



“E pluribus unum”? From colors to psychology

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Abstract

The commentary deals with multiplicity vs unity in psychology, contrasting the compartmentalization of psychology as several different disciplines. The problem has significant repercussions on the professional level, given that the psychologist under Italian law is authorized to work in all fields of the psychological profession, except psychotherapy for which specialist training is required. Possible unifying criteria, epistemology and methods common to the entire psychological science are sought. The applicative aspects for training, in light of the new norms on the qualifying degree in psychology, are discussed.

Keywords: psychological profession, epistemology, psychological methods, training.

Multiplicity vs unity in psychology: a professional perspective

“*E pluribus unum*” – Is this motto (firstly attributed to Virgilio with reference to colors, and adopted for many historical seals and coins) applicable to psychology? Can a coherent picture be built up by

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differently colored and shaped pieces of the puzzle of a seemingly fragmented psychology?

The compartmentalization of psychology is an ancient issue. In the first year of publication of the *Review of General Psychology*, Yanchar and Slife (1997) exposed the concern that «disciplinary fragmentation is precluding the accumulation of knowledge and catalyzing the dissolution of institutionalized psychology» (p. 235). Many attempts have been made to search for unity (e.g., Staats, 1999; Henriquez, 2011), but much mistrust remains: «If there is a kind of unification in psychology's future, it is more likely to be one that, paradoxically, sees it broken up into a number of large 'super-subdisciplines', each of which exhibits more internal coherence than does the current sprawling and heterogeneous whole» (Green, 2015, p. 207).

Recently, the problem has been reported to professional psychology.

Saks (2016, p. 170) highlighted «the ongoing significance of professions in the fast changing modern world. There are debates about their current levels of autonomy, but within their new organizational and societal context professional groups remain powerful with a growing theoretical literature on their nature and role». According to Burns (2019), professions should re-think their position to meet the demands of social policies, organizations and consumers. «Professions are made up as they go along» (p. 65).

With reference to the psychological profession, Salvatore *et al.* (2022) underline that the two main lines of its development – expansion and specialization – are intertwined. Are these trends also reciprocally dependent, i.e. expansion requires specialization, creating several psychological subdisciplines, each with different epistemological and theoretical backgrounds and different specific methods? «The repertoires of knowledge of most professional psychology are based on or comprise short-range models that tend to operate in reciprocal isolation, as self-contained systems of theory and practice, ending up being separate territories, with weaker and weaker reciprocal linkages ... This separation is sanctioned and further fueled by the separation between scientific communities, each with its own organizational structures, contexts, and communication tools (conferences, journals, scientific associations)» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, pp. 10-11).

But, according to the Italian laws, the psychological degrees and

the habilitation (now to be included within the degrees themselves) regard all the fields of the psychological profession, except only the specific practice of psychotherapy, requiring a formal specialization. Therefore, all psychologists enrolled in the professional Order can work in all the fields of applied psychology, although this possibility is hardly realizable in concrete professional activity. How can this hypothetical and forced unity be represented and sustained by a community expanded and specialized in its scientific and formative bases?

In search for unifying criteria

The socio-biologist Edward Wilson (1998) argued for the fundamental unity of all knowledge and the need to search for what he calls “consilience”, i.e. the composition of the principles governing different branches of learning. Unifying the knowledge from different fields, consilience allows identifying powerful simple shared truths, overcoming the excessive fragmentation and specialization of knowledge. This approach is useful both across and within sciences, and can be applied to the different theoretical principles grounding “psychologies”.

According to Salvatore *et al.* (2022), a criterion is needed to compare the different approaches, with the aim of preventing the fragmentation of psychological science, and the intervention is proposed as a benchmark for finding this unifying criterion.

In previous articles (Di Nuovo, 2020, 2021) I suggested that the theoretical precariousness of psychology as a unitary science could find support by:

- a search for relations between *objective* observation and individual and social *subjectivity* – also with the help of models based on Artificial Intelligence, useful to cope with the dynamic complexity of the objects of study;
- the *transdisciplinarity* as a working strategy. In the “transdisciplinary” approaches (Bosio, Graffigna, and Barelo, 2021; Nicolescu, 2008) each science maintains its own specificity but together with the others, and with the social actors, designs, implements and verifies the construction of a society with less discomfort and more well-being. This approach is useful not only

between different sciences but also *within* the same discipline when it has several different theoretical and methodological models.

The target of the Salvatore *et al.* (2022) article is the professional, not only the academic and scientific, psychology. But are these separate worlds? Surely not, when psychological theories and applications are strongly connected, and this happens out of the laboratory where the variables are few and easily controlled. When variables are several, acting joined and without the possibility of reliable multivariate control, and modifying in time, attention should be focused on the methods of suitable applicative experimentation. An approach is needed that – without renouncing the rigor of the scientific method – aims not only at increasing knowledge and at verifying theoretical hypotheses but at modifying, through the experimental treatment, the object of study. Reference should be made to those sectors of psychological work in which the intervention is usually contemporary (and not subsequent) to the research, and the researcher is at the same time operator of a change to which clients and/or stakeholders are primarily interested. This happens in forensic, educational, and rehabilitation applications, in the psychology of organizations and institutions, of sport and leisure, etc. Particularly interested is clinical psychology (for prevention, counseling, and therapy), where professional interventions have been often separated from experimental approaches.

The traditional dichotomy between “basic” researchers and operators who “apply” the results of the research should be overcome. Near half a century ago a textbook, after reviewing the possibilities of the use of psycho-social theoretical models in clinical practice, concluded:

«We need controlled studies on theoretical relationships. We need a theoretical framework to operate as clinicians. But the clinician does not have to carry out this research himself. He has to keep himself informed about it ... Basic researchers and clinicians are in a productive, symbiotic relationship. Some trace the general principles; the others apply them to the real world» (Brehm, 1976, p. 237).

Thus theorizing a radical separation between “who does” and “who does research”. The time is ready to think of a figure of worker-researcher capable of combining psychological practice with the scientific logic of the *research-action* described by Lewin. The logic that

allows us to scientifically evaluate our own work without artificially separating the moment in which research is carried out and that in which the results are “applied”.

Without verifying efficacy and process of psychological interventions, professional psychology cannot be scientific – and cannot be socially useful, as requested by social stakeholders.

In search for common methods and epistemology

For this approach, psychology has several methods, from multi-centrum approaches to longitudinal and qualitative, idiographic methods. But, beyond methods, a unifying epistemology is needed.

Petocz and Mackay (2013) proposed that “situational realism” offers a unifying framework for psychology. «The approach is characterized by seven themes: ontological egalitarianism; situational complexity and process orientation; a network or field view of causality; a realist logic; a view of relations as nonconstitutive; an externalist relational approach to mind; and acceptance of critical inquiry as the core scientific method» (p. 216). This approach offers psychology a meta-theoretical framework to integrate hermeneutics and semiotics; allows expansion, redirection, and unification of psychological research methods, and has relevant consequences in the practice and teaching of psychology.

Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, and Reimer (2008) demonstrated the utility of hermeneutical applications to psychology as a whole and to some specific sub-disciplines (e.g., social and developmental psychology, psychoanalysis). Using both explaining and understanding the hermeneutics both discovers and constructs the reality, and this is particularly useful in applied psychology.

The hermeneutic approach is based on the constructivist ground of our knowledge that is aware of the limits of defining variables and trying to measure them (i.e., the traditional model of research and explanation). This approach includes the analysis of empirical data, obtained by observing selected variables, or an action as a whole in its development, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data based on techniques of assessment suitable to the aims of the study. But the hermeneutic approach goes beyond these simple and single analyses, connecting these data with others and exploring the topic of the research

in a cumulative way, as allowed by widespread statistical techniques (e.g., meta-analyses).

In search for formation

The last (but not least) issue to treat in search of a core epistemology for the psychological profession regards the *formation* to the way of building scientific applicative psychology, at the different levels: basic courses; Ph.D.; specializations in clinical and other fields of psychology, advanced training courses. In all these levels, including several formative contexts, the main problem is what model of psychology will be presented and, if models are different, what implications are needed in translating each model in professional practice.

Should the theoretical model each psychologist follows in his/her work remain fixed, i.e. the same on every occasion, or should it vary according to the requirements of the client or the context? For example, will the psychologist use the same model both in private and public practice, e.g., when it has to be applied in juridical or penitentiary contexts? Or should (s)he be able to integrate the basic model with approaches and techniques derived from other models more suitable for the specific contexts? In other words, the problem to solve is whether the model which mainly influenced the psychologist during the training (especially in the specialist formation), and of which (s)he is an expert, can always be strictly applied, or rather if the model can be modified when needed by implementing the so-called “integrated intervention” (both educational, or counseling, or therapy). In this perspective, it is needed to avoid the risk that this integration will become an ineffectual mixture of methods and techniques assembled without scientific rigor, only based on (possibly faulty) personal intuition that may cause great confusion and useless procedures. The training itself should teach how to integrate the models to answer specific targets and contexts of intervention, using appropriately the supervised practice as the recent Italian law on the habilitating degree requires. Teachers and tutors should be prepared for this, to build a project of formation useful for an integrated and transdisciplinary psychological profession.

“E pluribus unum”: a challenge for a meaningful picture of current psychology...

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