

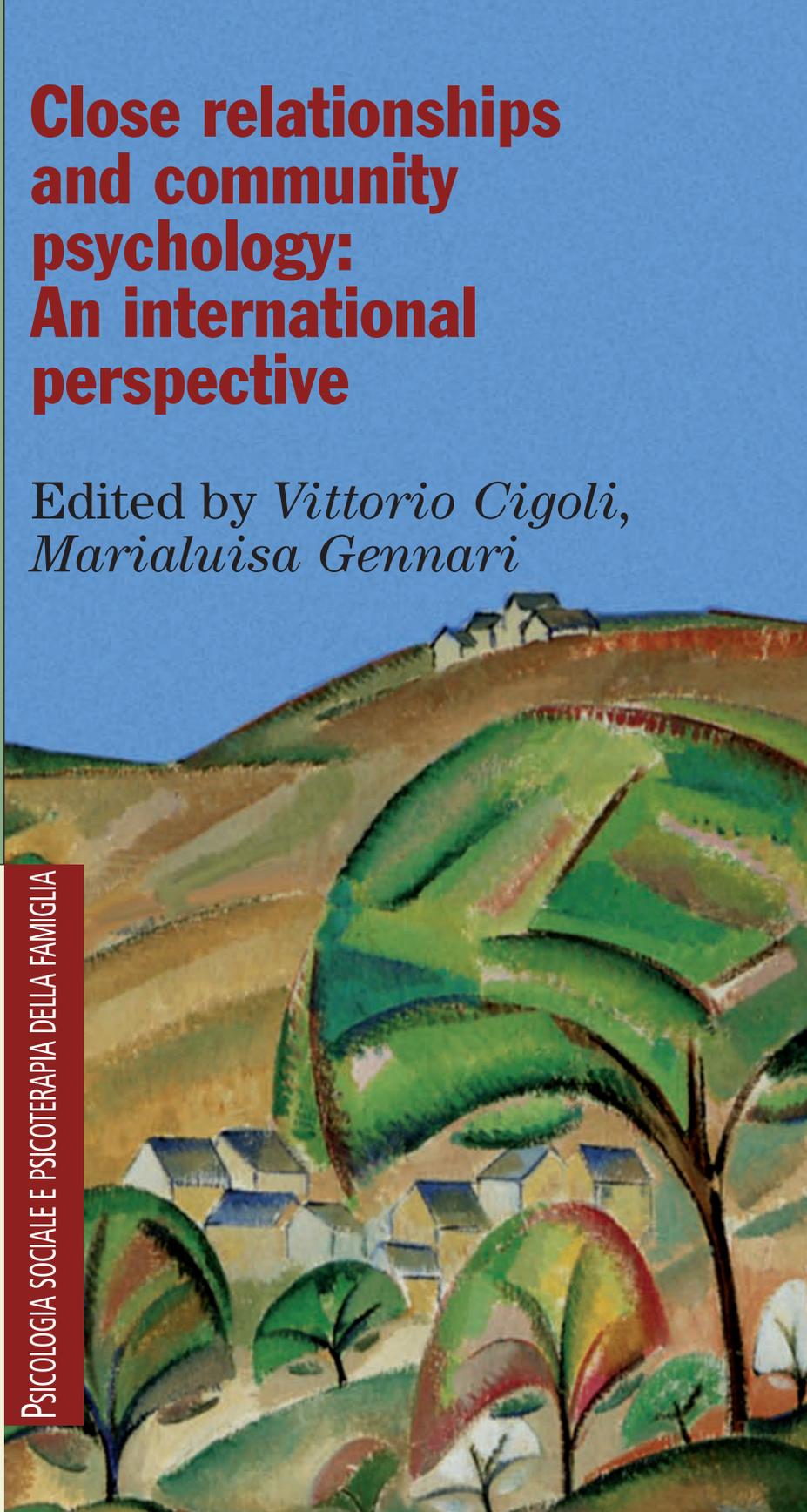
FrancoAngeli

Collana diretta da Vittorio Cigoli ed Eugenia Scabini

PSICOLOGIA SOCIALE E PSICOTERAPIA DELLA FAMIGLIA

Close relationships and community psychology: An international perspective

Edited by *Vittorio Cigoli,
Marialuisa Gennari*



Collana di psicologia sociale e psicoterapia della famiglia, diretta da Vittorio Cigoli ed Eugenia Scabini

Gli psicologi sociali che studiano i piccoli gruppi stanno oggi spostando sempre più la loro attenzione dall'analisi di gruppi artificiali, condotta quindi in laboratorio, all'analisi dei gruppi cosiddetti "naturali" o reali nel tentativo di realizzare una vera ricerca sul campo che possa fornire alle urgenti quanto concrete problematiche sociali un supporto scientifico costruito con rigorose metodologie. Le riflessioni e le ricerche condotte sul gruppo familiare rappresentano il corpus più ricco, fervido e consistente in questa direzione, tanto da costituire ormai un vero e proprio settore con dignità di disciplina autonoma denominato "psicologia sociale della famiglia".

La collana si propone di rendere noti i risultati più salienti, gli sviluppi dei quadri concettuali e le novità di intervento terapeutico che man mano vengono ottenuti in questo campo. Entrano nel suo ambito sia le ricerche sull'interazione familiare sia quelle relative alle varie fasi dello sviluppo della famiglia ("ciclo di vita") che coinvolgono i bisogni di stabilità e quelli di trasformazione del sistema stesso. La terapia, in questo contesto, risulta essere un modo, non solo di intervenire, ma anche di comprendere le relazioni familiari: da essa, dunque, possono emergere utili indicazioni di ricerca. La collana si rivolge ai ricercatori, studiosi di discipline psicologiche e, più in generale, a cultori di scienze umane e sociali direttamente interessati alle problematiche familiari; è diretta infine agli operatori, amministratori e responsabili dei vari servizi che trattano con la famiglia.

Tutti i volumi della collana sono sottoposti a referaggio.

I lettori che desiderano informarsi sui libri e le riviste da noi pubblicati possono consultare il nostro sito Internet: www.francoangeli.it e iscriversi nella home page al servizio "Informatemi" per ricevere via e-mail le segnalazioni delle novità.

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Progetto svolto nell'ambito dell'accordo tra Regione Lombardia e Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore per la sperimentazione di iniziative finalizzate a incrementare l'attrattività del territorio lombardo e la valorizzazione del capitale umano.

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CONTENTS

About the Authors	pag.	7
Introduction, <i>Vittorio Cigoli</i>	»	9

Part I - Community and family

How therapists view stepfamilies: An analysis of Italians clinicians' representations, <i>Scott W. Browning, Monica Accordini, Marialuisa Gennari and Vittorio Cigoli</i>	»	15
Between projects and regrets: Social network maps of three young female immigrants, <i>Carlos E. Sluzki, Marialuisa Gennari and Monica Accordini</i>	»	34
Emotionally informed mediation. Processing grief and setting boundaries in divorce, <i>Robert E. Emery, Davide Margola, Marialuisa Gennari and Vittorio Cigoli</i>	»	54
Mediación Familiar y cuidado de los vínculos. Un análisis empírico del modelo Relacional-Simbólico, <i>María Isabel González Jaramillo, Giancarlo Tamanza y Sara Molgora</i>	»	65
Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following childbirth, <i>Klaas Wjima, Emanuela Saita and Valentina Fenaroli</i>	»	83

Part II - Civic engagement

What our words say about us. The effects of writing and language, <i>James W. Pennebaker, Federica Facchin and Davide Margola</i>	»	103
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What do sustain our will to volunteer? A cross-cultural Italian and Spanish comparison, <i>María Luisa Vecina, Elena Marta, Maura Pozzi and Daniela Marzana</i>	pag. 118
La parole et le geste. Analyse de processus dans un groupe de parole pour des enfants en rupture de liens, <i>Marie Simon, Costanza Marzotto et Iliaria Montanari</i>	» 133
Inmigración, deporte y ciudadanía: una investigación participativa en Barcelona y Milán, <i>Ricardo Sánchez Martín y Caterina Gozzoli</i>	» 147

**Part III - Family relationships:
an exchange between genders and generations**

The benefit of «stress and coping» research in couples for couple therapy, <i>Ashley K. Randall, Guy Bodenmann, Sara Molgora and Davide Margola</i>	» 169
Helping couples cope with cancer: A multi-focal clinical intervention, <i>Jennifer L. Scott, Giulio Costa and Davide Margola</i>	» 187
Violencia en las relaciones de pareja: un modelo de intervención para mujeres maltratadas, <i>Montserrat Davins P., Marialuisa Gennari y Giancarlo Tamanza</i>	» 202
Building better intimate relationships: Advances in linking basic research and preventive interventions, <i>Thomas N. Bradbury, Benjamin R. Karney, Raffaella Iafrate and Silvia Donato</i>	» 224
Therapeutic Assessment and epistemological triangulation, <i>Filippo Aschieri, Stephen E. Finn and Patrizia Bevilacqua</i>	» 241
Parental disrespect: The italian validation of a new measure of perceived parenting, <i>Claudia Manzi, Brian K. Barber, Camillo Regalia and Miriam Parise</i>	» 254
Tradução e adaptação ao contexto português da «Entrevista Clínica Geracional», <i>Fabrizia Raguso, Federica Facchin, Sara Molgora e Armanda Gonçalves</i>	» 265
Sintesi dei contributi in lingua italiana	» 277

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INTRODUCTION

The present volume is one of the products resulting from the scientific collaboration between the Lombardy Region and the Postgraduate School of Psychology “Agostino Gemelli”, Catholic University of Milan. In the wake of Gemelli’s generative idea, the Postgraduate School supports both training programs as well as international exchange projects based on research and commitment towards society and community. Accordingly, the Postgraduate School promotes a science characterized not only by methodological conscience, but also by responsibility towards human relationships.

It is within this theoretical framework that international exchanges should be considered. These exchanges are at the origin of the “Universitas” which spread throughout the world, starting from the Italian matrix. So, if these exchanges weaken in favor of “endogamic closure”, the very heart of the University would suffer.

How does such endogamic closure show itself? With the continuous expansion (“self-feeding”) of the legal-bureaucratic apparati whose aim is the normative control to be executed throughout laws, regulations and their constant revision, as well as with the privilege given to “academic familism” in its various forms. Moreover, both aspects of the “endogamic closure” threaten the *responsibility* of individuals and groups, as well as the acceptance of the risk embedded in the encounter with the other.

Among the products of the international exchanges, mentioned at the beginning of the present introduction, are several international seminars on the topics of this project, the presence of various clinical and psychosocial researchers coming from different European and non-European countries. These exchanges led to the creation of long-lasting relationships based on trust.

The languages in the present volume are English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Though it must be acknowledged that British and American English is the actual international language, it would be a mistake to

underestimate the contribute given by the Mediterranean culture. There is a very high risk of homologation (and cultural predominance), but the international exchange should be able to face this danger.

The “body” of the volume is articulated around three main topics.

The first one regards the *family-community relation*. This perspective integrates horizontal (networks, services) and vertical exchanges (different generations). Specifically, among the research topics are: therapists’ representations and attitudes towards stepfamilies, effects of migration on adolescents’ social networks, family mediation, especially following divorce, effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder following childbirth.

The second topic is that of *civic engagement*.

Two theoretical approaches have been used in this case: “stress and coping” on one side, “relational” on the other. This section particularly explores the effects of writing on adolescents’ personal and social reflexivity, compares Italy and Spain in terms of what represents a “secure base” for choosing to volunteer, analyzes the use of support groups for children of divorce and describes the function of sports as means of cultural and social integration.

The third topic regards the *exchange between genders and generations*. This is the distinctive field of “close relationships”. This section of the book could be further divided into two parts. The first part focuses on *preventive and support interventions* for couples and families and entails 4 contributions: the first analyzes the benefit of stress and coping research findings for couples in therapy, the second describes clinical interventions for couples coping with cancer, the third illustrates support interventions addressed to women who’ve been physically abused by their partners whereas the last one is focused on preventive interventions aimed at building better intimate relationships. The second part includes 3 contributions and it is devoted to *techniques and tools*. This is in fact the case of the use of “therapeutic assessment”, the validation of a scale on disrespect in the parents-children relationship, as well as the adaptation of the Clinical Intergenerational Interview in the Portuguese context. Specifically, this last tool has been developed by the research group of the Postgraduate School of Psychology and it is used with both members of the parenting couple jointly. The interview is also available in English and Spanish (www.vittoriocigoli.com).

Each contribution has a comprehensive summary in Italian, which is the “matrix language” collecting and “hosting” the others. Hence the text can be spread in our country as well as in other linguistic areas. The volume will be available for other Italian and foreign universities, libraries, Psychotherapy Schools, health and social Services. In fact, the “mission” of Catholic University is spreading culture.

As series director for the publisher Franco Angeli and responsible for the internationalization project together with Marialuisa Gennari and Roberto Brambilla of the Postgraduate Office of Catholic University, I would like to thank the Lombardy Region for the trust (which I hope we have deserved) and wish the volume good luck... waiting for the beginning of other amazing international exchange projects.

Vittorio Cigoli

PART I
COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

HOW THERAPISTS VIEW STEPFAMILIES: AN ANALYSIS OF ITALIANS CLINICIANS' REPRESENTATIONS

*Scott W. Browning, Monica Accordini, Marialuisa Gennari
and Vittorio Cigoli*

Introduction

According to the ISTAT, the Italian National Statistical Institute, second marriages have increased together with civil unions over the past decade (ISTAT, 2006; 2009).

It is estimated that more than 5% of all households in our country are stepfamily households, in some big northern cities such as Milan and Turin the percentage becomes much higher with peaks that reach 20% (ISTAT 2006; 2007). In Italy there are about 555 thousand remarried families, 43,8% (243 thousand) of whom without cohabiting children, 35,9% (199 thousand) with children born from the current union, 11,2% (62 thousand) with biological children of only one partner and 9,1% (51 thousand) so called “complex” stepfamilies, with children born from both the previous and the current marriage (EURES, 2006).

Stepfamilies are reported to have a more ambiguous, blurred and confused identity if compared to first married families. This is true especially in Italy where stepfamilies are a relatively new phenomenon that has only recently started to be studied and analyzed.

Remarried families, both in Italy and in most countries around the world, lack clear norms and regulations, social and cultural models, as well as a legal statute to discipline relationships among their members (Gambini, 2007).

Despite the large number of articles and television programs, there are still only a few scientific publications on the topic of reconstituted families (among the others: Arace, 2009; Bianca *et al.*, 2006; Cigoli, 2002; Ercolani, Francescato, 1994; Mazzoni, 2002). It has also to be reported that most of the publications and reportages are aimed to reach a broad audience and therefore can be defined as popular and not scientific.

A review of the Italian literature showed the presence of only ten books entirely dedicated to stepfamilies and steprelationships; seven of the books are based on clinical impressions of expert therapists and only three also include a research, where hypotheses and clinical beliefs are empirically tested¹. As far as the articles are concerned, only six Italian articles have appeared in scientific journals over the past five years, four of them encompassing a clinical (not empirical) view of the phenomenon being studied.

This situation has been replicated in most Western countries, in fact there are only a few psychological programs specifically geared to address remarried families. Starting from the 1980s, both clinicians and researchers have stressed that even though nuclear families and stepfamilies might look alike, they present several key differences and that addressing step issues with instruments and techniques used in common family therapy leads to more distress and frustration both on the family and on the therapist's side (Browning, 1994; Bray, Browning, 2007; Browning, Collins, Nelson, 2006; Visher, Visher, Pasley, 1997). In fact, often methods and information appropriate to nuclear families can be destructive if applied to the highly specific dynamics of stepfamily systems. Still, the clinical as well as the empirical literature on the topic lacks studies on therapeutic interventions with stepfamilies.

A review of the American literature in 1994 identified only nine studies on stepfamily interventions (Lawton, Sanders, 1994). A follow-up in 2007 acknowledged the presence of twenty published study, plus one in press (Nicholson *et al.*, 2008; Whitton, Nicholson, Markman, 2008). 86% of the programs under study were preventive, in other words, they were specifically addressed to non-clinical families and did not include families whose members were having psychological problems. The evaluations of such interventions were strongly biased due to methodological problems both in the sample selection as well as in the evaluation procedures (Elliot, 1997; Pasley *et al.*, 1996; Rhoden, Pasley, 2000).

One aspect of the research literature that has had a particularly negative effect of the validation of effective clinical interventions with stepfamilies is called the Whoozle effect. A Whoozle effect (Ganong, Coleman, 1986) is observed when a finding presented in a study is subsequently reported in following studies without being verified.

An other problem in stepfamily literature is that not only do we know little about what kind of interventions therapists perform with these kind of families, but we know nothing about the therapists' view in respect to such interventions.

1. These numbers refer to Italian books, not to foreign books that have been translated into Italian.

In synthesis, not only stepfamilies seem to be a relevant population that has been paid only little attention, there is also an enormous gap between clinical reality and scientific research, as the increasing number of remarried families asking for help is not balanced by a parallel increase in the number of researches and published papers. In sum, not only we know little about the characteristics of Italian stepfamilies, and are forced to make assumptions on the basis of the American and British literature, we also know nothing about the people who are treating them, their thoughts, ideas, opinions, theoretical orientation as well as the beliefs, attitudes they hold towards this family typology.

Aims

The present research can be viewed as an attempt to fill in the above mentioned gap between research and clinical practice with remarried families as well as to start a dialogue and fruitful discussion between clinicians and researchers so that everybody can gain a greater knowledge and be able to provide a useful service for families in need. Not only have we noticed that stepfamilies deserve specific help and attention, we also know that therapists can be more successful and satisfied if they learn more about stepfamilies and their dynamics. This not only means being aware of the specific problems remarried families face and the most useful techniques of intervention, it also means being able to recognize one's emotions, ideas, bias and representations regarding this type of families. This paper reports the findings of a subsection of a larger research project. In particular, the findings reported here flow from studying and analyzing therapists' representations about remarried families starting from the answers given to five open ended questions.

In particular, this contribution aims to:

1. investigate the representations Italian clinicians have about stepfamilies (strengths, resources, limitations, problems, ...) and understand the elements – basic concepts – on which such representations are founded;
2. determine whether the elements – concepts – that constitute the therapists' representation are specific to stepfamilies or are instead broader concepts that also apply to other family typologies;
3. understand which are the resources therapists utilize in their clinical practice with remarried families.

Participants

125 Italian therapists took part in this research project, 34.4% (43) of them were males and 65.6% (82) females. The only inclusion criteria was to have had at least one stepfamily², or stepfamily member, as a client in therapy.

All Italian licensed psychotherapy schools (N = 251) were contacted via e-mail, if a school had more than one seat, all seats were contact separately for a total number of 329 seats contacted³. Schools were asked to provide the names of up to five psychotherapists willing to take part to a research project on stepfamily therapy; in the end, 153 schools took part to the research (drop out rate = 46.5%), providing from 1 to 3 psychotherapists name each, for a total of 125 psychotherapists.

The 125 therapists were then sent a brief questionnaire via e-mail an asked to fill it in.

Instrument

Clinicians taking part to the research project were asked to fill in a brief questionnaire comprising two parts: the first part collects the therapist's structural data (age, gender, training, theoretical orientation), the second part includes five open-ended questions reported in the box below.

1. *Please list the first five words that come to your mind when you think of your work with stepfamilies.*
2. *Which are the most interesting aspects of working with stepfamilies?*
3. *What personal and professional characteristics can you count on for you work with stepfamilies?*
4. *What are, in your opinion, the stepfamily characteristics that facilitate the clinical work?*
5. *What are, in your opinion, the stepfamily characteristics that hinder the clinical work?*

2. The following definition for stepfamily was adopted: a married or cohabiting couple in which at least one of the partners had been previously married and had had a child from the previous relationship, the child must live at least for one third of the year with the new couple (NSRC, 2007).

3. The complete list of Italian licensed psychotherapy schools updated to 2009 is available on the website of the Ministry of University and Research (www.miur.it).

Data analyses: from raw data to categories (T-LAB)

For the scopes of the present article, a content analysis⁴ was first performed on the answers given to the five open-ended questions to detect general categories from raw data, subsequently text analysis for the extraction and mapping of contexts was performed on such categories throughout the software T-LAB 4.1.1 PRO⁵.

The total number of answers given by the therapists was 1837. The coding process – performed on all the variables considered – generated a list of 120 categories (for specific details regarding the number of answers given to each question and the number of categories found see table 1).

Tab. 1 - Number of answers and categories

Question	Answers	Categories*
1	612	32
2	172	24
3	446	35
4	301	23
5	306	37

* If the total number of categories is computed by adding all the categories identified for each question, the total would surpass 120, this is because some categories occur more than once across different questions.

Each of the 120 categories was then classified as specific or unspecific; specific categories include all the words and concepts that can be considered as typical and peculiar characteristics of remarried families. A category was considered specific if references to the concepts it underlay were found in at least 10 scientific articles or books about stepfamilies.

4. Content analysis is generally considered as an inductive approach to data examination, in fact it allows researchers to create categories starting directly from the data, thus not having an a priori hypothesis in mind. Such analysis draws its bases from grounded theory, this means that categories are created according to a bottom up, rather than a top down, approach (Mayring, 2000): the coder reads through the data and creates a new category each time he/she thinks to have found a different theme or topic.

5. T-LAB software is a linguistic and statistical tool for text analysis developed by Franco Lancia. In the present contribution T-LAB was chosen to analyze the therapists' answers because, while maintaining a strict adherence to the text and the words used by participants, it also uses a rigorous methodology that allows sophisticated analyses based on statistical elaborations of the data. T-LAB is in fact a text driven instrument which allows for significant themes and contents to emerge directly from the data (Lancia, 2004).