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Lifelong Lifewide Learning

RICERCHE

L'attuazione della missione educativa della famiglia attraverso la formazione continua degli adulti.

The implementation of the family's educational mission through adult continuing education.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Il divario tra adulti altamente e poco qualificati risulta ampio anche in riferimento all'educazione e accompagnamento delle famiglie. La formazione continua degli adulti, declinata alle relazioni: tra coniugi; tra genitori-figli e tra fratelli, rappresenta un focus emergente e potenzialmente trainante nel campo della ricerca educativa, anche in vista della vulnerabilità dei legami familiari e delle ricadute sociali ad essa collegate. Il saggio presenta, per la prima volta, i risultati di un'indagine esplorativa quali-quantitativa comparativa condotta in quattro continenti (Europa, America, Asia, Africa), su un campione di 386 adulti. La riflessione analitica dei dati raccolti mostra l'impatto positivo di alcuni percorsi di accompagnamento e di educazione personale e familiare di tipo longitudinale, sulle condizioni, sul benessere e sugli stili di vita delle famiglie e apre nuovi filoni epistemici di ricerca pedagogica.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

The gap between highly and low-skilled adults is also significant in the context of family education and support. Continuing adult education, particularly with regard to the relationships between spouses, parents and children, and siblings, emerges as a crucial and potentially transformative area of educational research. This is especially pertinent given the growing vulnerability of family bonds and the resulting social consequences. The essay presents, for the first time, the findings of a comparative qualitative-quantitative exploratory study conducted across four continents (Europe, America, Asia, and Africa), involving a sample of 386 adults. The analytical reflection on the collected data highlights the positive impact of certain longitudinal educational and support pathways on the conditions, well-being, and lifestyles of families, thereby opening new epistemological avenues for pedagogical research.

Introduction

The theme of lifelong adult education is closely linked to another significant pedagogical issue: that of relational and family dynamics. The relationship between these two areas is so interdependent—especially in the current historical context, characterised by an unprecedented and concerning socio-ethical and emotional illiteracy among both young people and adults—that one could assert, without fear of contradiction, that the revitalisation and/or strengthening of lifelong adult education, across all cultural, professional, and existential aspects of human life, represents the first step towards personal, relational-family, and social fulfilment.

Moreover, the educational vulnerability and weakness of the family itself further underscores the urgent need for a renewed educational mediation, capable of addressing

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familial gaps, cultural disparities, and inequalities, in order to foster the comprehensive empowerment of both individuals and society.

With this premise in mind, the epistemic choice of this study becomes clear: to connect the theme of lifelong adult education with the educational shortcomings of both school and family, particularly in light of the profound crisis facing the institution of the family today. This is especially pertinent given that our focus is not on a general, neutral, or vague form of adult education. Instead, we aim to examine a type of education that is ontologically aligned with human nature and its manifold constitutive dimensions: a holistic human education aimed at individual and relational-family empowerment and civil progress.

The starting point of this reflection is therefore the current relational and familial crisis, which is closely tied to an emerging and profound educational need. If we consider that personal and social well-being is at stake, it becomes easier to grasp the sensitivity of this issue, on which we will offer only a few reflections, without claiming to be exhaustive. We hope instead for increasingly in-depth and clarifying pedagogical research, capable of alleviating a form of suffering—both personal and relational—that is becoming ever more widespread and concerning.

The family crisis is a complex and timely issue, about which generalisations cannot be made. The only certainty in discussions about the family, or families, is that this ancient and indispensable social institution is—undeniably—experiencing an unprecedented moment of difficulty and crisis. This crisis is not limited to the legal sphere; indeed, today one can no longer speak of family in a unilateral and definitive way without risking heated and polemical debates. It also—and perhaps more significantly—concerns the existential dimension of family members.

Approaching these lived experiences with great care, in order to understand pedagogically and in depth the relational dynamics and complex mechanisms that generate family conflicts and misunderstandings, with the aim of defusing them, or at least reducing and preventing them, represents one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary pedagogy and adult education.

Indeed, while the phenomenological evidence from families' daily experiences reveals that, in relational matters, there is a gap between more and less qualified adults in terms of metacognitive and interpersonal skills, it is regrettable that, at least in Italy, academic pedagogical studies on the family remain sparse. This is despite the multitude of relevant issues and the generative and transformative potential that pedagogy holds.

In recent decades, we have indeed witnessed an increase in pedagogical studies on the family, which, albeit still somewhat sporadic, demonstrate vitality and originality in research. Over time, these studies have sought to outline a renewed conception of the family, through which parental roles and the educational functions they perform can be reinterpreted.

It is worth noting that, from the second half of the 1970s, the traditional approach to family research—which tended to view the family in a static way and to assess parental functions in a fragmented manner—underwent significant developments and modifications (Cadei, 2022).

Today, the family is increasingly studied from an evolutionary, dynamic, and integrative perspective, drawing on a wide range of scientific contributions. This new approach has been furthered by the specific contributions of dialogical philosophy and General Systems Theory, and by the developments and applications of these approaches in various academic fields. However, in our view, this does not exhaust the epistemic scope of pedagogical research.

If, following the great masters of contemporary pedagogy such as Maria Montessori, pedagogy still holds a unique transformative and generative potential—capable of effectively developing human perfectibility and indirectly influencing relational and, subsequently, socio-political processes—then one might agree with the idea proposed in this study: that it is pedagogically valuable to delve ontologically into the family crisis. This can be done by studying the phenomenology of the existential experiences of family members, which are becoming increasingly problematic and complex with each passing day, in an effort to encourage a bold and still possible reversal of this trend.

Moreover, with a utopian belief in the possibility of "saving the family" from the current cultural and social collapse, through a renewed understanding of family distress—via a hermeneutic-transformative pedagogy that returns to the essentials—this belief could serve as the starting point for a somewhat novel pedagogical reflection (Aduc, 2018).

It wagers, in a Pascalian sense, on the possibility of reawakening the dormant collective conscience and on the potential to promote a genuine revitalisation of lifelong adult education, with the aim of fostering positive individual, familial, and social change. It also wagers on the possibility of guiding each family member towards their personal and communal fulfilment.

This essay offers a hermeneutic reflection on the potential to fulfil the emotional and educational mission of the family through lifelong adult education. This reflection is supported by data from a recent mixed-methods research study conducted across four continents, using semi-structured interviews.

The research reveals that, in response to the increased levels of distress, misunderstanding, and frustration experienced in family relationships during the Covid period, there are deep-rooted individual and relational factors, hidden within the fabric of families' daily lives, that can make some families more vulnerable than others. If these fragility factors are not promptly and effectively addressed, they can lead to the breakdown of family bonds and cause significant suffering for family members.

Conversely, there are also stabilising factors—whether personal, communal, internal, or external to the family—that can support and strengthen family dynamics, making them more resilient and happier, thus less vulnerable to the inevitable and unpredictable challenges of life.

The proposed study sheds light on these new pedagogical insights and describes several factors that can influence resilience, prosocial (1) behaviour, and the well-being of individuals and families, regardless of socio-cultural and economic conditions, in times of cultural and social crisis, such as the current one. This opens a new epistemic horizon for pedagogical research and adult education.

The centrality of childhood and Berger's hypothesis of new generative factors for human formation

The concept of family has significantly evolved over time, to the extent that it is no longer possible to define a single model of relational and family life. There is, in fact, a variety and plurality of family groups and emotional bonds.

Alongside this diversity, there also exists a multitude of organisational and educational models that can be associated, due to certain specific characteristics, with the traditional family institution. However, despite this complexity and diversity, pedagogical schools still converge on the idea of the family's indispensable social and educational role.

The family, in fact, is not only the primary cradle of human life, the fundamental place for the humanisation and socialisation of the individual, but also the first setting where one learns the rules and boundaries of life. It is also the emotional space in which, through the experience of parental tenderness, care, and unconditional love, a child will lay the foundations for emotional security and balance. In the family, children deeply shape their inner nature, particularly their temperament and character, progressively preparing themselves to adapt and grow through encounters with others.

The family is also, in every sense, the cradle of a child's first dreams, the primary bulwark against the existential fear of nothingness and death, and the fertile womb where thoughts of eternity first emerge, though they often, sadly, perish.

Reflecting deeply on the real and symbolic value of the family, Maria Montessori viewed the child as a kind of ideal model of humanity, uncontaminated by the errors and mental structures of the adult. She even regarded the child as the point of reference for a transformative education of both the adult and society at large.

Montessorian pedagogy presents the child as a gift to the family and to society: a marvel of nature, and more specifically, a spiritual embryo, capable, through their innocence and natural moral dispositions, of initiating a reversed pedagogy. This is a pedagogy in which the child, though small and vulnerable, can become the teacher who revitalises adult education, provided the adult returns to their origins—to the humility of their original condition—and is ready to listen to the voice of childhood.

The intergenerational exchange between the teacher—the child—and the adult—the disciple—is the sure and secret path to personal and social renewal. It is so significant that it is considered the prelude to the building of a just, peaceful, and happy civilisation (Montessori, 1936, Ital. trans. 1938).

However, today, much like almost a century ago, during the years when Montessori wrote and published The Secret of Childhood (1936), humanity's consciousness appears to be in a deep slumber, unable to perceive the pride, narcissism, selfishness, and all other errors of adults (ibid.).

Today, the moral blindness of humanity seems to have reached alarming levels, and the arrogance of life "prevents receiving a vital aid, a saving truth"—that is, an external help capable of prompting a re-evaluation of one's positions and choices (Montessori, 1999, p. 301).

If this were not the case, the world could progress rapidly: there would be no dangerous contrast between the ever-increasing speed of material transportation and the ever-deepening rigidity of the human spirit (ibid., pp. 301-302).

Nor—one might add—would there exist today the current gap between widespread access to the world of knowledge and information, enabled by the advent of the web and the proliferation of digital mobility, and the blindness of the human heart, increasingly turned inward, focused on selfish interests, unable to see the "dangerous abyss in which childhood lies" (ibid.).

"Where is the love" Montessori asks, "that could serve as a comforting refuge for the child?" Or, paraphrasing Montessori's text, where is the love within families? And, delving deeper: where is the family today—the homeland of the human heart? (ibid., p. 300).

In the preamble to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed in New York on 20th November 1989, it is stated that every child has the right to live in a peaceful family environment. This right is supported by the common understanding that, for the harmonious and complete development of their personality, a child needs to grow up in a safe family environment, surrounded by happiness, love, and understanding.

How, then—at a time of general crisis within the family, and recognising the pedagogical necessity of reaffirming the priority and centrality of loving and responsible care for children—can we support families in their complex and delicate task of returning to being the cradle of a new civilisation and the homeland of every individual's heart?

The only viable path seems to be the revitalisation of lifelong learning for adults and the continuous, personalised education of family members.

On this delicate issue, recent pedagogical research, though tentative, appears to have made some initial strides in favour of the knowledge and implementation of certain best practices in the education of adults and families, already adopted by young Christian faith communities and replicable in other educational contexts (De Angelis et al., 2022).

Given the disparity in family life experiences and the gap between highly qualified adults and those unqualified, including in the pedagogical domain of education and family support, the provision of lifelong learning for adults, particularly focused on relational aspects—such as spousal relationships, parent-child interactions, and sibling dynamics—has emerged as a crucial theme in adult education, essential for the promotion of social well-being.

Among the most prominent sociologists who, in recent years, have investigated new generative factors capable of promoting global human development, Peter L. Berger stands out.

In one of his final publications, before his passing in 2017, Berger explored a theme as crucial as it is stigmatised in the postmodern age: the "transformative role" that authentically lived religious faith can play. He emphasised the distinctive positive behavioural effects that certain religious individuals display in difficult life circumstances (Berger, 2014, Ital. trans. 2017).

We are, of course, fully aware that religious experience is not the only means through which individuals, in the postmodern era, can positively restructure their lives, even during their most challenging existential periods. However, certain empirical evidence

gathered in this study demonstrates the positive impact of ongoing Christian education and practice on the overall well-being and the phenomenology of the daily lives of many families worldwide. This finding opens new epistemological perspectives for pedagogical research.

In a significant text on personal empowerment from 1977, Berger himself (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977) notes that all individuals face crises at some point in their lives. However, the majority of those who manage their difficulties more successfully are those with access to institutions that mediate between the public and private spheres, providing meaning and value to their lives.

Among these mediating structures, Christian associations and Catholic pastoral care play an important, and sometimes decisive, role in human formation and in the empowerment of individuals and relationships.

In exploring these aspects further, Berger highlights the significant contribution of mediating structures—which he identifies as neighbourhoods, families, churches, and voluntary organisations—in alleviating the crises of meaning and values in modern society. Their strategic pedagogical-social function lies primarily in their capacity to significantly reduce the sense of isolation and helplessness experienced by individuals and families, who often feel overwhelmed by seemingly insurmountable problems. Additionally, they mitigate the anomic (2) precariousness of individual existence, frequently detached from society, and help to counter the threat of alienation within the social fabric and public order (Berger & Luckmann, 1995; Berger, 2014).

In the context of the pandemic, when the unprecedented lockdown rendered any form of social contact other than that confined to the family impracticable, with the exception of those who continued to frequent workplaces in essential services in a rather sterile manner, we decided to interview two groups of families: one explicitly religious (comprising members affiliated with a Catholic Secular Institute) and the other not explicitly religious.

The aim was to assess the quality and well-being of these family groups, under comparable socio-cultural and economic conditions, and in an epochal crisis such as the pandemic.

Research Design and Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this research deliberately reconciles the two main emerging positions in the scientific debate on pedagogical research methodology: the qualitative approach, strengthened epistemologically by the use of the phenomenological-hermeneutic paradigm (Popper, 1976; Campbell, 1988; Mortari, 2010; Elia, 2016; Zagzebski, 2020), and the quantitative approach, which critiques the lack of methodological rigour in educational research and is inspired by the positivistic paradigm (Gödel, 1940; Pring, 2000; Evans, 2002).

Our choice centred on employing a multi-method, quali-quantitative approach in the exploratory investigation to seek "clear and evident knowledge" regarding the experiences of certain individuals and families who, during the pandemic emergency, were subjected to an online semi-structured questionnaire.

To delve into the specifics of the comparative investigation strategy, it is necessary to specify that: a) the exploratory comparative research was conducted between 2020 and 2021 on two samples of adults, homogeneous in terms of socio-cultural and economic conditions; b) the research aimed to explore any positive effects of longitudinal educational mediation processes on adults adhering to a particular Catholic religious charisma: the charisma of the Servants of Suffering.

The first group, comprising the Associates of the Servants of Suffering (3), consists of 295 individuals. Of this group, 40% are men, aged between 25 and 80 years, while 60% are women, also aged between 25 and 80 years (see Fig. 1).

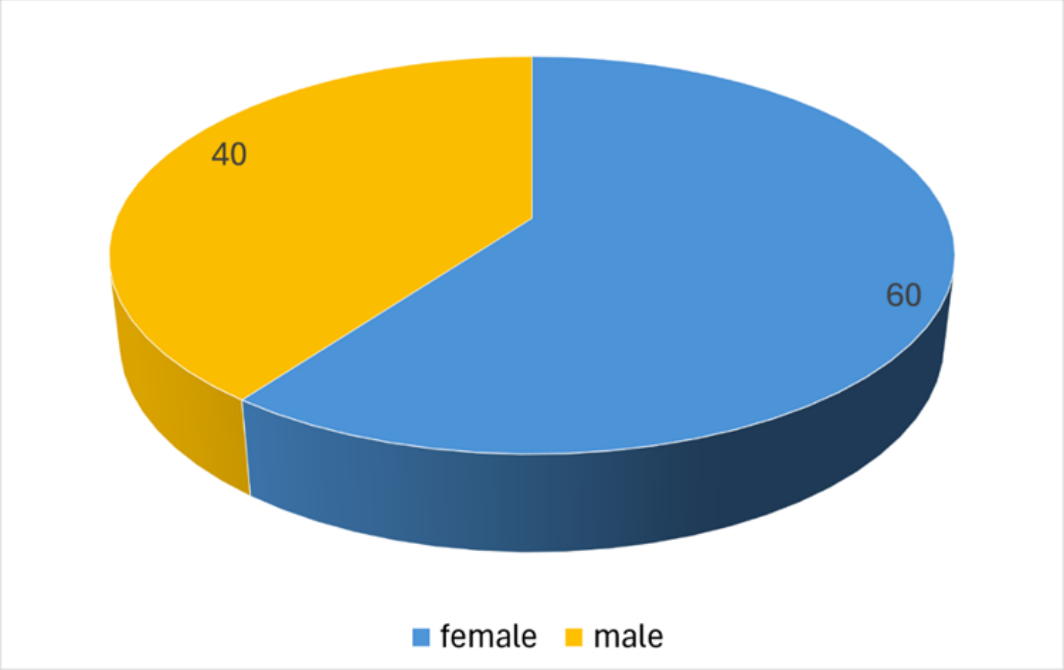

FIG. 1: DISTRIBUTION OF THE GENDER OF ADULTS TO WHOM THE QUESTIONNAIRE WAS PROPOSED

Members of this young Catholic Christian community, present across four continents (Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas), are formally admitted to the association after completing a three-year formative programme. Upon joining, members actively participate in various activities, including: monthly training meetings (held locally in small communities led by a lay coordinator and a spiritual assistant: a priest); communal prayer sessions; periodic retreats and training (three times a year) with other individuals and families; workshops; agapic social gatherings; recreational and sports activities; concerts; video conferences with the Founder; excursions; and annual spiritual exercises.

The diverse range of formative and recreational activities offered by the association engages individuals and families in an intriguing and novel existential journey, supported by a stable educational mediation characterised by the pedagogical dimensions of listening, dialogue, and sharing common experiences of holistic human development. This journey is closely followed by diocesan priests from both Italian and foreign backgrounds, all belonging to the Institute of the Servants of Suffering, as well as by lay educators. For

the past decade, the educational focus proposed by the Founder, in agreement with the Moderator, the mother of the Institute, and other governing bodies, has centred on formative issues and pedagogical strategies aimed at revitalising ongoing adult education and renewing interpersonal relationships both within and beyond the family. The primary religious and social intent of the pedagogical work carried out by the religious family is the empowerment and overall well-being of individuals. This is achieved through a strategic participatory planning approach, in synergy with the local community, the church, and local institutions, aimed at addressing the current crisis and promoting social change and collective well-being.

The second group (the control group), which is socio-culturally and economically homogeneous with the first group, consists of 91 adults who do not identify with any specific religious affiliation (see Fig. 1).

Both groups were administered an online semi-structured questionnaire, distributed via the association's social network (for the Associates of the Servants of Suffering) and through the mediation of several Italian and foreign curriculum teachers (for the control group of adults). The strategy for disseminating the questionnaire involved sending two access links via the internet: the first to the adults of the Association of the Servants of Suffering and the second link to the teachers of the control group, via the curriculum mediators. A deadline was set for the two access links, and once this deadline expired, the data were tabulated.

After collecting the data via Google Forms, a percentage-based analysis was conducted on the two samples, viewed through the lens of the phenomenological-hermeneutic paradigm. This analysis constituted the second phase of data coding.

All responses from the interviewees, including those to both open and closed questions, were read and interpreted according to the phenomenological-hermeneutic paradigm. This approach allowed us to explore the networks of meanings identified by the interview participants.

Finally, to clarify certain formative aspects, and following the reading and coding of the data, several members of the association were invited to participate in two focus groups.

Results of the Comparative Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates the geographical composition of the sample of 386 adults interviewed. Adults from the European continent total 288, representing the largest portion of the sample (75%). American participants number 50, accounting for 13% of the interviewed adults. There are 31 representatives from Asia, which corresponds to 8% of the sample, while 18 interviewees (5%) are from Africa (see Figure 2).

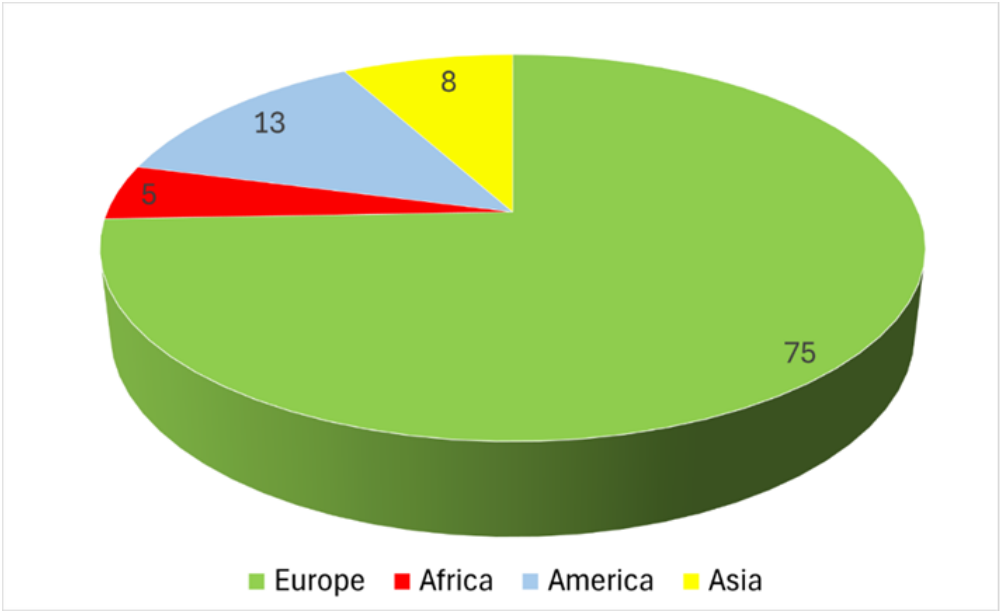

FIG. 2: GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN OF THE SURVEYED ADULTS

Figure 3 depicts the distribution of interviewed adults in relation to the indicator of continuous religious formation. Specifically, the pie chart reveals that 76% of the interviewed adults are aligned with the chosen research focus, aiming to evaluate, from a hermeneutic-pedagogical perspective, any positive effects on personal and relational well-being and resilience due to longitudinal Christian formation programmes for adults.

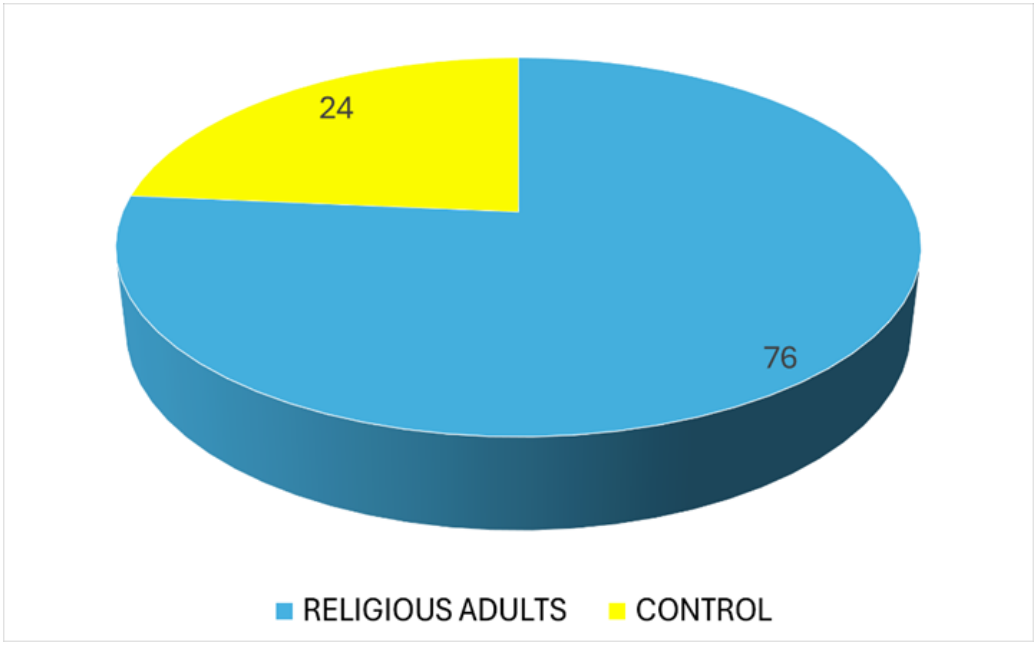

FIG. 3: DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT RESPONDENTS IN RELATION TO RELIGIOUS FACTOR

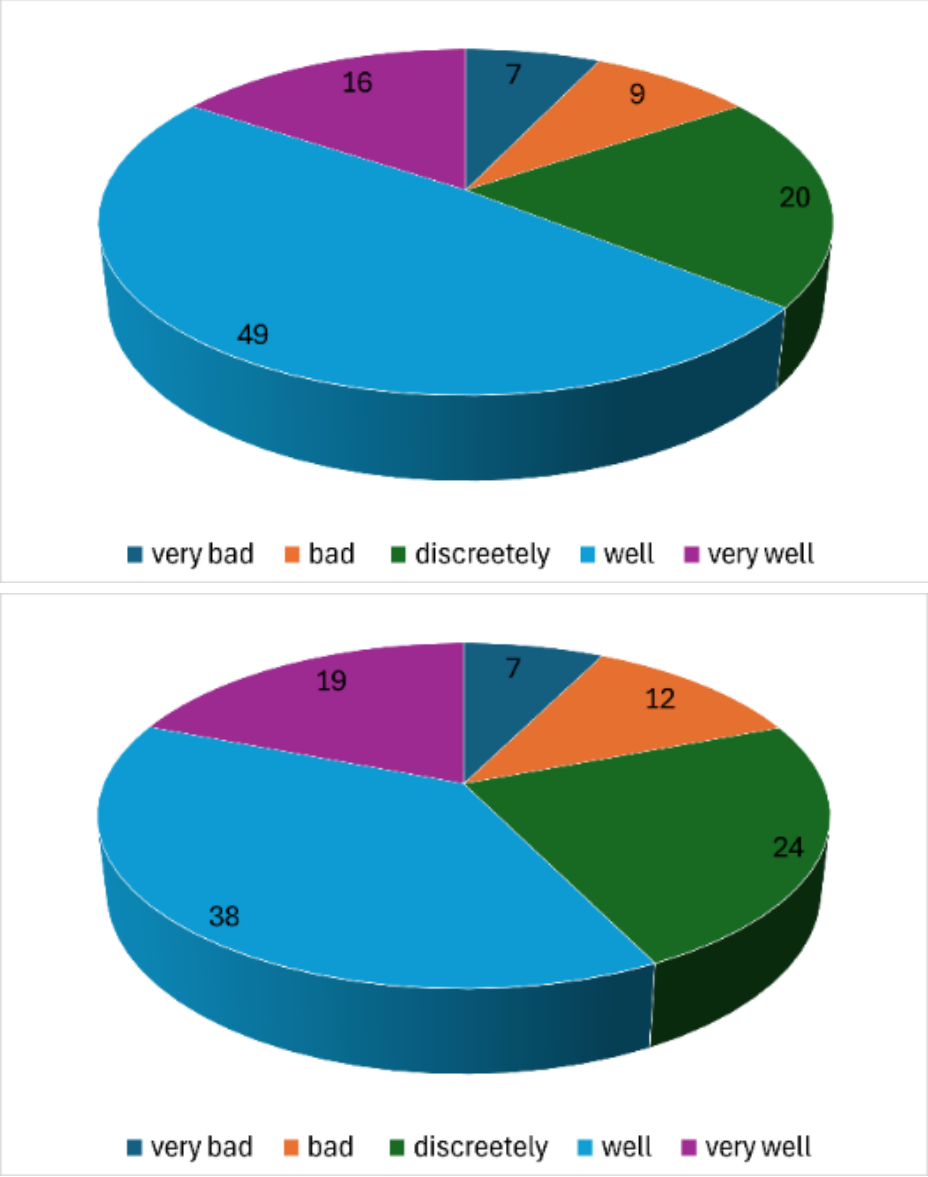

FIG. 4: SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING IN INTERVIEWD ADULTS. RESULTS ARE EXPRESSED AS PERCENTAGE

In more detail, the composition of the sample of interviewed adults comprises 295 individuals associated with the Charisma of the Servants of Suffering and 91 adults who are not explicitly religious (see Figure 3).

Among the most notable findings from the reports are the data related to overall well-being (see Figure 4) and the spiritual well-being of the respondents (see Figure 5).

In particular, regarding the assessment of the spiritual well-being of the interviewed adults (Figure 4), the graphs reveal that summing the percentages of "Good" and "Very Good" responses from the group actively engaged in religious formation yields a figure greater than the corresponding sum for the control group. Conversely, summing the percentages of "Poor" and "Very Poor" responses for the control group results in a percentage that exceeds those recorded for the group engaged in religious formation.

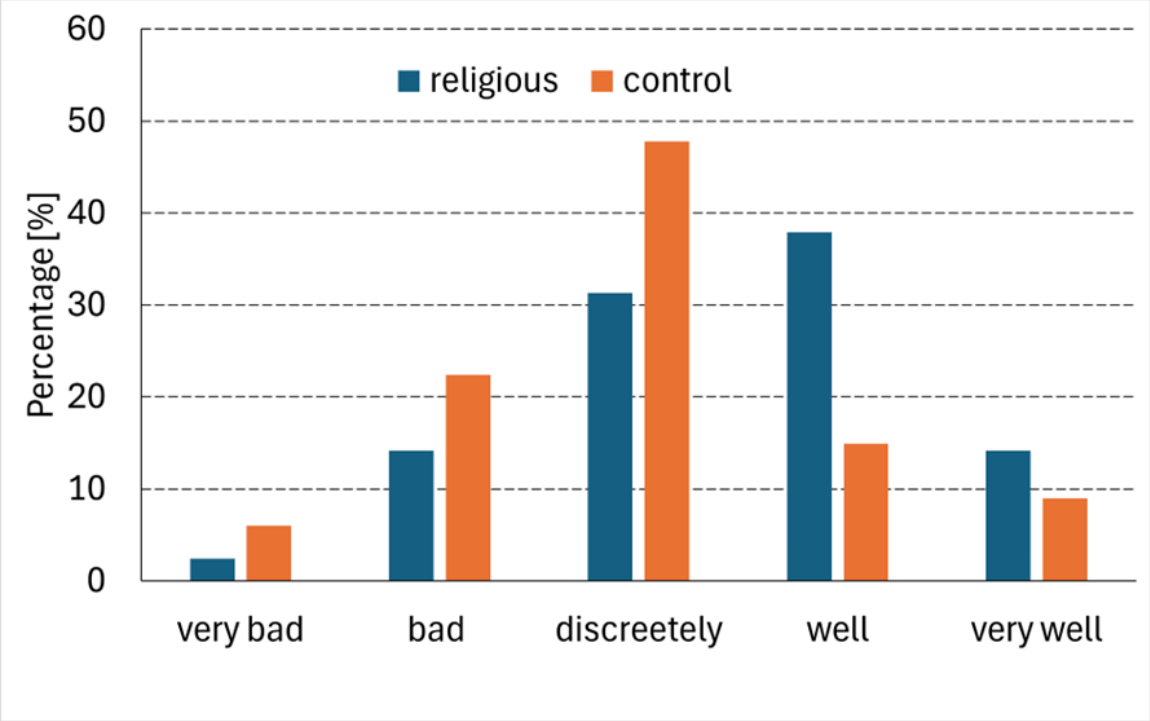

FIG. 5: PERCENTAGE OF THE RESPONSES GIVEN BY THE INTERVIEWED ADULTS TO THE QUESTION REGARDING THE GENERAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of the percentages of responses received concerning the question on self-perceived psychological/general well-being. It is observed that, similarly, the sum of "Good" and "Very Good" responses from the group engaged in continuous religious formation is more significant than that of the control group. In other words, it is reasonable to hypothesise that continuous religious formation has positive effects on mitigating negative self-perceptions while enhancing positive ones.

Conclusions

Acknowledging the provisional and limited nature of the results obtained in the proposed study and recognising the need for further research and investigation into a topic that remains relatively underexplored within pedagogical scholarship, we turn to reflect on some epistemic implications.

The first consideration is that, in a historical moment characterised by the challenges faced by both Italian and international institutions in recognising the transformative and generative role of lifelong human formation and in investing new resources in adult continuous education, to address new cultural challenges and promote positive social changes and personal fulfilment (and, ideally, to attempt to reorganise individual and societal life in light of increasingly widely shared values), our research highlights a novel pedagogical insight.

This insight can be articulated as the necessity and opportunity to revitalise and advance the knowledge of our Western religious tradition to foster holistic human development and a new humanisation of interpersonal relationships.

The knowledge of the multi-millennial heritage of Western culture cannot harm the personal sensitivity of increasingly multicultural and multi-religious societies, provided it is presented through a hermeneutic-reflective approach and a new socio-ethical-affective paradigm. This paradigm should be open and respectful of each person's cultural and religious identity, and receptive to mutual enrichment through listening to and encountering otherness; rather, it can contribute to establishing more humane, friendly, and supportive interpersonal relationships.

Indeed, the aspiration towards universal brotherhood and the elimination of inequalities and prejudices is at the very essence of the Christian message. This message, which proclaims the sonship of every person in Christ to a single loving Father who will judge personal and universal history, translates into two universally shared commandments: love of God and love of one's neighbours.

The second consideration arises from the research conducted. If the positive role of personal disposition (mediated by external educational practitioners) in interpreting daily life events within a value framework, or better still, an existentially religiously oriented vision, is acknowledged for personal and familial well-being, it remains perplexing why there is a persistent tendency to deliberately omit religious elements in adult educational programmes.

The current cultural context still harbours a religious taboo, disguised as a defence of religious pluralism and introduced by positivist vetoes in the last century, to the detriment of the pedagogical recognition of human ontology and axiology.

If research demonstrates the positive impact of religious factors on well-being, resilience, and prosocial behaviour in some individuals, it revisits the significant and ongoing philosophical and pedagogical question of recognising an ontological need for transcendence within the human experience.

Such recognition gains scientific relevance, particularly when aligned with recent theories and discussions in psycho-pedagogical literature concerning the concept of "resilience." In recent years, psychology has not only highlighted the benefits of prosociality and mindfulness practices, but also proposed Mindfulness and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as techniques for developing resilience in individuals.

In therapeutic practice, mindfulness and self-awareness exercises, along with the prosocial attitudes promoted by these techniques, have proven particularly useful for individuals in coping with and addressing life’s challenges. Moreover, these techniques exhibit surprising "similarities" with certain religious experiences and practices, implicitly supporting their benefits for the development of human resilience (Lambiase and Cantelmi, 2021).

In light of these considerations, this article underscores the importance of incorporating into continuous adult education all factors that can influence holistic human development and promote resilience, prosocial behaviour, and personal and familial well-being, as highlighted in the study. It also opens new epistemic avenues for pedagogical research.

Notes

(1) Prosocial behaviour is an attitude of openness towards others. Christian prosociality, in particular, exhibits distinct characteristics that are not found in other religious professions or confessions. It is marked by a deep concern and commitment to defending the rights of the most marginalised groups in society (the poor, the sick, and sinners); by a sense of gratuitousness and universal brotherhood aimed at promoting the well-being of others and closely linked to empathy; and by the capacity to transform evil into good (through forgiveness and love for one's enemy, in accordance with evangelical teachings).

(2) Characterised by anomie. In sociological terms, anomie refers to a situation where socially prescribed individual goals and the institutional norms governing their attainment are incongruent, that is, practically incompatible.

(3) The Association of the Servants of Suffering is an extension of the Catholic Secular Institute "Servants of Suffering," which was founded in Italy by the Reverend Don Pierino Galeone in 1957, at the explicit request of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. The purpose was to perpetuate globally the mission of serving the suffering of body and spirit. The Institute quickly expanded, encompassing both female and male branches, as well as a clerical branch. It was officially recognised by the President of the Italian Republic on 8 July 1980 and canonically by the Archbishop of Taranto on 25 December 1993. The activities of the Servants of Suffering are directed towards all sectors of society, where they are called to operate with a clear witness to Christian and professional life, alongside appropriate apostolic and formative work. The family of the Servants of Suffering—comprising priests, laywomen and laymen, consecrated clerics, individuals, and families—is present across four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. They diligently work, through prayer, witness, acts of charity, and the formation of young people, adults, and families, to imbue the world with an evangelical spirit.

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