



Generating a beneficial creative chaos to manage compartmentalization in psychology: A trans-disciplinary approach to intertwine plurality and unity

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Abstract

The search for a composition between plurality and unity of psychology is developed here by articulating a reflection on three points concerning:

1. the origins of the phenomenon of compartmentalization that can be traced back to a dual configuration – plural and fragmented – of psychology; characteristics that are connected but not coincidental;
2. the acceptability of a trans-disciplinary approach to design a composition of psychology that respects its plural articulation;
3. the choice of the area of health as the elective phenomenical field to test the possibility of composing the plurality and unity of psychology starting from a trans-disciplinary approach.

Keywords: compartmentalization, plurality, fragmentation, professional psychology, trans-disciplinarity.

The position paper by Salvatore *et al.* (2022) that is commented on here deals with the phenomenon of the compartmentalization of the psychological profession, a phenomenon that we could also represent in terms of fragmentation and self-referentiality of professional practices. More specifically, the paper describes the current situation and

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puts forward a synoptic picture of the strategies deployed today to support a greater unity of psychology on a theoretical and pragmatic level.

Let us observe how the choice of anchoring the reading of the compartmentalization of psychology to the pathway of the construction of the profession – and not only to a formal epistemological analysis – is an opportune and shareable option from at least two points of view. From one side, it reinforces the perception of a problem certainly present in the psychologists' community (cf. Kazdin, 2008) and confirmed by empirical research on the profession (cf. Bosio & Lozza, 2021) but still rather weak in scientific reflection on the discipline¹. On the other hand, the professional anchoring highlights questions of great importance that are still open today: how to manage “here and now” a dilemmatic polarization between compartmentalization and unity in psychology? And how to repair the resulting state of fragmentation: a state destined to depower the discipline in its capability to construct responses to an increasingly challenging, multi-faceted and complex social demand for psychology?

To start from the pathway of the professionalization of psychology thus seems to configure a good laboratory for analysing our theme, as is also shown by the reconstruction of the “state of the art” proposed by Salvatore *et al.* (2022). I intend to start from this reconstruction in order to develop a reflection structured around three main questions schematized as follows.

1. What lies at the origin of the phenomenon of compartmentalization of the psychological profession and what are the generative roots of the phenomenon? In particular, are we dealing with an insuperable or manageable problem in the construction of the discipline?
2. How to configure an approach capable of linking plurality and unity in psychology? More specifically, is it possible to design a purposive process methodology from a trans-disciplinary approach?
3. And lastly, can the area of health (pivotal example reference in the paper by Salvatore *et al.*) be taken as a good area of test for linking plurality and unity of psychology in a trans-disciplinary key?

¹ A quick exploration conducted in Google Scholar for the period 1990-2022 from the keywords given here (unity of psychology, psychology unification, psychology fragmentation, psychology compartmentalization) shows a weak attention to the topic evenly distributed over time: the total contributions recorded are about fifty with a rate of a few units/year.

Plurality and/or fragmentation of psychology? At the root of the phenomenon of compartmentalization

Plurality and fragmentation are clearly configured as overlapping characteristics in the current structure of psychology. From here, a question imposes itself: are we dealing with coincident predicates of psychology or with distinct characteristics that the historical path of the discipline's construction has connected? Disambiguating the point is important: are we dealing with a sort of "original sin" (not amendable) or with the outcome of a contingent process (susceptible to reconfiguration)?

From my point of view, the second option appears more persuasive and sustainable on the basis of arguments that concern both the scientific and the professional set-up of psychology.

From a scientific point of view

The plural structure of psychology is configured first and foremost as a scientific response to the exceptional semantic breadth of the phenomenon to which the discipline is dedicated (a phenomenon with many faces categorized as: subject, mind, body, behaviour, relationship, individual, group, thought, language, emotion, discomfort, disorder, disease ...). This response – it is well known – has always been articulated on a wide variety of paradigms selectively focused on a subset of properties of the phenomenon identified as priorities.

The resulting plurality of theories and methods thus appears to be a constitutive fact of psychology that must be taken into account. First of all, to recognize the potential and limits of a paradigm with respect to the extension of the phenomenon of reference... unless we resort to options such as "psychology is my psychology", expression of a reductionist and hegemonic tendency that seems to have generated more difficulties than opportunities for psychology².

² It is well known (see e.g. Agazzi, 1976) that the choice of a paradigm is based on "a priori" – anthropological, cultural, value, ideological... assumptions – that are foundational to the paradigm itself. Any paradigm, therefore, is intrinsically limited in its capability to offer a total understanding of the phenomenon: both in terms of

We are therefore faced with an initial root of the phenomenon of compartmentalization that can be traced back to a plural structuring of psychology as a science. We know that, on a historical level, the management of this structural datum has clearly privileged – in line with the dominant mainstream in the scientific world (cf. Bosio & Morelli, 2015) – the internal growth of single paradigms in the logic of their hyper-specialization, underestimating the construction of systemic links between the various “visions” of psychology. This choice is now showing its penalizing effects for a multi-paradigmatic science such as psychology (cf. Henriques, 2004) but it must be recognised that this was a historical option and not an inevitable consequence due to the epistemological set-up of the discipline (cf. also Walsh-Bowers, 2010) therefore liable to new paths of response to plurality.

From a professional point of view

Similarly to what we have just seen, a growing plural articulation can also be observed in the frameworks of the psychological profession: some of them already codified for some time within standard classifications (see the taxonomy proposed by the APA), others more recent, fluid and in progress generated in the sphere of neo-professionalism (cf. Bosio, 2011).

This is – it should be clarified – a phenomenon analogous to what has been detected on a scientific level but autonomous and autogenous in relation to it. This, having to do with the concrete and contingent (historical-social) conditions within which the professionalization of psychology has been generated and is regenerated by a social demand of psychology even more varied, complex, and multi-faceted.

These conditions can be synthetically traced back to two main orders of factors: on the one hand, the characteristics of the phenomenon identified as elective that are at the origin of a professional service

the selective spectrum of phenomenal characteristics observed, and in terms of its foundations external to the paradigm itself.

This condition – it should be pointed out – certainly concerns psychology but not only that, extending to all empirical sciences, as evidenced by Godel’s incompleteness theorems (cf. Raatikainen, 2013) a mathematician ready to remind us that “what we can know is much more than what we can prove (from a paradigm)”.

(what salient dimensions of the phenomenon trigger a demand-supply of psychology?); on the other hand, the presence of lay actors (stakeholders) bearers of a demand – implicit or explicit – for psychology (what space to give them in the development of the profession?)

A specificity/autonomy of professional contexts is thus emerging, which poses difficulties: on the one hand, the prospect of constructing a profession as a pure replication of the scientific set-ups of the discipline³; on the other hand, the possibility of marginalising the role of the social contexts and the stakeholders in the creation of a professional project⁴.

In the face of this situation, the phenomenon of compartmentalization described by Salvatore *et al.* (2022) well represents the current state of the psychology profession within which plurality and fragmentation of professional contexts tend to be confused within a single offer. It is therefore necessary to disambiguate between the opportunities linked to a plural articulation of the profession and the limits of separate practices that have difficulty communicating with each other and legitimising each other. In short, we are facing the challenge of designing a good composition of the various professional paths of psychology within a common and shared frame; a task that cannot be entrusted to theories alone nor to the experience of individual communities of practice (Wenger, 2009), which for the most part generate a tacit and implicit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) exposed to the risk of self-referentiality and to the esoteric short-circuit of communication.

³ The linear “pure research-> applied research” model, however deeply rooted in the scientific tradition, does not seem to reflect the possibility of the “many ways of applying” in psychology (see Bosio, 2012) nor answer the need to intertwine within a dedicated project elective properties of a phenomenon and specificities of a paradigm. This actually opens up a reconfiguration of the model in an interactive logic: “applied research \leftrightarrow pure research”.

⁴ Scientific expertise does not seem to be able to manage a professional design on its own: in the face of a growing demand for the participation of lay actors (including the citizen-consumer and the consequent recognition of a role for the citizen scientist, see Stilgoe, 2009) and in view of the evidence that the quality – both objective and perceived – of the professional outcome is also linked to such participation (with reference to the health context, see Graffigna & Barelo, 2018).

Combining plurality and unity in psychology: a trans-disciplinary proposal

To summarise the picture that has just been outlined: a) psychology appears to be guided by a double internal dynamic that orients it towards plurality (basic structural fact) and towards fragmentation (historical construction in response to the structural fact); b) plurality and fragmentation, although different, are interwoven and characterise both the discipline and the psychological profession; c) the phenomenon of the compartmentalization of psychology represents the final negative outcome of this dynamic that calls for a threefold reparative intervention on the discipline, on the profession, and on the relationships that regulate discipline and profession.

On this point, the paper by Salvatore et. al (2022) proposes an effective synoptic framework concerning the strategies implemented to contain/resolve the fragmentation of psychology, outlining three paths defined as: “search for ultimate explanation” (search for a paradigm deemed capable of unifying the theoretical status of psychology), “strategy of extension” (progressive coverage of the different thematic areas of psychology by the same paradigm), “meta-theoretical framework” (systemic configuration capable of composing the theoretical and practical articulations of psychology within a unitary second level framework). These are three options that configure at the base a different response to the structure of psychology: the first two in a mono-paradigmatic key, reducing the current state of fragmentation of psychology by overcoming its plural paradigmatic configuration; the third in a systemic key, linking the many faces – theoretical and practical – of psychology within a unitary framework of a higher order.

A few considerations on the first two options. Both are oriented towards constructing an answer to the problem through the extension of a single paradigm, but following different paths: the first, on a theoretical level (see, for example, the path advanced with reference to evolutionary psychology described in the paper by Salvatore *et al.*); the second, on a pragmatic level (see, for example, the scope extension of neuroscience to construct a single umbrella capable of integrating the various domains of psychology: Cacioppo, 2002; Stam, 2015). These are, first of all, still emerging working hypotheses whose evaluation can be made in the long term on the basis of their outcomes and

are therefore of little use for a “here and now” management of the problem. Moreover, we are faced with paradigm unification projects destined at best to reduce the internal plurality of psychology but not to eliminate it at its roots, the gap between the semantic complexity of the phenomenon studied and the selectivity of the paradigmatic point of view chosen being insurmountable, as seen above.

From what has just been said it follows that the third way (meta-theoretical framework) should be considered carefully for two reasons: contingent (plurality is a constitutive datum of psychology that cannot be overcome in the short-medium term) and epistemological (the plurality within psychology can be reduced but not overcome due to the heuristic selectivity intrinsic to each paradigm). It will therefore be worthwhile to focus on investigating the possibilities of developing the third way by designing the implementation paths of a meta-theoretical framework.

In this sense, I offer a possible interpretation of the task – certainly not the only one – from a trans-disciplinary perspective. A theoretical-practical perspective oriented towards integrating epistemological-formal attentions in the analysis of the socio-historical process of constructing scientific knowledge and its applications. Developed in the last decades (on the impulse of some founding fathers such as Piaget, Morin, Bateson, Nicolescu...), the trans-disciplinary approach can be summarised in its founding traits as follows (for more details, see: Nicolescu & Ertas, 2008; Schweizer Ries & Perkins, 2012; Polk, 2014; Bernstein, 2015; Bosio & Morelli, 2015; Scholz & Steiner, 2015):

- attention to the sciences as a system of knowledge and to the path within which this system is constructed;
- recognition of the limits of scientific development based on an increasing separation between the sciences in terms of specialisation and hyper-specialisation;
- need to generate interconnections between the sciences in order to overcome the current state of fragmentation and self-referentiality (a need not satisfied by multi- or inter-disciplinary meeting logics aimed at building comparisons in additive logic but not substantial integration processes between different sciences);
- awareness of a growing social demand for scientific knowledge and

applications to be constructed in a polyphonic manner to respond to increasingly challenging and complex problems;

- awareness of the need to redesign relations between science and the outside world in order to foster the active participation of the lay (non-scientific) actor and the co-authorship of research and intervention paths;
- need to develop a process methodology capable of virtuously guiding the encounter between expert actors from different scientific backgrounds, as well as between expert and lay actors;
- propensity to anchor the development of a trans-disciplinary approach to concrete contexts of encounter between social demand and scientific supply within which shared co-designing can take place.

To summarise, it is evident how the trans-disciplinary perspective configures a response to the need to bring the sciences into dialogue: with each other and with the social contexts of reference. This point will be taken up in its implications for psychology in the last paragraph of this paper. What I propose here is to transfer and test the viability of a trans-disciplinary approach within psychology, given the evident paradigmatic and applicative fragmentation of this discipline: is it possible to compose plurality and communality in psychology in a trans-disciplinary key? The exercise is obviously exploratory, not only because it is in its beginning stages, but also because it may rest on a frame of reference still in progress in its configuration. While accepting, however, the degrees of provisionality and uncertainty involved, it is possible as of now to focus on certain meritorious points worthy of attention that can be schematised as follows.

Process-centeredness

The contribution offered by a trans-disciplinary approach is clearly of a meta-theoretical and meta-contextual nature since it does not concern the contents related to a paradigm or to the generative context of a practice but considers the construction process of these two worlds: within and between them. Hence the possibility of designing a frame of reference of a processual nature capable of articulating within common and shared methodological anchorages the plurality of disciplinary contents and practical contexts that populate psychology.

Project-centeredness

A trans-disciplinary approach hardly adapts to abstract modes of comparison but requires the construction of experiential frames within which to develop paths of encounter between expert knowledge oriented by a common triangulation on a real context that is the bearer of a question. I read here – in agreement with the choices made by Salvatore *et al.* – the possibility of identifying the professional context as an idealtype place within which to operate an integration between plurality of content and commonality of process in order to favour a de-compartmentalization of psychology in a trans-disciplinary key.

Conceptual analysis and formal ontology: two anchors for a trans-disciplinary design

A process methodology needs its articulation on the operational level. In this perspective, certain philosophical contributions in support of the method appear particularly promising: in themselves and for the derivatives that follow in the field of psychology (see, for example, Yanchar & Slife, 2000). I am referring to conceptual analysis and formal ontology as theoretical-methodological artefacts capable of guiding a path of comparison-composition between different scientific knowledge: among themselves and in their relationship with the phenomenical world (for further study see: Laurence & Margolis, 2003; Guizzardi & Halpin, 2008). These approaches are already present in the field of psychology (cf. e.g.: Ward, Haig, and McDonald, 2022; Martin, Sugarman, and Stanley, 2015), also with reference to the issue of the fragmentation of the discipline (Marsh & Boag, 2014; Hibberd & Petocz, 2022).

Conceptual analysis seems particularly promising in supporting the path of clarifying the semantic spectrum of a paradigm beyond entropies and linguistic overlaps (“what theoretical object am I talking about?”) a preliminary operation to a comparison with other paradigms engaged in reading the same phenomenon (cf. Baldwin, 2008; Tobon, 2018; Hibberd & Petocz, 2022).

Formal ontology, starting from the contribution offered by conceptual analysis, lends itself well to constructing a syntax regulated in

logical-formal terms between the properties of a paradigm and the properties of a phenomenical reality, or between scientific worlds and lifeworlds. We are talking – it should be made clear – about a space of definition free from substantive veritative concerns, (i.e. concerning the “true essence” of the phenomenon) but rather aimed at configuring a space of encounter/confrontation between otherwise incommensurable cognitive worlds (cf. Guizzardi & Halpin, 2008; Basli, 2015; Guarino & Musen, 2015).

Attention to the pragmatic and the quality of the path

The clarification of the logical-formal conditions on which to guide a trans-disciplinary encounter process can certainly mitigate the criticalities of an experiential pathway, but it would be excessive to expect the complete abolition of the problems linked to the complexity of the process (subjectivity of the actors and non-linearity of the situations..). As a matter of fact, the confrontation between different disciplinary universes and between scientific and lay knowledge asked to co-operate within an open project – which cannot be foreseen a priori either in its development or its outcome – implies the taking into account of pragmatic criticalities to be read and managed in the operational flow of the working group. The need to cope with “confusing...hybrid...non-linear...turbulent...” path junctions (cf. Aargard & Hansen, 2007) or manifestations of monopolistic temptations by “strong sciences” inclined to occupy the thematic field in a monodisciplinary key (cf. Bosio, 2021) or even the marginalisation of lay actors in practice (cf. Van Bower, 2017) is therefore to be expected. These are not insignificant problems that psychology seems to be sufficiently equipped to manage, having developed an appreciable wealth of knowledge and skills to support a good pragmatics of the encounter capable of fostering reciprocal fertilisation between the actors and positive effects on the creativity of the outcomes.

Health: a testing ground for a trans-disciplinary approach in psychology

The paper by Salvatore *et al.* explores the phenomenon of compartmentalization of psychology mainly in the area of health; a choice linked to the scientific-cultural specificity of the authors and the journal but also projected onto a broader dimension of meaning. The reasons for starting from the area of health to test a trans-disciplinary approach in psychology are different but all converging in connoting health as a pivotal area (cf. for more details Bosio, Barello and Graffigna, 2021):

- most psychologists find in health an elective area of reference both scientifically and professionally;
- health today configures a multi-faceted area that crosses most of the disciplinary and professional articulations of psychology;
- in this area the phenomenon of compartmentalization appears substantial, as does the opportunity of overcoming it: the difficulties of constructing a compositional framework of commonalities and differences on the scientific and professional level but also on the training level are evident (cf. Bosio, 2022a);
- finally, health appears to be an area in which psychologists are often confronted with other disciplines (medicine, but not only) that operate on the same themes and within the same spheres of action; to call oneself out of this confrontation would seem to destine psychologists to a sort of marginalisation, in particular with reference to the public health and welfare sphere (the Covid-19 experience is illustrative in this regard; cf. Bosio, 2022b).

There are therefore many and consistent reasons in favour of a commitment of psychology from a trans-disciplinary perspective in the area of health. A commitment that could strengthen its paradigmatic and professional construction in terms of de-compartmentalization but also increase its capacity for positioning and cooperation in scientific and professional projects increasingly marked in a trans-disciplinary sense. More than a wish, a necessity.

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