baldwin *et al.*, 1991). This means that if one chooses one's own training one is more motivated and learns more.

The outcome of these considerations is the recognition of the importance played by giving the training participants the chance to choose as a motivating strategy in training contexts.

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<sup>14</sup> The construct introduced by Bandura concerns the psychological conviction that one is capable of achieving a goal, carrying out a performance, of succeeding in the various situations in life. See Bandura A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action. Englewood Cliff, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

The separation between individual and organization leads those who approach the training discourse in an individualist perspective to think that they can separate the “participation of people in the organisational context from the context itself and to make it a sort of individual attribute” (Carli & Paniccia, 1999). Might it not be useful to interpret the critical nature of this operation, rather than presenting banal statements as *refined products of scientific studies*? Psychological research often shows little ability to “reach results that are counter-intuitive, or at any rate not obvious” (Salvatore, 2006, p. 121)<sup>15</sup>.

How is it that psychology does not say something more? As Legge (1999) observes, free individual choice and the idea that individuals have the freedom for self-determination recalls Kantian philosophy. Psychology could use better organised models that are useful for interpreting the experiments carried out in the complex field of training.

Probably this is not possible if it continues to look “into” individuals and to retain the individualist prejudice, splitting people from organisational contexts.

### *Personal development*

Two other concepts of the training literature are: the development of the self as a person and the development of competences and capacities that have value on the employment market. Some authors distinguish training activities from development activities (Sonnentag, Niessen & Ohly, 2004). In the first case there is the idea that training is addressed to the current occupational role, in the second training is part of a future prospect and aims at the personal growth of individuals (Fraccaroli, 2007; Noe *et al.*, 1997; McCauley & Hezlett, 2001). In some cases there is the phenomenon well described by Russ-Eft (2000) when he talks about “a focus on the development of the resources of humans” instead of on the “development of human resources”. It is in this sense, in my opinion, that we should read the spread of studies on the spiritual dimension (Wager-Marsh & Conley, 1999; Chalofsky, 2000); studies that emphasize characteristics inherent to the personal individual nature including concentration, the refining of awareness, wisdom. These are all characteristics that concern people’s personal and private sphere, and that are therefore a-specific and a-contextual. From this viewpoint, individuals are considered as being split from the working context. Moreover, the authors believe that studies on how working life is regulated and governed on a day-to-day basis also focus more and more on individuals as such and not as belonging to a specific working context (cfr. Cullen & Turnbull, 2005). In my opinion, at bottom there is the belief that individuals can use training opportunities to *grow* as people or to improve themselves and not to *develop* within the working context. In saying this I am using a psychological model that enables the difference between growth and development to be interpreted. The term growth refers to process of linear evolution involving the individual from A to B (from child to adult, for example). Development involves not the individual but the relation between the individual and the context of which he is part and is oriented to the strengthening of the capacities for production and exchange in this relationship (Carli & Paniccia, 2002; 2003).

It should be said that the training designed from the viewpoint of the immediate usability of its product, in working contexts, itself opens up numerous complex conceptual questions regarding the relation between individual learning and organizational change (Quaglino, 1985; Carli & Paniccia, 1999; Fraccaroli, 2007). If this relationship relies completely on the individual and is extended over time, the situation is complicated even further.

If one thinks one can develop “people” regardless of “organizations”, anything will be acceptable: watching a film, going to an exhibition, going on a peace march, doing yoga or pilates.

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed examination of this question see Salvatore S. (2006). Models of knowledge and psychological acting out. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*. Theory and methods of intervention, 2-3, 121-134.

The idea that one can participate in training processes regardless of whether one is in the working context is not thought out in a critical manner, but is taken literally and taken for granted. Using the values-objectives psychological model (Carli & Paniccia, 2002), one may think that, if people are split from the context they are in, development ceases to be an objective and becomes a value; in this way one loses the only anchorage that provides the methodological criteria to verify whether or not the training constructed is *useful* to the interlocutors (insofar as they belong to an organisation). Values are *a-historical* in that they are based on the claim of universality and *a-critical* towards the social system in which they are pursued; pursuing values can replace the development of objectives (Carli & Paniccia, 2003) and make the specific aspects of an organisation be disregarded. To design training, so as to pursue the development of people in working contexts, it can be useful to refer to a psychological model based on which the development of organisations depends on the development of their *client* (Carli & Paniccia, 2002). In the psychological definition of the client function, this represents a model of relationship between individual and context: the client is the *extraneous one*<sup>16</sup> on whom development depends. The client, in turn, has a client to develop. This means that the client always configures another, second-level, client, who conveys a demand for development. If, for the trainer, the workers and the organisation itself are the clients, this means that the training should always be seen in terms of who will use the training; the worker, therefore is whoever, in turn, will have a client to develop.

#### *Learning and cognitive styles*

Another characteristic of the current literature on training is the anchorage to learning theories and to individual learning models. This poses not a few questions, if one thinks that learning yet again concerns the individual (and not relations). My hypothesis is that considering individual learning as the goal of training can be partly linked to the traditional anchoring of training to educational activity.

Let me start from the definition provided by Canestrari and Godino (1997) which says that learning is considered “the more or less stable modification of a subject’s concrete potential behavior that results from the experience of the person (or animal)” (p. 197). The authors believe that “there is no learning without a perceptive and cognitive elaboration of a stimulus”, considering learning as an individual process of elaborating information” (Canestrari & Godino, 1997, p. 197).

When training is being dealt with, reference is made to traditional learning models like for instance those developed in the behaviorist approach and the cognitive approach. They are two types of learning: the first is *associative*, mechanical and linked to a stimulus-response sequence, producing habits; the *cognitive* type involves higher psychic functions such as perception, intelligence and cognitive processes in general.

The first is based on the S-R model, Stimulus-Response: the environmental stimulus affects the individual who reacts with a behavior towards the environment. Think of the historical theories like association learning of Pavlov and Watson; Skinner and Thorndike’s learning based on conditioning; Bandura’s model of social learning. In this model, learning is based on the association between the *stimulus* and the *response* as it is realised with the acquiring of habits through the use of rewards.

In the cognitivist perspective, on the other hand, learning is a process of construction by which the individual assimilates new cognitive elements, becomes familiar with them and consequently restructures his own cognitive system. This process trains one for observation and mastery of one’s modes of learning and for the localisation of areas of improvement; it also contributes to improving

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<sup>16</sup> On this point, see Carli R., & Paniccia R.M. (2002). *L’analisi emozionale del testo. Uno strumento psicologico per leggere testi e discorsi* [Emotional text analysis: an instrument for reading texts and speaking]. Milano: FrancoAngeli oppure Carli, R., & Paniccia R.M. (2003). *Analisi della domanda: Teoria e tecnica dell’intervento in psicologia clinica* [Analysis of demand: Theory and technique of psychological clinical intervention]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

cognitive performance and to fostering self-awareness. For the learner, a problem is not a mountain to climb, but a resource, an opportunity for learning, for learning to learn (Pedin & Sprega, 2008). The fulcrum is the motivation to learn that creates the necessary premises, activating the limbic system for the creation of long-term memory, acting on positive interest and more in general, on the desire to learn. The motivation to learn is also influenced by other factors: the physiological situation of the learner, the atmosphere, the environment. Favorable associations and experiences arouse attention and act on memorization thanks to the triggering of the emotions and to the reinforcement of associations. Association with hostile experiences produces flight, and a block in memory and learning... The conditions needed for learning are: clear objectives, favorable atmosphere, motivation to learn, association with experience (Pedin & Sprega, 2008). Attention is focused on environmental factors that favor or hinder learning, interacting with the functioning of mental processes. In this regard, it should be recognised that "the acknowledgement of the role of the context as a source of input that can modify the intrapsychic structure does not negate, in fact it actually presupposes the fundamental idea of psychic structure, which is [...] the distinctive note of individual-centered theories (Salvatore, 2006, p. 126).

Taking learning as the goal and motivation as the driving force to achieve it, the training literature focuses on dealing with *learning styles*, that is, the ways – also in this case, *individual ways* – in which learning takes place.

In dealing with these issues, it refers to concepts generally considered closely connected to learning styles like personality type, cognitive style, thinking style and decision-making style. It should be pointed out that in some cases these terms are used as synonyms (Sadler-Smith, 2001a), and also that different tools are used to measure seemingly the same thing, and conversely, very similar tools are used to measure different styles (Messick, 1984). What has been said is particularly true of cognitive and learning styles, often used interchangeably (Cassidy, 2004).

To analyse the question I use the work of Berings, Poell and Simons (2005). Personality types are a series of orientations and attitudes about basic individual preferences that accompany a person in interacting with the environment. Cognitive styles represent individual differences with which a person perceives, thinks, solves problems and learns (Witkin *et al.*, 1977). They are self-consistent characteristics of information elaboration that are developed in congenial ways around the basic tendencies of the underlying personality (Messick, 1984). Thinking styles are the ways people choose to use or to express their knowledge. A thinking style is a preferential way of thinking (Sternberg, 1994). Decision-making style is a characteristic way in which the individual perceives and responds to tasks requiring a decision (Harren, 1979). The term "learning style" is commonly used to express all these dimensions. The distinction between cognitive styles and learning styles mainly concerns the contexts where they are used: the first are more used in academic research and the second in theoretical speculation (Riding & Cheema, 1991; Swanson, 1995). In some cases the learning style is considered in a broader sense than cognitive style, in others the opposite happens.

In this case, too, several critical elements remain. A working and training context is made up of groups of people, but the scientific literature, by focusing on individual constructs, deals with it as if it were a sum-total of individuals. In the perspective proposed here, the training that pursues individual learning can promote the knowledge underlying people's cognitive repertoires and it is hypothesised that it pursues change in organisations (Carli & Panizza, 1999). This is made possible through the *acting out* of the training act and the organisation of training. For this reason it has a totally self-referential organisational efficacy. Moreover, all learning of cognitive repertoires is strongly influenced by the organisational context in which it comes about. The possible efficacy of training, in this sense, will therefore be a different learning from training context to training context. Lastly, training that prefigures individual learning leaves to single individuals the burden of using what has been learnt in the training context, in the workplace. In this sense it will not be possible to verify the training proposed in terms of its usefulness in working contexts and even less foresee the outcomes and possible backwash.

### *The scission between emotionality and rationality*

Alongside the separation between individuals and organizations, the literature analysed seems to show a sharp gap between emotionality and rationality: individuals convey the former and organizations the latter. According to Sangiorgi (1991), the key dimensions present in an organization are the individual dimension and the social dimension. The first is characterised by the needs and motivations of individuals; it can be defined in terms of the expectations, hopes, fears present in the person through these. This is the dimension with the greatest subjectivity. The second is the dimension characterised by structures, norms, procedures that the organisation puts into effect to achieve its goals. This is the dimension with the greatest objectivity (Sangiorgi, 1991). In this perspective, organizational change derives from the gratification or frustration of individual needs, in a given structure. In other words, according to the author, the syntony and congruence existing between needs and reality, between the individual and the social dimension, between subjectivity and objectivity, will determine the behavior of the individual. This behavior will be consistent with needs, where the structure permits its realisation, while it will be inconsistent, i.e. an expression of the strange, the alien, of defences, where the structure is contradictory (Sangiorgi, 1991). A training intervention with individuals would modify behavior by acting on needs and motivations, favoring the development of those more in harmony with reality. Consistent with this idea of organizational change, in order to design training, individual needs are analysed. I have nothing to say against the more and more sophisticated techniques used for analysis. What I do question is the underlying hypothesis and the vision of training as the “answer” to individual needs. In my opinion, if an individual within a working context is asked about his personal needs, he might indicate something that is outside the organisation of which he is part: the “outside”, the leisure, the “enjoyment” away from the work routine. This operation might therefore foster a training oriented to people’s growth regardless of their relationship with work contexts. The separation between emotionality and rationality lays the foundations for a training that is valid in itself, based on meaningful methodologies and activities. The latter may have effects on corporate functionality after the training, but it is unlikely that there will be the *a priori* definition of the processes through which the training will affect the organization’s functionality. It can however be hypothesised that if one used people in work contexts to construct a space where they could put forward their ideas, starting from their relationship with the organization and the problems they encounter, they could present a demand for training which would be meaningful in terms of the development of that relationship and of dealing with those specific problems.

The scission between emotionality and rationality may also involve other aspects and for example may mean that training works simultaneously on two levels: that of conceptual models and theories on the one hand, and that of experiences that trigger the expression of emotions, on the other. All this is without a model of the relation between these two levels, without a theory of the technique connecting the two experiences; this in fact reiterates the split we have been talking about. This brings to mind the lessons on the different models of interpreting the organization, in the first case, and on group dynamics in the second case. Both come about without any relation between them, or any relation with the experience the participants have in their particular organizational structure, with the theories by which they conceive it and the collusive experience they share (Paniccia, 1989). In the first perspective, there is no room for emotion in the training process; it becomes a disturbance and as such has to be controlled, managed, channelled and tamed. What people think and feel towards the training process is not expressed inside the training experience but belongs to what is outside (bar or corridor) or to the private individual. In the second perspective, everything is contained in the emotional experience in itself, the reflection on group dynamics, considered separately from the organizational context and from the moment in time in which it is located. In actual fact, rationality appears to be reliable insofar as it does not belong to the people, to those who use the techniques, but to the techniques themselves in that they are “scientific”, protected from contingency and from

emotion. It is therefore a rationality that is related to a form of thinking and science produced elsewhere (Paniccia, 1989). At the same time, this split alienates people from emotion, which on the one hand seems to be something private and ineffable, which is never the object of communication or reflection or used in professional experience. On the other hand, it is manifested as collusive acting out in which emotion is no longer recognisable as such, because by making it pragmatic and triggering the reaction of the other, action no longer allows the distinction between emotion and action (Paniccia, 1989).

In other cases, there is talk about an inadequate conjunction of technique and experience, with reference to optimal organizational behavior. Defining the ideal in words, breaking it down into categories, is in contradiction with its very nature; but it can be understood that, through the "technique", it is connected to an omnipotent experience; or that, with emotion, it negates the violence of the acting out, and therefore its destructiveness (Paniccia, 1989). The technique will indicate the competent behaviors that can achieve an objective that is verifiable according to scientific criteria; experience, split from the former, added on and not integrated, will indicate the ability to treat management problems with "common sense", in other words, the collusive ability gained through an adequate stay in the organization, which enables membership to be promoted and consolidated.

### Conclusions

What has been said so far seems to show that, in dealing with training, the scientific literature and the service agencies place emphasis on *individual constructs* and suggest a *split between emotionality e rationality*. When organizations are examined, one sees the *single individuals* that make them up. And yet, if one mentally goes over the training processes one has participated in, one recalls groups of people, interactions, relationships, work contexts. If one looks into experience, therefore, it is clear that organizations are composed of groups, training is done in groups, but we remain radically anchored to the individualist vision.

What relationship links the training of individuals to organizational change? Is it possible to think *which transformations* are introduced in an organization by a training intervention and *what tools* there are to hypothesise them? Is it possible, for organizations that are investing money, to foresee how the changes introduced by training will end up? To respond to these questions we need a theory on the organizational efficacy of the training that supports the connection between individual and organizational processes.

An interesting proposal in this direction is that of the *theory of the relation between individuals and context*, based on the bi-logical conception of the mind formulated by Carli and Paniccia. In this perspective, the organization can be considered without starting to think of the individual, that is, of the inseparable unit, past which one cannot go down the scale of *reductio ad unum* (Carli & Paniccia, 1999). This is possible if one considers the *context*<sup>17</sup> as an uneliminable presence in the psychological reality, so the mind is configured as being constantly in touch with the context. If one thinks of the characteristics of the mind's unconscious mode of being<sup>18</sup>, the context is always *intentioned*, therefore it is made of relations that are strongly marked by intentionality. Moreover, the

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<sup>17</sup> The context is seen in a symbolic, emotionally connotated sense: "the set of collusive affective symbolizations underlying the phantasmic relationships through which one has a specific experience of relating, in a specific time" (Carli, 2006, p. 179).

<sup>18</sup> On this, see: Carli, R. & Paniccia R.M. (2003). *Analisi della domanda: Teoria e tecnica dell'intervento in psicologia clinica* [Analysis of demand: Theory and technique of psychological clinical intervention]. Bologna, Il Mulino. The perspective proposed refers to the mind's unconscious mode of being, as it was theorised by Freud in the first topology, where it is postulated as a mental system, the mind's specific mode of being; remember the five features: condensation, displacement, absence of negation, absence of time, replacement of external by inner reality.

context can only be composed of several people and *it is impossible not to relate*. Here relating is not to be seen merely as a physical presence, but as the constructor of emotionally shared meanings. Training is not separate from the organizational culture in which it is carried out, from the stories of those participating and from the way those participating emotionally live the training context and the organization. Thinking of training is therefore inseparable from considering the context of relations in which the training is done. Training is a complex process and those carrying it out cannot escape facing this complexity, at the cost of offering sterile *repetitions of knowledge*, regardless of the contexts and of the interlocutors, or *emotional immersions*, which may be fun but which go no further than the emotional experience as an end in itself. To go beyond the individualist reading in organisational contexts and the split between emotionality and rationality, therefore, it is possible to use *a theory of the relation between individuals and context* and the *model of promotion of development*. This model “presupposes the possibility – theoretical and methodological – of a socially shared negotiation of the development goals of the organisational/social system that is taken as interlocutor” (Salvatore & Pagano, 2005, p. 177). In this perspective, dealing with training means placing professional functioning in a relationship with commissioners, contexts, contingencies, products and verifications and therefore with the relations of demands and with the social realities that express them. In this way, training is situated in the organisational context, works within its components and finds meaning in giving prompt responses to the problems of firms and organisations, not to the problems or needs of people split from working contexts.

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