



## Dynamics of defragmentation

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### Abstract

In their statement paper, Salvatore and colleagues observe dynamics of expansion and specialization in the field of psychological theory and clinical practice, and especially the compartmentalization of professional psychology. The authors, joining a long strand of diagnostics about the fragmentation of the field, argue in favor of an effort toward a reunification of the field. They propose three “overarching strategies: I) the identification of the ultimate causal explanation, from which phenomena could originate; II) the progressive extension of the explicative capacity of specific theories to phenomena other than those for which the theory was originally elaborated; III) the building of a metatheoretical framework providing the language to map the conceptual linkages among short theories”. The authors present these strategies as alternatives that would exclude each other and indicate that they themselves do not agree on the best way to fight against fragmentation. As readers with experience in developmental psychology and with the development of theory, we believe that this separation is based on a static flaw: understood dynamically, these three strategies may well be part of a general movement of theoretical development. We illustrate our point with a series of theoretical moves in our fields.

**Keywords:** Development, Theoretical Integration, Dialogism.

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## Psychology without Foundation<sup>1</sup>

Describing psychology as fragmented is one possible narrative of the field; one may also object that, psychology, as any growing system, undergoes phases of differentiation and hierarchization (Werner & Kaplan, 1963; Zittoun *et al.*, 2009); however, in the case of the authors, the starting point comes from an experienced crisis in professional practice, which justifies a particular reading of the field as fragmented.

From that perspective, then, psychology is a fragmented field, both in theory and in the field of professional practice. The fragmentation is due to a large range of causes: the diversity of objects studied by psychology, and the range of its scales (from neurobiological processes to social discourses); the pluralization of schools and traditions over the world, while the domain attracts more and more scholars; the financial interests related to publications, conferences, funding bodies, psychological practice, insurances, and the medicalization of the field; an old habit to create schools around creative scholars cultivated as heroes, and the reinforcement of boundaries around communities, rather than fostering collaborative work, etc.

First, even if we admit this differentiation, one may question the need to achieve a form of global unity – is it necessary or even really possible to find a unifying principle in what explains neuronal plasticity, repressed memories, and group activism? (Zittoun *et al.*, 2009). To the search for unity, we would first oppose the principle of commensurability among theories and concepts (Valsiner, 2007; 2009): to address complex phenomena today – such as the construction of gender at school (Cabra, 2021), the development of older persons in new housing modes, or the life-long experience of immobility (Pedersen & Zittoun, 2021) – we need to be able to put in dialogue a diversity of concepts and theories, so as to combine multiple perspectives and different levels of analysis. Commensurability requires interdisciplinary work, collaboration, and theoretical creativity and integration (Valsiner, 2007, 2009; Zittoun, submitted; Zittoun *et al.*, 2007). Hence, against a search for unity, we more modestly encourage other forms of integrative efforts.

<sup>1</sup> A heading referring to Stenner & Brown (2009).

Second, we believe that the question of the “solution” to fragmentation, even through local integration, needs to be reflected on the basis of some explicit theoretical and epistemological assumptions. The three strategies proposed by the authors – looking for ultimate causes, proceeding by extension, looking for metatheoretical principles – seem to be proposed from different fields, on the background of different types of research and practice; the authors can therefore themselves see them as in potential opposition, or having only local validity. These thus appear as isolated operations, detached from wider dynamics or purpose. We believe that a reflection on theoretical integration needs to be grounded in a certain conception of what scientific work is, and how it changes and progresses.

### **A developmental stance**

We approach psychological science from a developmental and sociocultural perspective, and epistemologically, we assume a constructivist, dialogical and pragmatic stance. This implies, first, that we are aware that theories and concepts are not hanging out there waiting to be discovered; theories and concepts are co-constructed, in our interaction with the world, and authors of the past and the present (Carré *et al.*, 2016; Doise, 1989; Silva Guimarães, 2021). Second, we work with a historical, processual, or dialogical ontology, which then translates, epistemologically, in a duty to identify processes of development and change, not static phenomena (Bornstein & Lamb, 2015; Valsiner, 1994; Valsiner *et al.*, 2009). And third, we believe that a good criterion for the solidity of a theory is its pragmatic validity: does it enable to see or conceive better some aspect of the reality, does it enable us to guide an efficient activity (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; James, 1904a, 1904b; Rosenbaum, 2015; Zittoun, 2015)?

From such a perspective, then, the movement against fragmentation is a developmental process, and it has to be described as a dynamic process. Theories and concepts may at some point move towards a certain form of extension within another field, and in other contexts lead to the need to find a metatheoretical framework which coordinates different concepts developed in other fields. As such, the dynamic movements through which theories and concepts evolve can

take various shapes, as any trajectory of thinking or of theoretical elaboration. From such perspective, then, the three strategies identified by Salvatore and colleagues (2022) can be seen as subcases of movements of transfer, enrichment, and generalization, as part of dialogues within theory and between theory and empirical facts, or as part of more general abductive dynamics (Cornish, 2020; Valsiner, 2017; Zittoun, 2017).

### **Qualifying Movements of Theoretical Integration**

Let us first start with a basic movement of generalization in theory, the one that the authors call “extension”. Extension is the first and simplest way by which findings expand from one case to further cases. Extension can be distinguished in three main ways.

The simplest extension is that by contiguity; it is a form of horizontal translation. A researcher observes a child interacting with a wooden object that resists its activity, say, piling it up onto another one; he calls it conflict. He then observes another child struggling with how much liquid remains when a glass is transposed in another glass – this is another case of conflict, then. He then realizes that the resolution of the conflict brings the child to more complex conducts. Conflict is a concept that can be extended to a wide variety of situations, and that enables to build a theory of assimilation and accommodation, key for development (Piaget, 2000). Later on, another researcher realizes that children that disagree may actually gain new understandings from the conflict of perspective; that seems to be another case of conflict – now a socio-cognitive conflict (Perret-Clermont, 2020; Perret-Clermont *et al.*, 2004). These are still cases of horizontal generalization, or transfer of concepts. Later on, further researchers realize that young people experiencing the move to a new school, or mobile person arriving in a new country, or older persons losing their homes, all experience a form of rupture in the taken for granted; this seems to be triggering developmental processes (Zittoun, 2006, 2008; Zittoun *et al.*, 2021) – other, slightly more complex cases of horizontal extensions. Now, researchers may realize that ruptures and conflicts engage similar phenomena, which can be more generally modeled as a person, with a given state of understanding, facing a disrupting event, requiring a reorganization

of knowledge. A second move would thus be to say that these dynamics pertain to the same class of phenomena – which would be still a horizontal extension, but this time with more active bridging of two sets of notions, or a partial integration (Zittoun *et al.*, 2003). However, one may do a third form of extension, by attempting to integrate these observations in one single explanation or subsuming them under one concept – that of conflict, or rupture, or crises – which would be a form of vertical extension.

Second, researchers may wonder why these dynamics seem to be so close to each other, and to other ones – cases of cognitive dissonance, group conflict, etc. This would require hypotheses about the phenomena beyond these observations; and here the researchers would turn to what Salvatore and colleagues (2022) call the search for the ultimate cause. What are the substrates of these conflicts – schemes, semiotic constructs, electric dynamics? Why are conflicts conducing to change – because they demand the production of discourse, or a solution, or a new scheme? For the first researcher mentioned above, knowledge is based on the complexification of schemes emerging from action; this is the ultimate cause of development (Piaget, 2000). For other researchers, conflicts are rather seen as liberating affects that need to be elaborated, and so semiotic elaboration is the cause of change (Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). Hence, there may be different, and compatible or not, models to account for these phenomena.

Third, researchers may then wonder why these searches for ultimate cause are compatible or not, or what supports these. For this, they will need to temporarily forget the specificities of the phenomena they observe, to consider more metatheoretical explanations. One may thus consider that all psychological phenomena, whether individual or collective, are based on very basic semiotic processes of progressive generalization (Valsiner, 2021a, 2021b); the same, or others, may prefer to consider that all changes can be described in fundamental open dynamic system terms (Smith & Thelen, 2003; van Geert, 2019; Witherington, 2007). Moving to metatheoretical explanation enables then to come back to the specificities of observations, and to give a grounding for past local extensions, as well as provide supports for new ones. It also enables to select among ultimate causes, the one that are compatible with other findings.

## And Back to the World

We so far decomposed the dynamics of theoretical integration inherent to any knowledge construction – whether the acquisition of language or mathematical reasoning in children, of professional expertise, or of life experience: these require transfer of knowledge across domains, either horizontal or vertical; the latter often require the emergence of new levels of explanation, and these may potentially, partly, or wholly, reorganize other aspects of previous understandings. In addition, all these processes require some fundamental pragmatist tests: the concept, knowledge, or explanation, works or not – they are validated by practice, by communities, or by consistency.

Unlike common sense knowledge, however, theoretical constructions are characterized by the need, for developing, to be formalized to some extent – this may temporarily take a metaphorical form, as part of the scientific imagination (Zittoun, 2021; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2020b) – and to satisfy to some criteria of quality and transparency; they are much more dependent on the approval of other researchers, and validation by communities. And this is where we come back to our core issue: the only way to overcome fragmentation is for each of us, psychologists, to read beyond our field of expertise, to engage with other researchers, and to interact with the world that resists our propositions; we need to take the time and the risk to think and to try to practice with others. Defragmentation requires a fundamental dialogical engagement as a dynamic process, and it is the responsibility of each of us to do our part.

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