

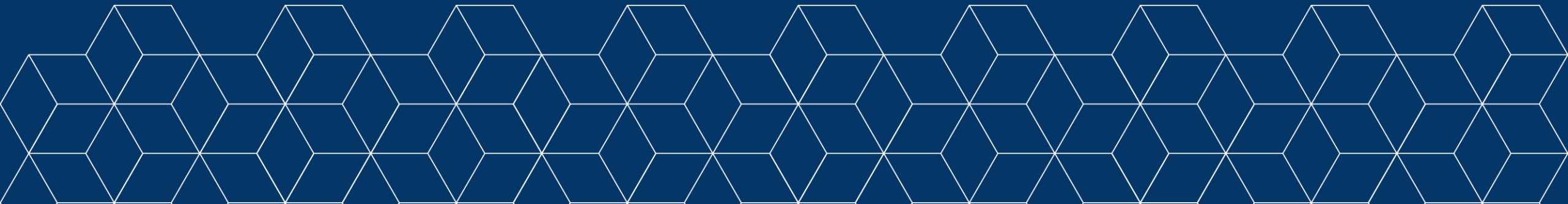
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# **PANDEMIC CRISIS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSION IN ITALY**

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- The **pandemic transition** has had significant impacts on the psychological and emotional sphere of individuals, with increased levels of panic and stress in the population.
- This has led to an unexpected **increase in demand for psychology and psychotherapy services**, even in the return to normality, up to the present day.
- The pandemic, therefore, has also been a **stress-test for public policies**, including policies aimed at protecting well-being and health in general, psychological well-being in particular.
- In Italy, mental health and psychology/psychotherapy services were **underfunded** by the State and therefore inaccessible, before the pandemic, for people in need.
- At a later stage, it also offered the opportunity to rethink and **strengthen public policies**.
- In Italy, **new public interventions** have been adopted by policy-makers, such as the on-line psychological support services; the promotion of information campaigns, the training of social workers on the management of psychological disorders, forms of economic support for people in need.



# THE ROLE OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSION

- Many authors have emphasized the holistic view of collective well-being of the World Health Organization (WHO).

“All this knowledge can be used effectively in **public policy and decision-making**, but the transition from basic science to applied action is challenging and demands time and resources. Scientific and professional organizations can be important drivers of this connection and translation of psychological knowledge to help societies in regular times and crises” (Gutierrez et al., 2019).

- Prilleltensky et al. (2022, 2023) go beyond this global mental health approach outlining a **psychology for the common good**, they theorize an interdependence between citizenship, social justice, equity and well-being :

“Programs, practices, and policies aimed at making people feel **that they matter** contribute to both citizenship and well-being. When service recipients, adolescents, or people with various unique identities feel accepted and valued, their **sense of belonging** increases, and they are more likely to participate in civic affairs. Programs, practices, and policies have the capacity to humanize society by treating each individual with dignity and by creating social structures that guarantee access to **basic necessities** and afford opportunities for individuals, communities, and societies to thrive”.



## THE VIEW OF THE PROFESSION IN THE ERA OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

- In Italy, the pandemic transition has reignited the debate around several **theoretical questions** on methods, practices, functions and effectiveness of different psychological approaches.
- The current common view of psychology is driven not only by the need to cope with contingent crisis of the profession, but also to the need to produce scientific knowledge about a professional figure that is often **confused with other near professions** (Ricchiardi et al., 2021).
- Following the lockdown and social distancing the **therapeutic setting** was changed moving from face-to-face sessions to on-line platforms.
- This challenge has forced a reflection on the therapeutic relationship and the **effectiveness of on-line psychotherapy** (Di Renzo and Marini, 2023), also in the context of different approaches. For example, the psychodynamic approach had always opposed a strong resistance to any change from the traditional setting.
- In general, the profession, during COVID-19, had to adapt to the new social context, opening to new digital technologies and remote communication tools, such as chats, digital platforms, etc. (Braitto et al., 2021).
- Italian psychologists had to adapt to this new professional market, which has seen the rapid expansion of **platforms** offering psychological and psychotherapy services on-line.



# THE ITALIAN SCIENTIFIC DEBATE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE DISCIPLINE

- For **Bosio** (2022), the psycho-social impact of the pandemic, and its exclusively medical management, has highlighted the need to overcome a mono-disciplinary logic to "encourage the construction of a trans-disciplinary approach within a plurality of scientific perspectives".
- The author starts from a series of researches on the social representations of the psychologist and psychology in Italy to outline **a picture of the psychological community**.
- This community is characterized primarily by its **extension**, which is matched by a perceived weakness, determined both by the difficulties of the financial and pandemic crisis.
- The few consolidated professional roles (e.g. in public health) are not enough to transform a growing "need" for psychology into **social demand**, determined by the interweaving of the pandemic transition with multiple other phenomena typical of a liquid (Bauman, 2000) and hyper-connected (Lancini, 2019) modernity.
- **Lazzari** (2021) lists some critical issues: the lack of a common and shared identity, the risk of disqualification determined by the spread of university degree courses and mainly the number of psychologists (one for every 500 inhabitants).



## THE POLICIES AFTER THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

- In Italy, **legislative initiatives** have been promoted for greater recognition of the role of the psychology both as a support for individual distress and as a structural professional figure in the National health public service.

### Ongoing legislative initiatives:



1. The Psychologist Bonus



2. The Primary Care Psychologist



3. The School Psychologist



## 1. THE PSYCHOLOGIST BONUS



With this policy, the Italian decision-maker had set himself the achievement of two objectives:

- 1. Promote the culture of bio-psycho-social well-being** as it manages to raise awareness among the population and encourage people to ask for help when they need it, as well as strengthening neuropsychiatric services for children and adolescents.
- 2. Reduce economic barriers to access the psychological care** in order to make it more accessible to the most fragile and vulnerable social groups. The cost of psychotherapy sessions can be a significant obstacle in some segments of the population.



## 2. THE PRIMARY CARE PSYCHOLOGIST



- **Since 2010**, legislative initiatives have been put forward relating to the primary care psychologist.
- The role of psychological activities is strengthened in the more traditional sectors (minors with neuropsychological and developmental problems, adult mental health, drug addictions, disabilities) and public interventions are expanded (e.g. Diabetes Plan, Chronicity Plan, Mental Health Plan, New Addiction Legislation, Palliative Care).
- The current legislative proposal includes different regional laws already adopted (Apulia, Campania, Sicily, Abruzzo, Tuscany, Lombardy).
- The legislative initiative establishes the primary care psychology service, articulated at the level of the health district, capable of ensuring psychological services to citizens in the field of primary care medicine.
- The service must guarantee a first level of psychological intervention with rapid patient care and carry out complementary activities with other health and social care professionals present in the area.



### 3. THE SCHOOLS PSYCHOLOGIST



#### In Europe:

- These services have been present **for years**;
- The psychologist, who supports the school and its main actors (pupils, parents, families, teachers and school staff) is mostly employed by the State or local authority (Amendolia, 2019).

#### In Italy:

- In the last 20 years, different national and regional law proposals have been presented but they have never been approved.
- Only in 2020, during the pandemic crisis, a **Memorandum** was signed between the Ministry of Education and the **National Council of the Order of Psychologists (CNOP)** in which it states the possibility of financing psychological support aimed at school staff, students and families, to respond to the traumas and discomforts derived from the COVID-19 emergency.
- The Memorandum also defines, for the first time, the **professional requirements** of school psychologists and provides *Guidelines for the promotion of psychological well-being at school*.



## CONCLUSION

## COVID-19 AND THE COMPLEXITY OF A PROFESSION

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant **impact on the mental health** of the Italian population, especially about vulnerable categories.
- The **social isolation** (lockdown) characterized by the forced closure of schools, offices and entertainment places - together with the fear of contagion and the economic uncertainty - have profoundly contributed to change individual and social attitudes and behaviours causing a pervasive increase in anxiety, depression and other mental disorders.
- Even before the pandemic, perhaps no other profession has ever questioned itself so assiduously about its **role, the scientific knowledge, the areas of intervention and the view** conveyed inside and outside its professional world.
- The change and increase in demand for support is matched by a renewed attempt **to redefine the content and tools of this profession**, to adapt it to the growing expectations of the public.
- Psychology (perhaps like no other scientific knowledge) embraces an **enormous variety of paradigms, theories, objects of study, methodologies**, and in the common view often it risks being confined to a pre-scientific stage, because the fragmentation and proliferation of different perspectives fail to integrate into a single conceptual framework.



## THE STRONG PUBLIC ADVOCACY OF THE CNOP

- What can be considered as a real "window of opportunity", at the level of policy advice, the CNOP has established itself as a credible stakeholder in the political and institutional decision-making arena.
- In the initial stages of the pandemic crisis CNOP makes a call to action for an **extraordinary recruitment** of psychologist for the National health service in addition to doctors and nurses.
- Thanks this strong advocacy, with a legislative Decree-law, **psychologists were included in the direct intervention**, first to population in general but also to cope with the stress and burn-out of other health workers engaged on the front line during the pandemic crisis.
- Their specific professional role was thus publicly recognized, as well as the institutional role of representation of the CNOP in the defence and social promotion of a **holistic concept** of collective well-being, already well established at international level through the campaigns of the WHO.



## PSYCHOLOGIST BETWEEN SOCIAL REDESIGN AND CONSTANT ADAPTATION

- In conclusion, the **social redesign** of the role of these professionals, is today driven by a proliferation of legislative interventions (Psychologist bonus; Primary care psychology; School psychologist).
- The occupational trajectory of the psychologist is affected by a combination of **multifaceted professional activities**, because of a demand for knowledge based on social intervention.
- As an outcome, this could lead to the formation of a **complex occupational profile** that has already branched out into different public sectors, taking on roles and tasks that are often heterogeneous.
- What is constantly occurring is a process of **constant adaptation** between disciplinary knowledge, personal attitudes and organizational contexts of reference.
- In the end, beyond the occupational trajectory of the psychologist in the public sector, today the **increased visibility of the profession within Italian society** is undisputed.



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