

On the Occasion of Renzo Canestrari's Ninetieth Birthday

On the occasion of Renzo Canestrari's ninetieth birthday, three of his first students, Anna Arfelli Galli who specializes in Developmental Psychology, Giuseppe Galli who specializes in General Psychology, and Giancarlo Trombini who specializes in Clinical Psychology, have chosen to revisit their early training in order to provide an insight into the character of the finest of teachers.



Anna Arfelli Galli

I met Renzo Canestrari in 1953 when I enrolled on his course of General Psychology at Bologna. I was a student in my third year of medicine and chose this optional course because it was my interest in how social environment affected development that had brought me to medicine in the first place. Consequently, the opportunity to hear a scholar talk about psychological problems was most welcome. The lessons were held just before lessons in Physiology, in the same lecture hall, which made starting the course even more convenient. Renzo Canestrari's lessons were interactive, and he asked us students to take part in discussions and add our comments. This was not to make the subject more attractive, but to force us to activate our naïve theories about everyday life, and to use them to solve the problems he presented us with, in particular those related to visual perception in *Gestalt* perspective. My reasons for staying in contact with him were certainly related to the issues he dealt with and the way he presented them and his way of relating to others whether patients, collaborators or students. So, in 1957, I did

my medical thesis with him, and, three years later, I completed my post-graduate studies in nervous and mental illness.

For my degree dissertation, Canestrari had me read *Die Reaktionen des Säuglings auf das menschliche Gesicht* by E. Kaila (1932) on the infant's perception of the human face. Later, as a post-graduate student, he introduced me to *Anfänge der Charakterentwicklung*, by R. Meili (1957) on the importance of genetic endowment, and to *La première année de la vie de l'enfant* by R. Spitz (1958). Giuseppe Galli and I were given the job of translating these last two works for the Editrice Fiorentina; Renzo Canestrari was always careful to look out for paid work for his students given that academic research was unpaid. I mention these three books because, apart from their influence on my work, they show clearly the theoretical framework of development within which, even then, my teacher was thinking and working. His attention was equally divided between genetics and environment. His focus was always on the mother-child relationship seen as a dynamic organization that can be studied clinically and experimentally. When working and talking with Renzo Canestrari, the debate was never about ideologies, although these need careful study, but about what was actually in front of us. Canestrari took a phenomenological approach to “encountered reality”, to use Metzger's terminology.

His respectful, open approach to others, which we, his students, encountered daily, characterized his anthropological vision and was transmitted in his study of those with psychological problems. Amongst his many contributions to social services in the Province of Bologna, Renzo Canestrari organized family type homes to deinstitutionalize the approach to looking after children in care. Under his guidance, Augusto Palmonari and I set up family-groups in Imola (BO) for children who were orphans or who were in difficulty: a job I continued to do, after moving to Macerata, for the Istituto Psicopedagogico at Montelparo (AP). When I began teaching at the University of Macerata, I adopted the style of my teacher, working with collaborators and students in small groups and organizing laboratories to make teaching a dynamic interaction between the problems presented and the naïve theories active in the real life of those in training. I hope these few lines suffice to describe how far ahead of his time Canestrari was in presenting his vision of developmental psychology at a time when biological and mechanistic notions dominated. His is a vision that is now widely shared.

Giuseppe Galli

In an interview he gave in 1988, Canestrari said: ‘I never put myself forward as a “Teacher”, but rather as a companion – a bit older and a bit more experienced, a fellow traveller. Rather than a “leader”, I have been a “partner” [...] In a word, in preference to shaping students, I felt I had to offer them opportunities for

learning which became more focused as the students became less timid and more convinced of their chosen specializations and their interests, explorations, readings and, finally, their research. [...] In order to encourage students who were beginning their research, I periodically organized seminars in which different working hypotheses and experimental observations could be analysed by prestigious scholars (Musatti, Metelli, Kanizsa, Metzger, Witte, Rausch, were often guests at Bologna breathing life into an extremely fruitful community).'

In my case, Canestrari enthusiastically encouraged me to build an extremely productive scholarly relationship with Wolfgang Metzger. At the very beginning of my training, he gave me a copy of *Psychologie* that became, in a way, my 'Bible'; he also encouraged me to take part in the seminars that Metzger held in different parts of Italy, including Bologna. This 'modus operandi' adopted by Canestrari appeared to me to be governed by two fundamental elements: respect and trust. Respect shown in his patience to wait for the students to mature and recognize what field they want to dedicate themselves to. The trust of the teacher who has faith in the students' earnestness and dedication and awaits with sincere candour the results of their research in order to evaluate their work. The respect and trust shown by Canestrari are connected to his anthropological vision, a vision imbued with benevolence. Canestrari's benevolence is that of a person whose first reaction on meeting another is to value them and desire to help them grow, whose reaction is neither fearful nor judgemental. His approach to research is not self-sufficient and exclusive but open to a multiplicity of views. In the early years of my training, I saw this approach as too eclectic and I told him so. His courteous reply was: 'It may well be, but we still know so little about how man grows.' His vision, which I would define, as Meili does, as 'productive pluralism', is an inheritance that influenced my academic career and one for which I am profoundly grateful.

Giancarlo Trombini

In 1962, I became Canestrari's assistant. The professor, on giving me the task of examining my first cohort of medical students from the University of Bologna, described the two risks that a young lecturer ran. The first was that of feeling too close to the students and becoming too lenient, the other was to coldly set oneself at a distance and adopt an attitude of severity in order to defend one's new role. The professor set out these two reference systems as those that would impede the emergence of the lecturer-trainer who, during the match, supports, encourages, evaluates. From the early days of my training, I have always been attracted by the idea of a system of reference where centring emerges and relationships are established. I know that Canestrari, with his advice, was the person who, very early on, brought this theme to my attention and encouraged its natural development in the field of General and Clinical Psychology. At that time, research in General Psychology favoured perceptible phenomena. Within

this environment, I felt compelled to study the tolerance of identity in its diverse figural transformations and set up the specific technique of stroboscopic movement of transformation. This gave rise to the invaluable chance to collaborate with the school of Metzger. At the same time, the great appeal that psychotherapy held for me appeared to be separate from my research into perception. It was Canestrari, an excellent clinical psychologist, who helped me to understand that the transformations analysed in the gestalt psychology of perception could be understood as a metaphor and also as an approach to the attempt to decipher the aspect of change involved in psychotherapeutic transformation and the limits of acceptable change. These considerations encouraged me to learn more about the connections between Gestalt Psychology and Psychoanalysis. Lewin's Field Theory, adopted by Psychoanalysis, motivated me to consider the field in which the child develops and battles to express itself. In 1962, I drew up the idea of Focal Play Therapy for childhood psychosomatic illnesses of protest involving food and bowel movements. Offering changes in the reference system can change the meaning of interpersonal relations and bring about behavioural change. The technique involves play because a child's language is not made up principally of words, but of action. Canestrari, a shrewd pioneer in the application of clinical psychology in psychosomatic disturbances, welcomed this new technique. It was a technique that, unlike the dominant notions of the day, did not place the greatest emphasis on the interpretation of the therapist, and Canestrari encouraged me to go to conferences to push for its recognition. It is with deep affection that I continue to remember the teacher Canestrari. I am moved by the memory of him walking by my side when I was a young researcher, going with me himself into the departments of the foremost teaching universities to set up and consolidate research projects involving collaboration between clinical psychology and medicine. My gratitude is newly present every day.

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