

## The importance of theory-driven psychology for overcoming common sense: The case of psychopathology

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**Abstract:**

Salvatore (2015) argues that psychology, in its development, has built his knowledge based on common sense. Only a theory-driven approach, in contrast to the prevailing evidence-based one, could overcome such an impasse. This paper tries to show how Salvatore’s approach, only apparently paradoxical, could be better understood through the example of psychopathology. Psychopathology is actually a discipline in which, against appearance, the influence of common sense is extremely intense.

**Keywords:** theory-driven; evidence-based; psychopathology; common sense.

**Sunto:**

Salvatore (2015) sostiene che la psicologia, nel corso del suo sviluppo, abbia costruito il suo sapere basandosi sul senso comune. Solo un’approccio theory-driven, in contrasto con quello prevalente evidence-based, potrebbe farle superare un simile impasse. Questo contributo cerca di mostrare come l’approccio di Salvatore, solo apparentemente paradossale, possa essere meglio compreso grazie all’esempio della psicopatologia. La psicopatologia è in effetti una disciplina nella quale, malgrado le apparenze, l’influenza del senso comune è estremamente intensa.

**Parole chiave:** theory-driven; evidence-based; psicopatologia; senso comune.

Sergio Salvatore's starting point in *Psychology in Black and White* (2015) is apparently defiant, while remaining consistent with an objective survey of contemporary psychology. According to Salvatore, psychology has been developed as a science of common sense. This has happened because, in general, its only purpose is to build models for explaining phenomena, which are described based on pre-scientific, commonsensical definitions. Such explanatory models, as Salvatore remarks, do no more than making plain a necessary semantic bond between *explanans* and *explanandum*. From this point of view, psychology explains, for example, that losing information is the effect of new information's interference; that intelligence correlates with scholastic success; or that therapeutic alliance influences the positive effect of psychotherapy. Concepts like oblivion and scholastic success are part of the ordinary language and their psychological definition does not substantially differ from the ordinary definition, understandable by everyone. Even the concept of psychotherapy could, in a way, be considered as having been acquired from popular culture. In actual fact, all of the examples of explanations provided above are tautological: losing information is part of the meaning of interference (=effect of information on other information); intelligence is always defined as performance (which means scholastic success is simply one of its possible definitions); and psychotherapy is a social activity with a shared goal (so its success is by definition tied to collaboration).

Nevertheless, the bond between the psychological sciences and common sense has a deeper and less immediately apparent consequence. The very reality of a phenomenon in the eyes of psychology might rely on its perception from within a given socio-historical context. An example given by Salvatore himself is addiction. In the European-Western opinion, one can be considered addicted to drugs but not to reading or to the internet but not to supporting a soccer team. One

might add that other forms of addiction, such as addiction to sex, are also defined based on the religious sensibility of a certain social group. "In sum, addiction is not a psychological construct, but a phenomenon of reality, defined prescientifically. Psychology is called on to explain it, not to define it". (Salvatore, 2016, p. xxiii). In fact, the whole psychopathological theory "defines the phenomena of interest according to the evolution of social values and structures of power" (p. xxxiii). A poignant example, given by Salvatore, is *drapetomania*, which, two centuries ago, was the diagnosis given to slaves that did not accept their condition and tried to escape. Such historical examples are indeed frequent. One might recall *sluggish schizophrenia*, which people who opposed the regime were diagnosed with during the Cold War beyond the Iron Curtain. Even if the real (positive and negative) symptoms of schizophrenia were not immediately recognizable, such a diagnosis could be proposed in the presence of other signs, which were unequivocal, such as an unhealthy level of research into freedom of expression and supposing facts hidden by the State. It can be demonstrated that such a nosographic entity was considered as real by professionals, since many of them, after hearing Gorbachev's public speeches, honestly believed that he suffered from sluggish schizophrenia (Savelli & Marks, 2015). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* officially lists a series of syndromes, which are still today amenable to particular cultural contexts (APA, 2013). Actually, DSM-5 introduced an interesting *caveat* with respect to previous versions of DSM: every single disturbance which is classified in the Manual should be considered as being, to some extent, culturally determined. One might consider such a statement as the consequence of a politically correct attitude from the DSM Task Force, rather than of real persuasion. Most people might, on the contrary, suppose that Western civilization has reached a sufficient level of

objectivity in classifying psychopathological disturbances. Indeed, that is the very purpose of a manual like the DSM, to provide a diagnostic language that can be shared all over the world. The vast majority of psychiatrists consider the West as relatively immune from cultural influences, which, elsewhere, cause the spreading of disturbances like *Amok* and *Koro*, so strange for our culture to be inspiring sources for literature. *Amok*, which inspired Stefan Zweig's (1976) novel of the same title, causes rage and pushes people to run from village to village, often with a blade in their hands, hitting everyone they meet, without considering the consequences. *Koro*, which inspired Gianluca Morozzi's *L'uomo liscio* (The smooth man) (2016), is a male's fear and sensation that their genital organs are retreating inside their body.

Surely, it's easy to run the risk of an ethnocentric attitude, considering such pathologies as the fruit of a "primitive" mentality. It can nonetheless be demonstrated that there are examples of culturally determined disturbances, which can even be found in recent Western civilization. Several papers by Ian Hacking describe psychopathologies which are typical of our cultural world. Of the examples Hacking provides, two are especially interesting for our purpose: the "foux voyageurs" or mad travelers (Hacking, 1998) and multiple personalities (Hacking, 1995). The mad travelers constitute a phenomenon, which is especially limited in space and time. The main hotbed can be identified in the French city of Bordeaux, for approximately twenty years of the XIX century. Apparently, several citizens of Bordeaux, not knowing each other, suddenly felt the need to reach a faraway place that they had heard about, entered a sort of trance and eventually found themselves in that place, without even remembering how they had managed to get there if not hypnotized. Hacking lists the historical conditions which could have helped to give rise to this strange disease, such as the invention of bicycle or the origin of holidays for the working class. If all such events could favor the idea that a journey could be possi-

ble for everyone (unlike in the past), none could have foreseen the rise and fall of a psychopathological "fashion".

Multiple personality is possibly an even more interesting example. After having been observed by the French alienists during the XIX century, the disease almost disappeared for decades. It eventually spread in the USA, at the end of the XX century. In this case too, it's extremely difficult to identify abnormal social conditions at the origin of such a return. Some proposed considering it as a consequence of an epidemic of Satanism, however, the presence of Satanism has been incredibly exaggerated by Christian publications (Introvigne, 1994; 1995).

Perhaps, on the whole, the concepts of normality and sanity may be the best demonstration of Salvatore's idea. Few psychological concepts could be considered hostage of common sense more than normality, which, essentially, is identified with a conduct perceived as usual and acceptable by the majority. On one side, this shared intuition led to the use of statistics based on the Gauss curve in order to find the "norm" of behaviors and attitudes (the central point of the bell). On the other side, deviations from the norm are, by definition, considered as not normal: praxis oriented to shifting conduct within the realm of acceptability has been tendentially considered as being well-grounded. This has led to aberrations in the field of psychiatry. For example, the conduct of children considered disturbing in the classroom led to the description of a syndrome (ADHD) with a specific cure, which involves administering psychotropic drugs to children. The side effects of such drugs are considered less important than maintaining children's quiet behavior at school (Wedge, 2016). Even if many psychiatrists still consider ADHD a real disturbance, even a former member of the DSM Task Force declared that its prevalence has been enormously overestimated (Frances, 2013). An even more significant case was the practice of lobotomy to psychotic people. The no longer disturbing behavior of lobotomized schizophrenics was considered evidence of a

more normal condition, even if the result was certainly undesirable from the point of view of the cured (i.e., the victims). The demise of this practice “before the brains of too many unapproachable psychotics could be operated upon” was probably not caused by ethical considerations, but by the discovery of “another approach”, i.e., psychopharmacology (Alexander & Selesnick, 1966, p. 285)

It must be remarked that simply reversing common sense may not be sufficient. Such an effort might, as consequence, keep common sense alive as a point of reference. According to the “psychedelic” conception of schizophrenia, as somebody called it (Scharfetter, 2002), psychological disturbances are a sane reaction to an oppressive society, which keeps people from authentic self-realization. A schizophrenic was considered, e.g., by Laing (1959), the only normal man in an insane society. In this sense, the ability of adapting to an alienating world should not be considered true normality.

If such a consideration might seem paradoxical, one could wonder if our attitudes would change if they were proposed to other societies, historical periods, or simply peculiar situations. There is no doubt, for example, that very few people could be considered better adapted to social conditions than the SS in Nazi Germany. Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of transporting Jews to the extermination camps, described himself, during this process, as somebody simply following orders, as anybody else would have done under the same conditions. Hannah Arendt, a very important witness to the trial, thought Eichmann felt sincere in saying this (Arendt, 1963). It can be argued that Nazi Germany was based on rules that everyone would consider unacceptable today. Nevertheless, very few German seemed to share such an opinion during the 1930's. Consequently, a cautious attitude should be adopted when judging the society where one lives.

Another interesting paradox with respect to normality is related to the studies of Zimbardo (2007) regarding the Lucifer Effect. The Californian psychologist observed the

behavior of people, who were randomly divided into a group of detainees and a group of guards. They were instructed to behave accordingly, in a context which obliged the former to be held in a prison and the latter to control them. The result was always that the difference in condition between detainees and guards led to tensions and then violence. In other words, most people, who tend to behave in a collaborative and non-violent way in ordinary social contexts, will adopt another very different form of conduct when a specific context is influencing them differently. In this sense, for example, Zimbardo thought that the American soldiers who were accused of physical and psychological violence towards prisoners at Abu Ghraib were not monsters but possibly normal people, almost similar to everybody else at home. They were led to sadistic behavior by their expectations regarding what was being asked of them by their superiors. Obviously, the idea that their superiors could, directly or indirectly, suggest violence towards prisoners was absolutely negated by the military (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 362). It should be remembered that studies on the influence of social context, and especially of authorities, have a long and interesting tradition, starting with the Milgram experiments (Milgram, 1965). If the theory of the Lucifer Effect is sound, should we say that it's normal to behave abnormally in certain conditions? Or should we consider normal the exception, that is to say, a property of the few people able to escape conditioning by social context?

The answers to such questions could only be valid if a research program is projected, which is not led by common sense but, as Salvatore (2015) suggests, by the construction of a theory that can subsequently be empirically tested. Zimbardo's research project offers a good example of how the theoretical level is paramount. Zimbardo (2007) actually states that the “power of the situation” is more important than the power of biology. In a bottom-up research, trying to find which genetic factors are more relevant for a given

behavior, such statement would be impossible to imagine.

In the end, the adjective “(apparently) defiant”, which we initially used to qualify Sal-

vatore’s leading idea, might be changed to the more appropriate “(possibly) revolutionary”.

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