



Outline of a grand theory of psychological activity

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Submitted: 10th June 2022

Accepted: 24th July 2022

Abstract

The rise of psychology over the past century has proceeded apace even in the absence of a unifying theory. The current state of the discipline is one where distinct sub-disciplines pursue compartmentalised interests based on specialist foci that address nuanced aspects of psychological activity in the human species. This commentary outlines the minimal ingredients of a grand theory of psychological activity that requires formulation at three levels of analysis. At the macro level, sociocultural contextual factors bear an influence on individuals and are more or less conducive to the expression of particular tendencies. At the micro level, phylogenetic tendencies influence psychological activity through neurochemical activity. At the meso level, individual dispositions are attuned to contextual demand through a process of changing mindsets to suit circumstances. At this strictly psychological level of activity, the ethical imperative facing the discipline is one that helps maximise psychological health and wellbeing in the face of adversarial conditions.

Keywords: Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Social Psychology, Personality, Worldviews, Cultural Influence.

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Rivista di Psicologia Clinica (ISSNe 1828-9363), n. 1/2022
DOI: 10.3280/rpc1-2022oa14456

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Salvatore and colleagues (this issue) draw our attention to the expansion of psychology's domain of interest, over the years, to cover every aspect of human activity. This ranges from the clinical situation to issues experienced by everyone in everyday life, such as relationships, workplace behaviour, physical fitness, health, wellbeing, and so on. In a sense, this is not all that surprising. The psychological subject engages in psychological activity in all she does; psychology is part of human nature. This is similar to physiological activity – the heart pumps blood around the body whether the subject is working out on a treadmill or relaxing at home in front of a television set. Cardiac activity is implicated as well as interesting in both cases. In the former, one is curious to see how well the heart might be keeping up with the strains of physical exercise. In the latter, one is curious to see whether cardiac activity, like heart rate and blood pressure, relax to a healthy level. Physiological intervention may be directed at either or both cases, depending on whether any anomalous patterns are discerned by the medical practitioner. The same holds true for psychology given that, like physiology, psychological activity is implicated in every aspect of human functioning. By extension, therefore, psychology has a question to ask and something to say about the entire gamut of human activity.

This state of affairs, however, stands in sharp contrast to the exclusive focus on the abnormal, or patterns of activity which do not “fit”. This is not to say that abnormal psychology, or psychopathology, is not a legitimate psychological concern. It certainly is, but it is not the only one. Psychology today, clinical psychology included, investigates the normal as well as the abnormal with the intent of identifying techniques for how psychological health can be ameliorated. Over the years, the abnormal has been associated with norms of behaviour that are relative in their manifestation (Farr, 1996). Psychologists understand that what is routine for some may be abnormal for others, and vice-versa. The fashion styles associated with Goth or EMO style have gone as far as to popularise what were previously considered psychological aberrations.

Be that as it may, psychology is still routinely requested to dig into a box of tricks to help resolve psychological ails, regardless of the fact that such problems may be construed differently by others. Parents still

take their teenagers to therapy when they realise they are self-harming, whether this behaviour conforms to some overarching fashion trend of the times or otherwise. Managers still implement team building programmes to help their human resources thrive and produce, even though some will say that the problem lies elsewhere, such as with management. The point is that psychology, in all its branches, remains attuned to human welfare of the psychological kind and perseveres in its efforts to understand it enough to try to improve it. It is hard to argue against such noble aspirations in the same way that it is hard to argue against the Hippocratic Oath, even though the life preserved may be depraved and go on to perpetrate heinous atrocities. No one would dare blame a doctor for this eventuality however. And in a similar way, no one blames psychology for trying to help restore and improve psychological health where needed either. This laudable aspiration drives the discipline forward in various directions. On the one hand, the Behavioural Sciences aspire to identify ways to nudge individuals to act in determined ways that (presumably) benefit society as well as the individual herself. On the other hand, the Cognitive Sciences are driven by the impetus to discern our neuro-cognitive mapping that, if tweaked through neurochemical activation, promises to modify subsequent behaviours and experiences. The Psychological Sciences add to these concerns a broader gamut of phenomena, such as experiences, emotions, non-conscious processes and social relations, all of which play a role to some extent in how an individual comes to develop or resolve a psychological condition.

One question that the application of psychology raises, most predominantly in its clinical vestige, is whose ends are being pursued through intervention (Sammot *et al.*, 2016)? Whilst some will argue that alleviating the suffering associated with psychotic or depressive episodes is a clear and straightforward task that requires no further justification, other areas of intervention may be less clear cut. For instance, psychology has pathologised individuals in the past on the basis of exhibited behaviours that are no longer deemed pathological today. The example of gay conversion therapy, which is being outlawed in many countries worldwide, provides a sobering lesson for the discipline. Moreover, there is something to be said about side-effects and long-term consequences of psychological intervention. Empowering an individual through cognitive therapy, for example, may lead to

relational breakdown and cause other forms of suffering that, perhaps, a systemic intervention might have averted. On the other hand, is it worth preserving a family nucleus that includes an active perpetrator? Is it not better to empower the domestic violence victim to break the cycle and seek romance elsewhere? My point here is that perhaps more than ever, as we learn further about human functioning and new psychological questions come to the fore, the domain of ethics in psychological practice becomes ever more salient. Sure, the discipline has extensive ethics codes that the various disciplinary bodies are charged with enacting and enforcing. But the crucial problem here remains our fundamental inability to understand the breadth and depth of our interventions given the disparate, specialised and compartmentalised psychologies our interventions draw upon. This is the outcome of a disjointed and fragmented discipline, which Salvatore and colleagues (this issue) draw our attention to. Should we alleviate anxiety by changing workplace practices, or should we pursue the same ends through psychotherapy? Which intervention is preferable, and why? These questions are a direct result of psychology's lack of a unified theory. Yet, I would like to suggest, this is no cause for despair. If anything, this only means that great discoveries in our discipline lie ahead of us not behind us, as we continue to figure out how psychological activity arises and unfolds in human subjects over the lifespan and in the contexts they inhabit. Rather than despair, this task is invigorating and in what follows, I wish to sketch the minimal constituents of what a grand theory of psychological activity might start to look like.

Individual Differences

Clearly, a central focus of any psychological inquiry – clinical psychology in particular – is a description of the psychological condition demonstrated by the afflicted individual. The roots of any psychological condition arguably extend beyond the individual with the presenting problem, as do its effects. Nevertheless, the individual's inclinations, behaviours, emotions, cognitions and dispositions are focal ingredients for any psychological analysis. We understand today that not all individuals are the same – some are more or less inclined than

others given any dispositional tendency. Indeed, this represents the great insight of “individual differences”, which some sub-disciplines of psychology have used as a measure of normality and, by implication, to define what is abnormal as well as, by extension, what can be regarded as psychopathological. Be that as it may, some individuals are more neurotic than others, more depressed or more jovial than others, more prone to anxiety, sadness, violence, happiness, open-mindedness, cognitive closure, and so on for any psychological trait one could identify. The same holds true for physical features attributable to individuals. The big question psychologists have faced over the years is how to explain these different tendencies, particularly how to explain how they arise? Evolutionary theory has solved this problem for physical traits by identifying the dual mechanism of natural and sexual selection operating at the genetic level. For psychology, the task is somewhat more arduous since it involves but exceeds biological propensities alone. The challenge, however, remains: if we know how they arise, then we know where and how to intervene in the same way that treating obesity requires consideration of calories consumed through eating and expended through exercise. One core explanation is that humans are endowed with a range of traits, on which they differ from others. The constellation of traits a particular individual demonstrates represents her personality, in other words, what makes her the *person* she is, different from any other person. I refer predominantly to the trait theory of personality here. The jury is still out on whether individual differences can be explained in terms of single traits alone or whether differences are due to structural variability in the constellation. In essence, however, we are wired differently from each other and differences in our human activity can be explained, at least in part, as a function of these psychological underpinnings.

The question of wiring here is crucial. One wonders how we come to have differently structured personalities. This takes us to the heart of the nature-nurture debate, which I will not rehearse here. We largely understand that our biological sub-structure plays a role, that our brains secrete neurotransmitters that lead to variable experiences in the mind, and that our inherited genetic baggage has something to do with the behavioural dispositions we demonstrate, at least to some extent. Genetic mutation alone explains how some disorders arise, by throwing a spanner in the works of healthy functioning and giving rise to

maladaptive dispositions. These may not survive phylogenetic transmission, but they still need to be contended with in the present and for the particular individual.

Arguably, the most influential theory of personality worldwide is the Big Five theory of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), that posits that individual differences in personality arise as a function of the role played by five underlying traits (Openness to Experience, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness). This theory has attracted cross-cultural criticism regarding validity of its claims concerning the universality of the range and type of traits (Wang, Cui & Zhou, 2005; Zhou *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, the specific role played by particular traits remains contentious (Connelly, Ones & Chrnysenko, 2014). Another theory that has gained prominence in recent years is the Dark Tetrad theory of personality (Paulhus, 2014), which posits that maladaptive behaviour can be explained as a function of three underlying pernicious traits (Psychopathy, Narcissism, Machiavellianism). In any case, psychology subscribes to the belief that human beings are not all alike, they differ from one another in their inclinations, and this in itself may, at times and for certain individuals, prove problematic. Psychologists, therefore, are called upon to help remedy certain inclinations (e.g. addiction) or alleviate the suffering caused by certain dominant dispositions (e.g. depression), despite the fact that their root cause may originate in underlying phylogenetic influences about which psychologists can due precious little, or overarching socio-political conditions that burden individual functioning. It is to the latter set of influences that we now turn.

Socio-Political Conditions

If social, cultural and political conditions fully determined individual inclinations, we would expect all Italians to demonstrate the same personality structure, different from the French personality structure, from the American personality structure, and so on. Deterministic accounts on the nurture side of the debate are prone to such fallacies. Behaviourism rests, to some extent, on the belief that human beings will respond to stimuli in the same way, regardless of individual differences that manifest between them at the psychological level. But all

Italians are not alike, and all French, American, or any other socio-ethnic-cultural-political category one may choose to identify with are not all alike either. However, socio-ethnic-cultural-political conditions differ from each other at the macro level and these differences translate into differences at the individual level, at least in part. That is, some contextual conditions are more or less conducive to particular inclinations than others. This is the behavioural insight that behaviourists have developed into a fully-fledged science – the science of nudging individuals in determined directions due to their being, to some extent, similar in certain respects.

In essence, whilst human infants have the natural capacity to learn any human language, Italian infants naturally learn to speak Italian, British children naturally learn English, Chinese children naturally learn Mandarin, and so on. That is, our abilities are both developed and honed through the environment we are exposed to. Children who grow up in stimulating environments do better at school than they would if they lacked such stimulation, regardless of their natural abilities. In other words, the kind of person we end up being depends on how our inclinations are shaped by the environment we inhabit. It follows that some environments are more conducive to develop some inclinations than others, for better or worse. Sociologists have sought to identify the universal features on which societies differ. Hofstede's (1991) theory of cultural dimensions and Schwartz's (2006) theory of cultural values are two of the most well-known and have received a lot of scholarly attention over the years. The effort is similar to the psychological enterprise to map the personality structure for the sake of comparison between different types.

The Missing Link

I would like to argue that the above two foci represent macro and micro influences on human psychology. Both sources of influence are concurrently implicated in social psychology – that branch of psychology devoted to understanding the relational individual in context. Social psychology has for a long time been juxtaposed against individual psychology. But just like the normal and abnormal are two sides of the same coin, the individual and the social are two sides of the same coin

of psychological activity like a figure/ground Gestalt. However, I would like to argue that between the two of them is a missing link that explains how an individual with characteristic natural dispositions goes on to develop particular tendencies and consequently demonstrate certain behaviours in a context of a certain kind, which results in psychological actions bearing consequences that play a role in the psychological functioning of the same individual. This refers to the meso level of psychological activity, which has received scant scholarly attention over the years but that proffers explanations that stand across the social psychological divide.

In essence, we understand how certain genetic influences go on to shape our dispositional tendencies that lead us on to particular psychological experiences. The same situation (e.g. public speaking) may thus be pleasant for some and anxiety-provoking for others. We also understand that situational circumstances hone our psychological tendencies. In one context being different is shunned, whilst in another it may be valorised. But individuals regularly turn up to the psychologist's office for therapy that helps them change, without resort to either changing contextual conditions (i.e. systems therapy) or meddling with their biochemical dispositions (i.e. psychiatric treatment). Taking nothing away from the fact that both systemic and psychiatric interventions may be effective and desirable in their own right, there is also a level at which people change without resort to one or the other. This level is, I wish to propose, strictly psychological, and is one step removed from direct genetic influences in a way that personality theories are not, as well as one step removed from social, political and cultural conditions in a way that cultural theories are not. In other words, this is the level at which *individual dispositions are attuned to contextual demands*.

The individual who makes recourse to psychological intervention is one who experiences a misalignment between her experience and her expectations of the experience. That is, she wants something different and that want leads to a discomfort that the individual has not resolved on her own. Individuals do not go to therapy to recite what is great about their lives. They focus on what is less than great – the problems, the issues. As detailed above, the roots of these problems may lie elsewhere, possibly genetic or social, or both. But the crucial point here is that people can be helped to change their *outlook* on

something, to experience a situation differently by thinking about it differently perhaps, or deriving a new sense out of it, construing it in a different way, without necessarily changing the situation itself and without medicating for it. That is, individuals can learn to cope with the situation, rather than change it or change themselves in reaction to it. And when they cope, they adapt to it, by changing themselves from one state to another, where the former was maladaptive and the latter adaptive. That, essentially, is what coping is – a state of conjectured adaptation to circumstances. And, I argue, this constitutes the missing psychological link.

As stated, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the meso level focus over the years. Some notable theories stand out, which I have rehearsed at length elsewhere, such as Salvatore and colleagues' (2018) notion of symbolic universes, Leung & Bond's (2010) theory of social axioms, and Haidt's (2012) theory of moral frameworks. What all these theories have in common, other than a fivefold typology, is a postulation of psychological states that represent an individual's axiomatic outlook on the world which shapes and guides their perceptions, the sense-making features of their cognitions, and the emotive responses they trigger to flavour their psychological experiences. For instance, recent research shows that worldviews based on these typologies discriminate supporters for recreational cannabis from opponents to this legislation (Sammut, Mifsud & Brockdorff, 2022). Clearly, one cannot assume that differential support for policy is based on personality structures rooted in genetic tendencies. Nor can sociocultural conditions alone predict such divergent support within the same setting. Once this missing link is factored in, we understand how in certain societies, some individuals who are inclined in a certain way will go on to act in particular ways that others will perceive as psychological activity of a certain kind. This applies to the deranged suicide bomber as much as it does to the holy ascetic, as well as the myriad constellation of behaviours that range between these two extremes and which pertain to the everyday life that human subjects actually and effectively inhabit.

Conclusion

Salvatore and colleagues (this issue) highlight the lack of a grand theory of psychological activity and point to some consequences of this disciplinary failure. They also advance some proposals of what a grand theory could look like. In this commentary, I have discussed the minimal ingredients that a grand theory of psychological activity requires. At the macro level, psychologists understand that different environments are more or less conducive to the expression of particular dispositions. At the micro level, psychologists understand that human beings are endowed with characteristic tendencies that naturally incline them in determined directions. These represent the sociogenetic and the phylogenetic influences on psychology respectively. At the meso level, psychologists understand that the people change even though their biological dispositions and the sociocultural contexts they inhabit might remain constant (Sammut, Foster & Andrisano-Ruggieri, 2016). The question is, what changes when individuals change? I have argued that ontogenetic changes psychologists typically target help individuals adapt their mindsets to changing circumstances. I propose that the ability to change mindsets constitutes our species' adaptive potential, much like a phenotypic camouflage, that enables individuals to pursue ontological aspirations that maximise their wellbeing (Sammut, 2019). This, in essence, represents the psychologist's ethical task.

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