

# Counseling in Italy

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The counseling profession in Italy is in an early stage of development. No university preparation programs exist, and counselors are not employed in schools. Counselors maintain private practices, work in agencies, and are employed by the government. Counselors receive their preparation in Italy from professional associations in programs that include 450 to 500 hours of instruction. The social and political climate in Italy suggests that the profession of counseling will continue to develop.

The counseling profession in Italy is in a very early stage of development. Even though there are counselors practicing in Italy, currently, there are no university academic programs at any level for the preparation. Professional counselor associations in Italy offer counselor preparation programs and issue certificates of completion. A typical program might be 3 years in duration and might include 450 to 500 hours of instruction. Professional counselor associations have existed for less than 10 years in Italy and tend to be centered on theoretical orientations or models of counseling. In contrast to counseling professional associations in the United States, very little energy seems to be devoted by these associations to advancing the profession of counseling in Italy.

Professions in Italy are regulated by the national government, which is different from the system used in the United States, where professions are regulated by state governments. The national government of Italy does not regulate the profession of counseling, but counseling has recently been listed as an unregulated profession (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro [CNEL; National Council for Economy and Labor], 2005), meaning the counseling profession is at least acknowledged as existing by the government. Psychologists in Italy are opposed to recognition of or regulation of counseling as a profession. The Italian government is currently considering reforming the laws related to professional regulation, and counselors are hopeful that this reform movement could lead to counseling being more fully accepted.

Italian schools, as elsewhere in Europe, emphasize academics and do not employ counselors or offer counseling services. Aides sometimes are employed in schools to mainstream students with special needs, but there are no career, personal, or academic counselors in Italian schools.

Increasing numbers of persons in Italy have studied counseling theories and practices. Individuals who have completed counselor training from an association and identify themselves as counselors might have the equivalent of a high school education or may hold a university degree. A large number of counselors in Italy have the equivalent of bachelor's degrees in pedagogy or philosophy of education, and some are physicians or psychologists who have an interest in the humanistic orientation of the counseling movement.

It is interesting that Italians have adopted the English word *counselor* rather than using an Italian word equivalent. The English word *counselor* became the accepted title because a proper translation to Italian with the same meaning could not be found.

## Description of Italy

To understand the development of the profession of counseling in Italy, one may find it helpful to have a perspective on the history of the country and a basic understanding of the people who live there. The Roman Empire was a unifying factor more than 2 millennia ago; however, modern Italy, which dates from only 1860, is a very new nation (Greenspun, 2006). Italy sits in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, with the Balkans and Greece to the east, Spain and France to the west, and Africa barely off its southern coast. The richness of its economic and cultural life has made the peninsula a crossroads, as well as an object of contention, among various outside powers over the centuries. Of course, the social needs and the resulting development of counseling in Italy are profoundly influenced by location, history, peoples, religious heritage, culture, politics, and living conditions.

With a population of more than 58 million persons on 116,000 square miles of land, much of it mountainous, Italy is very densely populated. There are approximately 500 persons per square mile (WorldAtlas.Com, 2009) compared with 80 persons per square mile in the United States. Despite its low numbers of immigrants, like most political entities in the world, Italy is not homogeneous. Instead, the country is populated with groups of people who vary substantially in values, in way of life, and in dealing with today's challenges. Understandably, then, the profession of counseling is developing along different lines in the various regions of Italy.

## Emergence of Counseling in Italy

The counseling profession has been slower to develop in Italy than it has in the United States. Italy differs from the United States in many ways, and certainly these differences have affected the pattern of growth of the profession of counseling

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in Italy. Italian families continue to be very close and strong. Typically, children live in their parents' homes in Italy until they complete college and leave to get married (Cook & Furstenberg, 2002). Many homes in Italy house three or four generations. Furthermore, the incidence of suicide in Italy is quite low. In 1999, 14 out of 100,000 people committed suicide per year in Italy, whereas the rate in the United States was 22 out of 100,000 (World Health Organization, 2003). Also, although some substance abuse problems do exist in Italy, the incidence is very low compared with that of the United States. In 1978, Italy adopted a public policy that transferred the care of persons with mental illnesses from institutions to the community. There was a particular need for mental health professionals after the closure of psychiatric hospitals in 1978, which opened the door to social workers and professional educators to begin providing counseling-related services.

For various reasons, in Italy, there are many counseling associations. First, counseling is a new profession that was only recently recognized among the unregulated professions. The absence of government standards and regulation has led to each professional organization creating its own standards regarding the preparation of counselors and the practice of counseling. Another reason so many associations exist could be that Italians are very individualistic. This seems like a caricature, but evidence can be found in the political world in the dozens of political parties and organizations. Frequently, when one leader disagrees with the party to which he or she belongs, a new party is created. The same happens with professional associations in every field in Italy.

The following are the major Italian counseling associations:

- SICO (Società Italiana Counseling [Italian Society of Counseling]) has approximately 700 members and 60 affiliated schools ([www.sicoitalia.it](http://www.sicoitalia.it)).
- FAIP (Federazione delle Associazioni Italiane di Psicoterapia [Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Associations]) has approximately 550 members and 50 affiliated schools ([www.faipnet.it](http://www.faipnet.it)).
- CNCP (Coordinamento Nazionale Counsellor Professionisti [National Coordination of Professional Counselors]) is a federation of 70 counseling schools ([www.counsellingcnpc.org](http://www.counsellingcnpc.org)).
- REICO (Registro Italiano di Counseling [Italian Registry of Counseling]) has approximately 145 members ([www.associazionereico.it](http://www.associazionereico.it)).
- AICO (Associazione Italiana Counseling [Italian Counseling Association]), a Gestalt-oriented group, was established in 1993 and changed its name to AICo Federazione Nazionale [AICo National Federation] in 2007. AICo Federazione Nazionale includes approximately 300 counselors and has approximately 20 counseling schools affiliated with it ([www.aicocounseling.it](http://www.aicocounseling.it)).

- ANCORE (Associazione Nazionale Counselor Relazionale [National Association of Relational Counselors]) is a small association affiliated with FAIP that accepts as members only university graduates ([www.ancore.net](http://www.ancore.net)).
- SICOOL (Società Italiana Counselor e Operatori Olistici [Italian Society of Holistic Counselors and Operators]), with 300 members, is slightly different from the others because its members are professionals in the holistic field and integrate in counseling sessions mind–body and holistic techniques, such as shiatsu, ayurvedic massages, Bach flowers (see <http://www.bachcentre.com>), Reiki, yoga, and meditation ([www.sicool.it](http://www.sicool.it)).

Representatives from some of the counseling associations in Italy are currently exploring the possibility of creating a national counselor certification process through the National Board for Certified Counselors International ([www.nbccinternational.org](http://www.nbccinternational.org)).

## Current Status of Counseling in Italy

Counselors in Italy are generally self-employed. A large number of them are psychologists and psychotherapists who are also counselors. In recent years, professional educators, social workers, teachers, and other professionals have completed the training to become counselors. These counselors were attracted to the field by the possibility of helping people through a one-to-one relationship. In addition, there is a demand for professionals in Italy who do not focus on mental illness but provide services to people who want to be listened to, want to find their own way to change their lifestyle, or want to deal more effectively with their insecurities. The counseling process is attractive to people who feel trapped in the rhythm and fast pace of modern life and who have become insecure because of the quick changes within society's rules. Also, significant immigration in Italy has resulted in Italians coming into contact with persons whose different values and habits challenge the status quo of what was once a relatively homogeneous society, bringing discomfort and confusing the cultural identity of many Italians.

At this time, there is no official study on the number of counselors practicing in Italy. Officially, there are approximately 4,000 members listed in the national associations and federations, but unofficially, the number could be nearly 10,000 because there are many small associations as well as nonaffiliated individuals. Counselors are spread all over Italy and are almost equally divided between the North, Center, and South, with perhaps a slight prevalence in the North.

Until very recently, counselors could not be hired in public agencies because the profession is not regulated by the national government. Nevertheless, with a recent liberalization in the work market, counselors can be hired by the government as self-employed professionals for specific projects. Professional educators and social workers, many of whom are now counselors, have the professional qualifications required to work in public

jobs. Sometimes counselors are hired because they are professional educators or social workers, and, once they gain entry into an organization, they introduce the counseling approach and philosophy to the workplace. More and more, in institutions, schools, and companies, counselors are involved in teams with other professionals, such as psychologists and psychiatrists.

### Philosophy

The philosophy of counseling in Italy is reflected partially in the description of the job of the social worker (*assistente sociale*), which is to help and assist people to develop and use their own personal skills in facing the challenges and problems in their environment. The philosophy of counseling in Italy is also found in the word *education*, which comes from the Latin word *ex-ducere* and means to *take out* the resources of a person and *bring to the light* what is obscure or obscured.

Counselors in Italy come from fields such as psychotherapy, medicine, or education, but their philosophy is the same. The Italian National Council of Work and Economy has adopted the following definition of a counselor: “The counselor is a professional who, after a 3-year training program of a specific school of theoretical orientation, can help to solve some existential difficulty that does not need a deep reorganization of personality” (CNEL, 2005, p. 93). Counselors provide a relationship of orientation and support that activates the inner resources of clients, making them aware of the possibilities available to them to solve their own problems. Counselors help to change the point of view of their clients through empathy, acceptance, and a nonjudgmental attitude. Following the guidelines of the Italian Ministry of Health for a healthy lifestyle, counselors create programs and projects for the prevention of social problems and discomfort.

### Counseling Services

Counseling is applied in different settings in Italy, such as private practices, community agencies, schools, hospitals, prisons, companies, and universities. The common ground for counselors is the focus on empathy and interpersonal relationships. Counselors organize projects and manage educational and training programs for individuals, couples, families, groups, communities, and industries.

### Counselor Preparation

There are no university programs for counselors in Italy. There are counseling or counseling-related classes in a few university programs in psychology and science of education programs, but there is no degree in counseling. The University of Siena offers a master’s degree program in which relationship counseling (i.e., training on emotional-communication-relational skills) is taught, and this might be the only master’s-level program in Italy that approximates counselor education graduate programs in the United States.

As noted earlier, there are several different training schools in Italy that are affiliated with national associations and pre-

pare counselors for the profession. The minimum qualification to enroll in some schools is a high school diploma. Other schools require a university degree for enrollment. However, allowing individuals with high school diplomas to receive counselor training complies with European regulations on the matter of professions. The European Union has recently promoted the idea of university students having field-based internships as a part of their educational programs. As a result, universities in Italy were reformed, and the former 5-year bachelor’s degree was replaced with a 3-year bachelor’s degree, which might be followed by a master’s degree that would include some field-based experiences.

Models and techniques of counseling in Italy come from the models that exist in psychotherapy (psychoanalysis, systemic-family therapy, existential phenomenology, cognitive behavioral). The training for a counselor in Italy includes

- theory that follows the referring model or orientation of the school,
- techniques of intervention,
- practical training (simulation, role-playing, etc.),
- personal development (individual or group training), and
- supervision.

Generally, after an exam at the end of the program, the student is awarded a certificate from the school. If the school is affiliated with a national association, the certificate is issued by that association. These certificates are private and are not equal to a university degree or a governmental license to practice.

## The Future of Counseling in Italy

Counseling will become more important in the next years in Italian society. It is difficult to predict how long the process will take, but certainly Italians need counseling more than in the past and the demand for counseling is increasing. The rapid changes in Italian society in the last 10 to 15 years have created a climate of uncertainty and insecurity in the population.

A basic challenge for Italians comes from the transition from an apparently homogeneous to a multicultural society. The pressures and consequences of migration and emigration in the post–World War II period were significant and today are still evident in the movement for employment from South to North and from rural areas to the cities (Cardamone, 1990). Recent immigration, although still well below the levels of several other European countries, has had a tremendous impact on Italy. Immigrants are often coming illegally from Africa, and there is an influx of persons from countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain, now members or soon-to-be members of the European Union.

The rapidly increasing and significant diversity of the population brings in to question what it means to be Italian. There are mixed feelings about the changes. On the one

hand, with one of the lowest birth rates in the world, Italy is substantially in need of immigrant workers. Also, Italians in general are sensitive to the plight of immigrants, having only recently been a country that experienced families being split as members moved to other countries to survive (including the United States). Nevertheless, integration is not easy. The intrinsic value of multiculturalism has to be learned and appreciated, and people must be equipped to dialogue with each other and coexist.

The people of Italy are challenged with many societal pressures that are in conflict with life as they have known it in past generations. These pressures also include the development of a more mobile society in which children are drawn to urban centers and away from their families of origin (Cardamone, 1990); a changing role for women from housekeeper and mother to working outside the home (BBC News, 2006); an increasing divorce rate (Povoledo, 2003); an influx of immigrants (Hamilton, 2003); an increase in the use of alcohol and illegal drugs (Poldrugo & Patussi, 1996); and movement away from the Catholic Church, yielding a more secularized society that has brought with it a higher rate of divorce and abortion (Thavis, 2004). As has occurred in the United States, the profession of counseling is developing in Italy to meet societal needs that are changing. People are looking to counselors to help them cope with the environments in which they find themselves living.

Mental health services for patients who are seriously mentally ill, persons who are developmentally disabled, and individuals with substance abuse problems are well developed in Italy as a part of the country's national health program, which is accessible to all citizens for a nominal fee. However, counseling services are generally not available to individuals who are not indigent, seriously mentally ill, developmentally disabled, or experiencing substance abuse problems. Few individuals who are mentally healthy have access to counseling services in Italy, and those who do have access must generally pay on a fee-for-services basis.

Schools in Italy particularly need counselors and the counseling approach to help students make career decisions, to prevent violence and adolescent gangs, and to teach students how to mediate in order to solve interpersonal problems and conflicts. Counselors could facilitate problems in the relationships between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and children and parents. They could also develop programs for career decision making, intercultural education, and interpersonal relationships.

The interest in and need for counseling will increase in Italy despite the position of the Italian Psychological Society (Società Italiana di Psicologia, 2009), which claims that only licensed psychologists have the necessary training and preparation to provide counseling services. Counseling has recently been officially recognized as a profession by the Italian government. On May 18, 2000, counseling was listed by CNEL (2005) as one of many unregulated professions in Italy.

In unregulated professions, the Italian government does not define the requirements for practice and does not regulate access to the profession. In the regulated professions—medicine, law, engineering, architecture, psychotherapy, and so on—the Italian government defines the requirements for practicing the profession including the minimum required education, period of internships, and required government exams. Members of regulated professions are included in a government-published professional register, bar, or order.

A positive sign for the future development of the counseling profession in Italy is that the Italian Parliament is preparing to approve the reform of the laws governing regulated and unregulated professions. With the anticipated approval of this reform legislation, the status of counseling most likely will change in a positive direction. It is anticipated that unregulated professions such as counseling will be recognized along with their professional associations.

## Conclusion

The profession of counseling is just becoming established in Italy. Currently, a number of counselors who have been prepared by counseling associations (rather than universities) practice in private settings and as consultants to organizations. Counseling does not exist in schools in Italy. The profession of counseling is not regulated by the government in Italy, but recently, the national government recognized counseling as an unregulated profession. Anticipated reforms in Italian laws could result in counseling's recognition as a profession in Italy, with counselors being licensed and therefore eligible for positions in schools and government agencies. Societal changes in Italy, such as the deinstitutionalization of patients who are mentally ill, an influx of immigrants, changes in the roles of women, and increasing social isolation, are setting the stage for counseling to become more accepted in Italy and for counselors to establish themselves as members of a legitimate and recognized profession.

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