

The study of personality in organizations: Interview with Gian Vittorio Caprara

By Miruna Andreescu and Daniela Vercellino

ASPSE, Bucharest

SNSPA, Bucharest

In this interview Professor Gian Vittorio Caprara shares with us some of his thoughts about personality psychology and organizational psychology, emerging out of a long experience of working in both fields. Many important questions have been raised in these areas where there is a long-lasting concern with how personality should be understood and 'measured'. Professor Caprara addresses this and other pressing issues for theorists and practitioners alike in the present interview.

Gian Vittorio Caprara holds degrees in political science and a specialization degree in psychology. He is professor of psychology at Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" where he also served as chair of the department and dean. He held visiting professor appointments at Stanford, UCLA, UCI, University of Michigan and Santiago University. He is a member of several International Scientific Associations and has been president of the European Association of Personality. Professor Caprara is author and co-author of more than 450 scientific publications, including several volumes. His research interests are focused on primarily on the topics of personality and social psychology.

Address for correspondence: Dipartimento di Psicologia, "Sapienza" Universita` di Roma, Via dei Marsi 78, 00185 Rome, Italy
E-mail: gianvittorio.caprara@uniroma1.it

Interviewer: You first graduated Political Science and three years later, you graduated Psychology at the same university. How did you become interested in the scientific study of personality?

Prof. Caprara: When I started to study Psychology I was interested in understanding the person, what makes a person unique, what distinguishes a person from the other ones; I wanted to provide a meaning to the life of the others. I was interested in understanding what makes people happy, how can we offer people the possibility

to make the best of themselves. My interest in psychology has always been a political interest, an ideological interest: the more I study psychology, the more I think we should acknowledge the diversities and we should try to compensate the inequalities. Our goal as psychologists is to understand how our people can develop, which are the conditions that allow all people to express the best of themselves. Psychology can help us understand the causes of diversities, it can help us moderate, attenuate the ones that are due to nature; it can help us avoid the expansion of these diversities and the injustice that could follow. I have always been interested in politics, I graduated Political Science and for the last fifteen years I did research in the field. For many years, I was a militant in the left party. When I left IBM, I joined the Communist Party, which I left too, eventually. After IBM, I realized communism was a disillusion, I expected too much from it. The kind of communism that we have seen and experienced is not desirable anymore. The question is whether democracy can be the best form of government. Democracy offers most people the possibility to express themselves, to participate, to be responsible of how the government works. The world we live in is very complicated, with tremendous disparities, but still one has to try to understand, to make sense of things, to search for better ways to manage the problems, managing the society. I'm very much convinced that psychologists can contribute in making a world more just.

Interviewer: Between 1968 and 1973 you worked in Human Resources at IBM. What was your greatest challenge there, as a psychologist? What did you like most about your experience in that company?

Prof. Caprara: IBM for me was a very interesting experience, I learned a lot. IBM offered me many opportunities, it was the good face of capitalism. I say that because IBM is an organization with many defects and virtues of capitalism: in there I learned to work, I learned the importance of competencies, the importance of organization. I was responsible of developing all the measurement, all the testing and training. I have always been more involved in managing processes other than managing people. IBM offered me many opportunities, I was exposed to many experiences. I was very young at the time, I was hired right after I finished my military service – at that time it was a compulsory draft in Italy. IBM let me go to school, so I could complete my graduation, my PhD program. After that I got another leave because I received a scholarship in Canada and when I returned, IBM offered me a managerial position. Finally, I left IBM to go to work in universities, but they kept me as a consultant for many years.

Interviewer: In the last years, organizational psychology headed to the intense study of personality. What do you think will be the *hot topics* of tomorrow?

Prof. Caprara: Identification and actualization of potentials, elaboration for innovation and justice - to offer people the feeling that they are respected and treated fairly!

Interviewer: Research has found personality to be related to important organizational outcomes such as positive job attitudes and behaviors and job performance. This means that organizations should use personality tests to select their future employees. However a common criticism is that job applicants can easily *fake their answers* to personality scales. What are your thoughts on this issue?

Prof. Caprara: You need a good test! First, you need a good theory of personality functioning, comprehensive theory. Then, you need good measures. But the theory determines the validity of the measures. It is the theory that drives the measures, that allows you to understand whether people fake or not, whether their responses to tests are reliable or not. I am strongly convinced of the primacy of the theory! And that is unusual because people have some kind of fetishism for testing. I trust in what people report, I'm not so concerned about social desirability. For instance, two months ago I was invited to identify potentials in an advertising company, among very young people with an excellent CV. The tests were absolutely average, the people responded average, so there was no concern about faking. In many situations, the best choice is the right choice – what do you think it's true. If the test is correct, the people do not know what is going on, ultimately they do not know what you expect from them. Of course, there are certain tests that are difficult – for instance, it is difficult to assess efficacy in selection because if I ask you "Are you capable to do so?", of course you say "Yes!". But if I ask you whether you like or not a certain kind of movie, what is the right answer? There is no right answer!

Interviewer: The differences between scientists and practitioners are a common theme in organizational psychology. How can we bridge this gap between science and practice?

Prof. Caprara: Scientists should make an effort to make themselves easier to understand. Practitioners should be more diligent, less lazy. Both should be less arrogant! We should educate the client to be more exigent, to be more severe. The companies buy an instrument because there is a good salesman. The clients don't question many things, because they don't understand why we use tests, what is validity, what is reliability, what makes a test better than the other. We should defend our instruments, our ideas, by providing evidence, research, documentation!