

ROLE and Dependency Roles

Mara Ognibeni e Ombretta Zoppi

School of Specialization in Constructivist Psychotherapy, CESIPc, Florence, Italy

This paper aims at highlighting and extending some aspects of Kelly's personal construct theory regarding the Sociality Corollary and the notion of personal ROLE. The presence of the word "MAY" within the Sociality Corollary suggests that playing a ROLE in a relationship with another person is neither automatic nor a given factor, but it is an actual possibility that each time entails choosing between its enactment or preclusion. We consider the ROLE to be a different process from the Dependency Role, and we will illustrate the details and implications of it. If we consider playing a role as a choice and describe it as a form of movement towards the other within a process of understanding, it will also become possible for us to take efficient and suitable actions to establish and to maintain the therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: role, dependency role, core role structure, sociality corollary, choice corollary.

In Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory (PCT), the Sociality Corollary and the notion of ROLE (whose meaning is very different from the common psychological sense: role) constitute the fundamental basis for understanding and defining the therapeutic process, as they are for comprehending how one acts towards others in the everyday life.

Kelly considered his notion of ROLE so important that he first thought of calling "Role Theory" what we now know as the personal construct theory (1955, p. 179; 1969a, p. 271).

Other authors have already turned their attention to the Sociality Corollary, holding it to be one of the most innovative and original features of Kelly's theory, considering it a focal point for understanding the theory itself.

According to Butt (1998), "Hinkle (1970) insisted that it is the sociality corollary, with its definition of role relationships, that is the 'object of the game of personal constructs'. He believed that other aspects of the approach were secondary to this aim. Kelly believed that taking the role of the other was not only necessary in effecting personal change but was essential to any humanitarian enterprise" (p. 105).

In the constructivist literature it is referred to the ROLE within two different professional constructions. The first one corresponds to the Sociality Corollary, while the second one regards the concept of invalidation of the core construction of role and its relative implications in terms of transition, in particular guilt.

The corollaries are the fundamental cornerstones of the PCT; on the basis of their assump-

tions, the further professional constructions develop and articulate as the result of a logic consequence.

Kelly (1955) dedicated a precise corollary to the concept of ROLE. He considers core role constructs as “those which govern a person's maintenance processes – that is, those by which he maintains his identity and existence” (p. 331). It follows that an invalidation of these constructs implies the possibility to jeopardize the conservation of the system itself.

This process – invalidation/lost of identity – corresponds to a precise transition: guilt, defined as “the awareness of dislodgment of the self from one's core role structure” (Kelly, 1955, p. 391).

Transitions are a phenomenological way to describe emotions. Kelly considers them as forms of movement within the construct system (Butt, 2008). Anxiety, guilt, threat, hostility, have the most clinical importance.

In this paper the distinction Leitner (1988) makes between ROLE (upper-case) and role (lower-case) will be maintained, the first indicating the ROLE within personal construct psychology, and the second the role as used in the common psychological sense.

The sociality corollary

One has often the sensation that the professional constructs in relation to ROLE are interconnected with other aspects of the theory, and that they could be further understood, integrated, and developed. This stimulated the desire to write about these particular aspects of Kelly's theory, being it a reflexive theory open to verifying the various supplementary hypotheses, starting from our clinical, teaching, and – why not? – personal experiences, while remaining coherent with the theoretical framework.

Our reflections started from the Sociality Corollary, first emphasizing two of its apparently less important contents: “to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he MAY play a role in a social process involving the other person” (Kelly, 1955, p. 95, uppercase ours).

Why has Kelly used the word “MAY”?

Consistently with Kelly's procedures (in particular in reference to the Corollary of Choice), we may say that the word “MAY” indicates the possibility that playing a ROLE constitutes a very precise choice, a possibility among others if a person has constructs which have the construction processes of others as elements; a possibility offered to the extent that playing a ROLE represents the most elaborative choice in that moment for that person, within that particular relationship.

We would like to respond to questions arising from our clinical practice and from that of our students in clinical cases supervised by us.

The questions derive from the observation that in therapies in which important changes facilitated by us have indeed taken place, certain constructs still remain particularly resistant to change.

There are cases in which a change occurred in response to therapy seemed to go in the direction of an increased capacity of the client to construe the construction processes of the other, but this change had no effect on the client's feelings within the relationship. This appears to be true even when at a certain stage of therapy a quite good understanding of the other person involved has been achieved.

In other words, in some cases the person ends up saying: “all right, now I understand perfectly what the way my mother addresses me means, and how impossible it may be for her to

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act differently, but I still get as mad at her as before and she continues to make me feel inadequate”.

A good knowledge of the others is not supposed to be sufficient in order to refer to it as a ROLE.

This consideration leads to underline a second point in regard to the Sociality Corollary, in relation to construing the other's processes as opposed to construing his or her constructs, as suggested by Leitner (1988): “It is important to understand that Kelly did not define a ROLE relationship as the construing of the other's constructs; he defined it in terms of the construing of the other's construction process. The distinction between the content of constructs and the process of construing is critical in understanding ROLE relationships” (p. 254).

If, when encountering other people, their movement within the relationship is not considered, but only their “way of being”, there would be the risk of inserting them in generic categories, however refined in their contents.

In this connection one could consider that the construction of oneself as a person capable of understanding others, whether in a common psychological sense or not, has often to do with establishing cause-effect connections among elements of a personal story or among certain of its single aspects and acts. To the extreme: “he behaves this way because his father treated him very strictly”.

The same question could be put instead in these terms: “How will my movement within the relationship be read by a person who, having had a very strict father, anticipates that others will probably criticize his actions?”.

If on the one hand it is evident that using a greater understanding of the other to structure him or her will certainly not facilitate a change in the way we are with this person, on the other hand and in a similar way a greater understanding of the other's processes does not necessarily implicate a change in our own way of being and feeling.

At this point, having specified these two aspects, one could ask how and when do we choose to play a ROLE, when do we preclude this possibility, and what might be the premises in one's personal development that can render this possibility viable or not.

Again we might ask ourselves why the widening of one's ROLE constructions does not always and in every case bring a change in the relationship in the direction of a different way of perceiving oneself with others.

Dependency

To answer these questions we start from another of Kelly's professional constructs: dependency.

From a clinical point of view, we discriminate dependency constructs from those pertaining to ROLE. The first allow to construe and therefore to give a sense to the other's behaviour relying on our personal viewpoint, and therefore not discriminating between what makes sense to us and what sense the same thing might have for the other. The second permits us to give a sense to the other's perspective from that person's point of view.

First of all, it could be useful to identify two levels of construing. The first would be concerned with events and with people treated as events. It can be possible to construe people's behaviours rather than their outlooks. This is one level of construing.

There is a second level, concerned with construing the constructs of others. Instead of making our own sense out of what others did, we would try to understand what sense they made out of what they do (Kelly, 1969b, p. 203).

We could say that dependency constructs are those that allow us to explain certain aspects of the other that correspond (or not) to our own expectations, requests, and needs.

If dependency constructs are mainly used when relating with others, the risk is to consider them more as “objects” than as “persons”. It would be as if we were looking at them from a two-dimensional rather than a three-dimensional perspective, construing only what is related to their possibility to satisfy our needs or requests.

If for a person it is particularly important being cuddled, this may be identified as a need; if this person would rely only on dependency constructs in a relationship, the only elements perceived in the other would be those related to his or her feeling cuddled: one would constantly be occupied with getting “cuddled” regardless of whom the other is. The reflections about the other would be such as: “you never do the things I ask, I can't count on you, you're selfish, etc.”, or vice versa “you're so nice and kind”. In other words, this person would be occupied with defining and labelling features of the other person according to his or her own point of view, therefore excluding the other's outlook.

Dependency constructs tell something about the persons in their relationship with others, but do not permit to play a ROLE in a sociality process.

In the course of the clinical work, as well as in personal lives, we often find ourselves within interpersonal contexts that reserve no space for the other person's perception. Basing the relationship solely on our definitions of the other, we may start a whirlwind of whims and reactions to the supposed “injustices” which could reduce the relationship to a level of discredit and denigration.

When working with clients we sometimes try to facilitate the construing of constructions that regard both one's own and the other's psychological processes, through a progressive dispersion of dependencies. This points at defining how to discriminate among various needs and how to better recognize the persons able to fulfil and/or satisfy these.

However, it is not sufficient to disperse dependency in order to play a ROLE, since this might simply facilitate the presence of a greater number of persons within one's “social web”, while continuing to consider them “objects” rather than persons.

As Kelly explains (1969b):

It is this second level of construing that opens the door to the reciprocal handling of dependency. [...] the breakdown often comes when each person employs a psychology that tries to get what he wants from the other without being concerned with the other's outlook. If there is any reciprocity it is likely to be a simple transaction in which each person tries to give the other explicitly what he *says* he wants without trying *to understand what it is like to have such a want*.

But now let us apply this second level of construing to interpersonal relationships. [...] Far more important than the transaction, or the exchange, would be the framework of understanding within which it took place. Even if one person did not get what he wanted from the other, the fact that his outlook was understood by the other, that the other could see what it was like to have such wants, and that the other can agree that, from the same point of view, he, too would experience a similar yearning – all this is likely to provide greater security in the dependency relationship than getting literally what was asked for. (pp. 203-204, italics ours)

If our needs and those of others could be construed within a broader framework, we might be able to insert them within a relational process and not just treat them as if they were single things to satisfy or ignore.

We often distinguish, sometimes rather schematically, between those who play a ROLE and

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those who use dependency constructs, without considering that no one is really entirely one way or the other. A ROLE can be played within a certain relationship and not in others; in the same way, in a relationship a ROLE can be played with regard to some dimensions and not at all to others.

If we consider the ROLE as an elaborative choice, if we look at it as a form of movement towards the other and not as a way to define the other, we could broaden our own perspective.

It would thus be possible to consider the needs, or more precisely the dependency constructs, in a less negative way by starting to think about them as processes. Sometimes dependency constructs are used not because there are not any others, but because one expects them to be more useful for initiating or maintaining certain relationships with certain persons.

Keeping in mind what has been said up to now about dependency constructs, we extend our discussion to "Dependency Roles" themselves. These might be defined as follows: we can place some dependencies on persons we understand well, since this is precisely what has given us the possibility to do that. In the same way, the choice may fall on dependency constructs in order to help to maintain a relationship or the possibility to invest in it.

Dependency Roles

Let us focus on what we mean by "Dependency Roles".

In a recent article, Chiari (in press) highlights some paths of personal development: "My suggestion is that people (at least some) presenting a disorder had experienced a lack of mutuality in their relationship with parents, with prejudice to the completion of the process of recognition".

Chiari suggests two possible developmental paths resulting from this form of incomplete recognition: one characterized by a transition of threat, and the other by a transition of guilt.

In the first case (threat), the core construction (of ROLE) will contain some dimensions in the form of constituent components that may be formulated as separateness, freedom, and solitude; in the second case (guilt) the most recurring dimensions will be acceptability, lovable-ness, trustworthiness, and competence.

Chiari specifies that people who have experienced a path traced by threat will seek relationships with others that are distant but certain, in a constant "tension" between freedom and solitude, possibility of self-identification and its loss in those interpersonal relationships characterized by excessive closeness.

Those with a path traced by guilt would experience a "tension" in the relationship between self-expression and constriction in those aspects of the self that are incompatible with satisfying the other's expectations or when one anticipates a denial. These persons will consequently seek relationships that are detached but reliable.

Ricoeur (2004) considers personal identity as a form of narration, and its complete identification as deriving necessarily from social recognition, given the subject's constitutionally relational and interpersonal structure. This process is thought to initiate within the family in the mother-child relationship, in which identity is linked to the reciprocal interpersonal recognition, that is of the willingness of each to identify himself in the other, as dependent one on another, but equally as fully individualized.

In accordance with Chiari we choose to call Dependency Roles these specific modes of relationship, recognizing them as part of the core role structure, but different from the ROLE itself.

Dependency Roles, from an ontological point of view, are considered as the most elaborated

tive choice for maintaining the relationship with others, in the direction of obtaining complete recognition; this in the course of life will reveal itself as something towards which one strives, but that is actually very difficult to reach.

The distinction between ROLE and Dependency Roles lies in the different ways of “being” in relation to the other, characteristic of each.

We develop a ROLE according to how the construing of the other’s processes of construction allows us to partially modify our own, therefore anticipating a continuous reciprocal change: the focus is the relationship formed, in which it will be difficult to separate who is doing what. In the clinical experience, one of the most important differences between playing a ROLE and a Dependency Role seems to lie in the first case in constructing an equally reciprocal responsibility for the relationship; and in the second placing the exclusive responsibility on one or the other component of the relationship: “us, as opposed to me or you”.

Those who have a Dependency Role construe the responsibility of the relationship as belonging to themselves or to the other. People who have a Dependency Role with a path traced by guilt tend to construe the responsibility of the relationship as their own; the other is not considered as responsible. On the other hand, those who have a Dependency path traced by threat, tend to attribute the responsibility of the relationship to the other, without considering themselves equally responsible. In both cases, there is a difficulty with construing the relationship between the two.

If the direction of the person’s movement is channelized by a shared responsibility, the possibility to have to face invalidation in the ROLE core structure will be less probable: if this would occur, it would be seen more as a limit of the relationship itself rather than as a personal deficiency.

Differently, if the nature of the movement within the relationship with the other is channelized by Dependency Roles it will involve continuously seeking for validation, together with a constant alternation between considering separately either oneself or the other. In this way we would be aiming at stabilizing the system rather than venturing to understand the other. Consequently, the possibility of invalidation would be more likely, and would have far more profound consequences.

The Role enables a superordinate interpretation of the invalidation as an ongoing process within the relationship; the construction of a shared responsibility about what is happening limits the ascription of any sort of incapacity to the other. To the extent that we are playing a Role, the construction of the invalidation will be in terms of a process rather than a casuality.

Leitner (1988) refers, in relation to playing ROLE relationships, to the great risks one could run in the case of invalidation; a risk which is evident in the light of the fact that invalidation would affect the construction of identity.

Considering the way we have interpreted the ROLE up to here, our considerations seem to go in the opposite direction: a Role facilitates a new and wider elaboration of invalidation, thus reducing the risk of a transition of guilt. However, it is unlikely that in close relationships one is with the other recurring to Role constructions only; in order to be relevant, a relationship requires Dependency Roles as well.

Although Dependency Roles are supposed to be more apt to involve invalidations than a ROLE, if an invalidation occurs in a ROLE, especially within an important relationship, it could have devastating implications. One would have to face the loss of two possibilities: that of being unable to continue experimenting one’s participation in a relationship involving reciprocal expansion of the elaboration of self and of one’s own ROLE; and of the possibility to consider oneself recognized by the person who has ventured together in experimenting an investment in wider terms. It is certainly possible to realize that such an eventuality would be very difficult to overcome in the attempt to conserve one’s identity.

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Having said this, we may resume our attempt to specify what we mean by Dependency Role.

Dependency Roles are distinguished from the ROLE because they require a continuous recognition to be sustained. Since Dependency Roles originate in “immature” relationships in which a complete identification of the Self has not taken place, one could consider them the most viable for trying to obtain just that unrealized, full identification; an identification which canalizes the experience with the other as a movement towards achieving it.

The other has to understand who and how we are, in a way that respects our desire to be seen; any different or separate interpretations would deny our identity. Since we are referring to Core Roles, it is understandable how profoundly destabilizing an invalidation of this sort can be.

If a Dependency Role has been invalidated in these terms, it will be practically useless to facilitate a wider understanding of the other; we will be in the presence of something like: “yes, all right, it's very clear to me now why and on what premises the other acted that way, but that doesn't change the fact that I feel hurt and disappointed”. These are the moments when the relationships reach a dead end.

Let us imagine what the implications in psychotherapy might be by following this type of distinction between ROLES and Dependency Roles:

M. describes and perceives her/himself as a reliable, pleasant, generous person, attentive to the needs and desires of others, and for whom the competence and ability at work or in other contexts are a basic need. This person lives, however, in a state of constant agitation and anticipation of failure, fearing to discover to be different from what he or she supposed. Every shred of energy concentrates on continuously putting one's own reliability, kindness, and competence to verification. We could analyze this case using the professional construct of Dependency Roles.

In therapy we tried to stabilize the Dependency Roles in order to make them less subject to verification, and then started to make them less absolute and rigid, favouring at the same time the creation of ROLE constructs. However, this leads to the dead end mentioned above: invalidations, although less frequent, seemed impossible to overcome. The possibility to perceive them as the outcome of meeting the other, a result made at this point much more construed and understood, did not modify M's sense of failure. What could be done? M., although having a good understanding of why others considered him or her at times to be somewhat unpleasant or incompetent, could not help feeling that his Dependency Role had been invalidated.

We tried to insert an entire series of mediations aimed at reducing the closeness of identifying the Role with the Role itself within the relationship, hypothesizing that the experience with the other could be something different from validation or invalidation. For M. the encounter with the other was construed in terms of cause-effect: I behave well/you like me, you don't like me/I'm doing something wrong.

The alternative to this was found reflecting on the idea that a reliable, competent person attentive to the needs of other acts in a relationship on the basis of these elements, and that recognizing this could be linked to the nature of the relationship rather than on the validation/invalidation of single aspects or events.

The therapeutic activity went in the direction of viewing the relationship, as far as possible, as a circular, recurrent process more than as a sequence of events; distancing identification from validation/invalidation factors permitted us to favour the revision of what had been experienced until then as admitting one's own non-validity. That is, starting from the supposition that the validity of the construction of self had been suspended and trying to consider this an acquired fact, the initial stabilizing of the Dependency Role made it possible to recover the sense of having an experience with the other moving towards an experiential relationship. The

other, rather than being almost entirely construed as the person who could validate or invalidate my Dependency Role, became a person involved “like me” in a commonly shared effort: the relationship. Getting involved passed gradually from being a way to verify one’s own value to being a way of understanding the other, specifying in this process what could be done and what remained unviable. This relational position, no longer cause-effect, made the experiment with M. more fluid, less stiff, with a greater openness towards revising several personal outlooks in meaningful constructions, useful to maintain the relationship rather than being the admission of one’s personal inadequacy.

Going back to the start, we can try to identify two potential answers to the question of what makes it possible to play a ROLE or what could be a preferable alternative.

A first answer to the initial question could be expressed in these terms: we can either play a ROLE or move within Dependency Roles only as far as one of these alternatives allows us to maintain the prospect of an interdependency in the relationship with the other, on the basis of what appears more important to preserve in that moment.

In conclusion, we may think of Dependency Roles as those that channelize one’s movement within the relationship with the other in the attempt to stabilize and to validate core constructions; the ROLE is considered as a movement in the relationship which facilitates a change of the core constructions, since venturing into a ROLE relationship requires, as is often the case, forms of assimilation and accommodation, as described by Piaget (1936).

In these terms, moving through Dependency Roles does not represent an obstacle for a productive and efficient relationship with the other, although perhaps limited in reciprocity and the possibility to widen the margins for a change.

We are not suggesting that Dependency Roles preclude the possibility to install authentic and important relationships with others; on the contrary we consider them as a particularly frequent mode that some people use to move towards the other. What we wish to define is their nature, and how, by taking account of them when construing the disorder, we may favour a reconstructive therapy that also reaches those aspects that at times appear resistant to change.

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At this point we may exclude that being in a relationship with others only on the basis of Dependency Constructs is possible, taking for granted that, aside from relationships of scarce importance, it would be difficult to have an interpersonal relationship only based on asking for the satisfaction of one’s own needs without having the slightest construction of the other.

It is important to focus on what “playing a ROLE” and “playing a Dependency Role” mean.

In our opinion, we “play a ROLE” when the way we act with the other is the result of the sum of our construction of ourselves, of our understanding of the way the others construe us and how they have come to do so, of our understanding of what the others see in us in a certain way, and of how we relate to them when we realize that we are the person that others see and not the person who we think we are.

To play a Role is a circular process in which our effort is towards a complex understanding of the network of relations between the way we construe ourselves and the others, as well as the way the others construe themselves and us. The Role, as intended by Kelly, is similar to the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity (Armezzani & Chiari, 2015).

There is reciprocity when “playing a ROLE” if the participants, whether they are two or more, are involved in a reciprocal movement towards each other, within a process of mutual assimilation and accommodation. We do not consider reciprocity a *conditio sine qua non* in

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order to play a ROLE, as previously described.

Our acting within the relationship is oriented by a continuous test of the validity of the constructions we have, and by the attempt to maintain this construction constant to our eyes.

In this case, what the persons are mainly verifying in the relationship with the other is the validity of their Dependency Roles rather than the understanding of what is happening in the relationship. Revisions are in the direction of being able to continue to confirm them rather than revising them in the light of what is taking place with the other.

By construing ourselves as not completely recognized we tend to preclude the possibility to construe in what way we could be fully recognized by others.

If the Dependency Roles are invalidated – as is more likely than in the ROLE – it is likely that the person shows a disorder, as described by Chiari and Nuzzo (2010) and by Walker (2002) in terms of nonvalidation, at the time the request for a therapeutic help is made.

To the extent that the invalidation of a Dependency Role implies guilt or the threat of guilt, the person may choose to halt his or her experience, by avoiding the verification of the dimensions of self that have been invalidated within the relationship. This can occur through the recourse to hostility or constriction. As a person faces the possibility to see their core structure of the Role invalidated, it is better for them to stop making experience rather than running the risk to jeopardize the organization of the system, and therefore the survival (Maturana & Varela, 1984).

In our therapeutic procedures, it would be appropriate to legitimate and reassure the clients before inviting them to explore the infinite worlds of the other, according to the premise that once one's idea of themselves has gained in coherence and one's own needs are felt to be recognized as legitimate, it will become more simple to consider the others as persons.

Let us focus again on that “MAY” underlined at the beginning. Playing a ROLE represents a precise choice, a straightforward adherence to a mutual accommodation and assimilation process in which we must be willing to make ourselves available: willing to go towards the unexpected, to follow unexplored and impervious paths, to transform oneself with the other, to construe new and unknown dimensions of the self.

Who, among us, could risk all this when the ground seems already to tremble beneath us? Who would want to face the ocean on a boat that is already sinking?

This is why the ROLE is viable in some relationships and not in others, and it often alternates with Dependency Roles, sometimes just barely traced without having completely taken form and embodied.

Conclusion

We hope to have succeeded in our intent to communicate the great complexity of orienting oneself within the world of relationships, and to suggest the many shades and variations of the theory in the light of which we perceive ourselves, our patients, and the relationships we have. Dependency is not just Dependency, the ROLE is not just the ROLE, we move in dimensions of Dependency and Role in a way that does not appear as schematic or rigid.

In this paper we have kept in mind several expressions often used during conversations with our clients in order to facilitate the understanding of the other and to loosen certain constructions.

“Yes, fine... you've described what you don't like in the behaviour of your boyfriend, what actually annoys you and makes you think he's selfish and doesn't care about you... but we can't be totally satisfied with this outlook... We have to give you and your boyfriend some different

possibilities... maybe it's not all so definitive and clear cut and schematic as you describe it... maybe there are some gradations, maybe things are a little more complex than this... let's try to see, let's try to think about this together...”

In our way of thinking this means inducing a kind of movement towards the other, something that may lead to widening the prospects involved.

The ROLE as we have represented it is for the therapist, from a theoretical viewpoint, what for the client is, on a clinical level, the reflection on the process of understanding the other. It represents a way to break new paths and to offer new possibilities, to perceive how we may consider and understand our clients in different ways, to express the breadth and the complexity of the relational world in which we live and operate professionally.

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The Authors

Mara Ognibeni, psychologist and psychotherapist, teacher AIPPC and SITCC, works as a teacher in the School of Specialization CESIPc (Florence and Padua) and as psychotherapist both in couple and individual settings in Florence and Ancona. She has long been interested, in training processes within the Ermeneutic Constructivism. Her attention is focused on the Relationship in both group and individual settings.
Email: m.ognibeni@fastnet.it

Ombretta Zoppi, psychologist and psychotherapist, teacher AIPPC, she works as a teacher in the School of Specialization CESIPc and as a psychotherapist mainly in individual settings. Within the Ermeneutic Constructivism, she is interested in the narrative processes in psychotherapy, in training processes and in didactic supervision.
Email: omzoppi@tin.it



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