

## **Community Psychology in Italy: Introduction and Prospects**

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*The history of community psychology in Italy is briefly reviewed. The field has developed extensively in universities and applied settings over the past 30 years. This issue presents 5 recent examples from different regions of Italy of preventive and other community psychological intervention studies. They include an evaluation of a program to increase the independent mobility of children walking to and from school, the ecological evaluation of child and adolescent residential care communities, participatory action-research with adolescents in schools and neighborhoods, evaluation of a participatory local health intervention planning process, and the description and evaluation of a collaborative, Internet-based community planning training program.*

*KEYWORDS* community intervention, Italian evaluation research, participation, prevention

In November 2007, Italian Community Psychology (CP) celebrated its 30th anniversary with a conference in Naples. At this conference, participants reassessed the reasons that pushed some Italian academic and professional psychologists in the 1970s to show interest in the CP movement.<sup>1</sup> This interest can be attributed to the activities of some professionals engaged in field

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work and interested in social change who were part of a community-based political and cultural movement involved in the reform of both psychiatric hospitals (called “Psichiatria Democratica”) and the welfare system. The first Italian community psychologists helped change many laws in order to move educational, social, and health systems in a direction that privileges prevention, citizen participation, and a “non-victim-blaming” approach. Probably the most important exponent of these changes is Franco Basaglia (1924–1980) who was instrumental in closing mental hospitals throughout Italy.

In this context of dramatic social changes, the symbol and guide for a new discipline was the first Italian publication about theories and applications of CP, the 1977 book by Donata Francescato, published the same year as the American CP texts by Rappaport and by Heller and Monahan. Once CP was established within Italian universities (in the 1980s), the academic side of the field developed quickly. The manifestation of this development is the Italian Society of CP (SIPCO, founded in 1994). This society, which organizes and promotes seminars, conferences, and recently (2005) sponsored the journal *Psicologia di Comunità (Community Psychology)*, consists mainly of academicians; professionals play only a marginal role. The journal, published as a monograph on a specific topic, recently devoted an issue to subjective (as opposed to more practical or technical) aspects of participation. The studies showed how people of different ages (children, teenagers, adults, elderly) experience and perceive participation.

Another sign of the difficulty of integrating academic and professional community psychologists is represented by participation in the conference organized by SIPCO every two years. About 90% of the participants have been from universities, which have tended to emphasize theory and research more than the practice of CP. However, there is an attempt to create a bridge between academicians and professionals in a more applied-training-focused conference on “Prevention and Intervention in Schools and Community” that takes place at the University of Padua in alternating years to the SIPCO conference.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ITALIAN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH

Theories and practices from many perspectives have framed the development of CP in Italy. Despite differences in culture, politics, and problem context, many Italian scholars have drawn critical areas of interest from U.S. CP.

*Sense of community* is one of the most important constructs studied by Italian community psychologists. Research on psychological sense of community has mainly focused on its relationship to individual or community quality of life in various groups, such as children (Prezza & Pacilli, 2007), early adolescents (Vieno, Santinello, Pastore, & Perkins, 2007), older adolescents (Zani, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2001), and adults (e.g., Colombo,

Mosso, & De Piccoli, 2001; Prezza & Costantini, 1998). Italian researchers have also contributed to the definition, theory, and measurement of sense of community (Mannarini, Tartaglia, Fedi, & Greganti, 2006; Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza, Di Marco, 1999; Tartaglia, 2006).

Related concepts include the *quality of neighborhood life* and residents' *fear of crime*, which have also been studied in Italy in different age groups, including adults (Amerio & Roccatò, 2005; Santinello, Gonzi, & Scacchi, 1998), adolescents (Zani et al., 2001), early adolescents (Santinello, Vieno, & Dallago, 2004), and children (Prezza & Pacilli, 2007).

Another important area of study and intervention embraced by Italian CP is *community participation*, which has been studied in terms of its effects on well being (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007; Vieno, Nation, Perkins, & Santinello, 2007), its definition (Lavanco, 2001; Gelli & Mannarini, 2007), and its antecedents (Marta, Rossi, & Boccacin, 1998). Related to participation, the promotion of *sociopolitical empowerment* is one of the most promising foci for the development of CP theory, research, and practice in Italy (see Francescato et al., 2007).

## APPLIED COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY IN ITALY

The most important areas of intervention in which community psychologists in Italy are closely engaged include: health education and promotion, social cohesion, urban safety, social integration of immigrants, policies to support families and young people, and participation.

### Education and Health Promotion

CP represents a key resource for those concerned with prevention, education, and health promotion. Many examples of health education in the schools (Antonietti & Croce, 2007), health promotion in the workplace, and prevention of youth problems and dependencies are based on the development of competencies, citizens' voice and choice in decisions and informed and active citizenship, and community intervention using models from CP (Dors-Piemonte Region,<sup>2</sup> Healthy City Network<sup>3</sup>). CP principles have also been applied to home care interventions in mental health, assistance for the elderly, and chronic illnesses. An interesting example is the experience of Micro-areas by the Trieste<sup>4</sup> ASL (Local Health Authorities), which has its roots in the psychiatric reforms of Franco Basaglia.

### Cohesion and Social Integration

Revitalizing human relationships and dialogue between citizens and institutions, injecting more trust, and promoting and sustaining programs

of collaboration are fundamental if we are to break out of the vicious cycles of impotence, delegating to institutions, detaching ourselves from the place where we live and improve the quality of co-existence that we create there (Signani, 2006). Thus, *social cohesion and integration, inclusion, and urban safety* are areas of growing interest for applied CP in Italy. The contribution that community psychologists can bring to integration with foreigners in the workplace, in schools, and in territorial contexts (local communities) can be especially important for favoring livable, sustainable, and equitable forms of co-existence (see examples in Bologna,<sup>5</sup> Rome,<sup>6</sup> and Turin<sup>7</sup>).

### Social Policies

Affirming the principal of solidarity in social policies, in its vertical and horizontal dimensions, brings a strong focus on community, its potentialities and resources, and its necessities. Strategies of community building and development are increasingly used in the area of policies to support families (Pozzobon, Baccichetto, & Gheller, 2005) in terms of the needs of daily life (see the experience of Emilia-Romagna's family centers<sup>8</sup> and projects in the provinces of Padua and Venice<sup>9</sup>), in youth policies (Monza's "Spazio Giovani" Cooperative<sup>10</sup>), in projects of urban regeneration and re-qualification of public residential construction (e.g., Turin Neighborhood contracts<sup>11</sup>), or community social mediation (e.g., Modena's "Mediando" Cooperative<sup>12</sup>).

### Participation

Participation, collaboration, and sense of community are processes and experiences that cannot be determined "by law" and cannot be managed bureaucratically, but should be promoted, supported, and evaluated through adequate models, instruments, and competencies. Processes of social participation, in varying contexts, are of great interest to CP both for research (motivations, effects, evaluations) and for planning and facilitating the processes themselves. Furthermore, nowadays participation is called for as a way of developing *integrated health plans* (Tuscan Region<sup>13</sup>) as part of Area Plans, to confront many problems on the local level. At the same time, however, participation is an instrument to promote, support, and develop community competencies (see, e.g., the work of Ivrea's IN.RE.Te Consortium<sup>14</sup>).

## THIS ISSUE

The Italian CP literature stresses the importance of collaboration and participation. For example, the article by Prezza et al. both reviews interventions promoting child independent mobility in their neighborhood and evaluates a particular program called "We go to school alone" in two Roman districts

and found that the participation and support of local government and service organizations is at least as important as children's and parents' support.

The article by Palareti and Berti summarizes a research plan for the evaluation of child and adolescent residential communities based on the theoretical framework of developmental psychopathology and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. In this case, stakeholders are involved in the design and implementation of evaluative research.

The article by Dallago et al. is at the same time typical of Italian applied school-based prevention research but also innovative in its participatory action-research methodology and attention to community-level changes. The Adolescents, Life Context & School project is described, evaluated, and found to increase children's civic responsibility and activity and led to real improvements in the neighborhood and school and to the creation of a local youth council.

Another face of participation is the article by Zani and Cicognani, which presents an evaluation of the participatory process in Local Plans for Health in Italy. Such Plans actively engage community members in collaborative decision making over health promotion interventions.

So there is a growing need for experts capable of participatory interventions acting as social catalysts to promote local well being and social empowerment.

The work of Arcidiacono et al. presents guidelines for all social and community actors on the acquisition of participatory planning tools. Individual and group empowerment training methods, including the creation of a virtual learning community, are illustrated and tested.

Illustrating the complete breadth of academic and applied CP in Italy is beyond the scope of this issue, but these few examples demonstrate that the current and future prospects of Italian CP could not be brighter.

## NOTES

1. For a more detailed history of the development of community psychology in Italy, see Francescato, Arcidiacono, Albanesi, and Mannarini (2007).

2. [www.dors.it](http://www.dors.it)

3. [www.retecittasane.it](http://www.retecittasane.it)

4. [www.retecivica.trieste.it](http://www.retecivica.trieste.it); [www.ass1.sanita.fvg.it](http://www.ass1.sanita.fvg.it); [www.triesteabile.it/voglioinformarmi/serviziosociosanitari/ass/microaree/](http://www.triesteabile.it/voglioinformarmi/serviziosociosanitari/ass/microaree/)

5. [www.provincia.bologna.it](http://www.provincia.bologna.it)

6. [www.comune.roma.it](http://www.comune.roma.it)

7. [www.comune.torino.it](http://www.comune.torino.it)

8. [www.emiliaromagnasociale.it/wcm/emiliaromagnasociale/home/famiglia/centri.htm](http://www.emiliaromagnasociale.it/wcm/emiliaromagnasociale/home/famiglia/centri.htm)

9. [www.martiniassociati.it](http://www.martiniassociati.it)

10. [www.spaziogiovani.it](http://www.spaziogiovani.it)

11. [www.comune.milano.it](http://www.comune.milano.it)

12. [www.mediantoweb.it](http://www.mediantoweb.it)

13. [www.regione.toscana.it](http://www.regione.toscana.it)

14. [www.inrete.to.it](http://www.inrete.to.it)

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