

Psychoanalysis and the ethics of meaning-making

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Abstract

In this work, several concepts, drawn from psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, are outlined that can contribute to expanding our understanding of the social phenomena described in the positional paper. It is suggested that psychoanalytic understandings concerning early development and group processes, primarily Kleinian accounts of the paranoid/schizoid and the depressive positions and Bion's theory of basic assumptions groups, can provide a theoretical lens through which to study the affectivization of the social sphere identified in the positional paper as a key element in the contemporary socio-institutional crisis that characterizes western societies. Furthermore, the concept of the semiotic capital is discussed in relation to psychoanalytic views on 'thirdness' that underscore the importance of intersubjective mutual recognition as key in recognizing and validating the other. This implicates the ethics of meaning-making, an issue that is further discussed in relation to psychoanalytic approaches to morality.

Keywords: *psychoanalysis; socio-institutional crisis; intersubjectivity; thirdness; morality.*

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Introduction

I would like to thank the editors for inviting me to comment on the positional paper in the inaugural issue of ‘Subject, Action & Society: Psychoanalytical Studies and Practices’, as it gave me the opportunity to reflect on the many important issues raised in the paper. At the same time, it has been a daunting task, given that the authors draw upon a broad and complex literature from diverse disciplines, and develop an extremely thorough, in-depth and comprehensive argument regarding the potential of psychoanalysis to shed light on contemporary social phenomena. My main aim in responding to the paper (Salvatore et al., 2021) is to highlight some concepts, drawing primarily upon psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, that may help expand the lenses through which social phenomena can be examined and to foster cross-fertilization between different domains of knowledge. My comments are grounded in my work as a psychoanalytic clinician with a keen interest in constructionist and dialogical theory, and as professor in clinical psychology with a long-lasting engagement with discourse analytic research on psychotherapy.

I fully concur with the main argument articulated in the paper on the significance of meaning-making, as an essential aspect of human nature and as key to understanding intra- and inter-subjective, and social phenomena. Meaning making is approached from several different perspectives including cultural psychology, dynamic systems theory and semiotics, which are integrated within a psychoanalytic meta-framework. The authors develop a

cogent and convincing argument about the potential of psychoanalytic theory to provide a conceptual framework for understanding -and addressing- the current socio-institutional crisis, as evidenced in many spheres of contemporary life in western Europe, such as the increased prevalence of xenophobia, violence, religious radicalization, and populism, accompanied by a devaluation and weakening of social institutions, traditional social entities and values. In addition, it aims to suggest ways in which, drawing upon such a conceptualization, one can design multi-level interventions and policies, that take into account the recursive relationship between individual subjects and the systems in which they operate. Psychoanalytic theory is proposed as a core theoretical framework for this ambitious endeavor.

Indeed, the psychoanalytic view of human subjectivity as multiple, divided, de-centred and relational (e.g. Auchincloss, 2015) can help transcend binary constructions of internal/external, individual/social, affect/rationality etc., invigorate social understandings, and inform policy making. Starting from Freud’s later work (1921), relatedness as an essential aspect of human nature has been developed in several psychoanalytic schools. Object relations and attachment theory, as well as intersubjective and relational approaches in psychoanalysis underscore relationality, and describe our internal world as essentially dialogical, organized around and through passionate, affective relationships with others, right from the beginning of life (e.g. Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Although the authors refer to different psychoanalytic thinkers, they primarily draw upon Freudian

theory as the basis for conceptualizing the current dominance of affective meanings and their implications. In my contribution, I discuss some further psychoanalytic concepts that can enrich our understanding of the processes of affectivization of the public domain, as well as the capacity to symbolize, the complex interplay between psychological and sociocultural aspects of meaning making, and morality.

The affectivization of the public sphere

A psychoanalytic view of subjectivity as constituted by embodied, affective, drive-related and unconscious aspects, and, on the other hand, by conscious, semantic, reality-oriented aspects allows the authors to describe the current socio-institutional climate in western societies in terms of an 'affectivization' of public life. The authors provide convincing observations regarding the 'enslaving' of the public sphere by affective enactments that generalize, simplify and homogenize available meanings, and conceptualize these processes in terms of Freud's notion of the primary and secondary process of mental functioning. I would like to suggest that Klein's theory concerning the structuring of mental life in terms of the paranoid/schizoid and the depressive positions can provide another fruitful theoretical model (e.g. Hinshelwood, 1989; Rustin & Rustin, 2017; Segal, 1964).

The paranoid/schizoid and depressive positions refer to two key modes of mental functioning constituted by specific constellations of anxiety, defences and quality of object relations. More specifically, Klein suggested that in situations of threat and increased anxiety, we tend to revert to the paranoid/schizoid position, a more primitive (that is psychologically immature) mode of mental functioning

characteristic of early infancy. The main anxiety experienced in this position is 'paranoid', in the sense that it concerns intense anxiety about survival of the self because of a (fantasized) external persecutory object. Hostility and other unwanted features of the self are projected to the other, who thus becomes equated with an evil enemy to be feared and avoided and/or attacked and fought against. In addition to projection, splitting is another key defence in paranoid/schizoid functioning; splitting consists of constructing an overly simplified, black-and-white version of the self and the world (Klein, 1946; Segal, 1964). Through splitting, the world is interpreted as divided into 'us' and 'them', friend and foe. As a result of splitting, the self and the in-group are often perceived in an idealized manner, whereas the other becomes the receptacle of projections of everything that is bad, unwanted, feared, contaminated and devalued. The intense use of splitting and projection means that relationships with others are not shaped by a recognition of differentness and separateness, as others become receptacles of disavowed aspects of the self; this process actually impedes the recognition of otherness (Rustin & Rustin, 2017). The dominance of splitting and projection also means that, when functioning in the paranoid/schizoid position, people operate primarily in the realm of fantasy, unable to deal with the complexity of reality, denying ambivalence and displaying a diminished capacity for symbolization. Furthermore, splitting and projection actually maintain paranoid anxiety, which the subject then needs to defend against, in a vicious circle that is subjectively experienced as inhabiting a frightening, hostile world, where people are either 'with' or 'against' us, with no other position conceivable. The depressive position on the other hand, refers to a mode of mental

functioning that is based on integration; it relies on the reduction of splitting and projection, the recognition of our interdependence combined with a recognition of the other's separateness, and is associated with ambivalence, increased reality testing, and guilt, which in Kleinian theory forms the basis of mature love and reparation (Klein, 1932; Segal, 1964).

Several of the characteristics described in the paper as constituting the affectivization of the public sphere (for example the dominance of affective meanings, dichotomous thinking, the enemization of the other, the irradiation of the identity bond) could be conceptualized as representing functioning in the paranoid/schizoid position. I contend that the theoretical and clinical psychoanalytic literature on the paranoid/ schizoid position and the processes that can help shift from it to a more 'depressive' mode of functioning could enrich theorizing about the links between intrapsychic processes that affect individual and collective meaning-making, and aspects of the socio-institutional crisis.

A related issue concerns the authors' observation that the salience of affective meanings in the social sphere is associated with increased uncertainty; the role of anxiety in inhibiting our capacity to think and to mentalize has been well described in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g. Bateman & Fonagy, 2004). In a related vein, Bion's (1952) observations regarding group functioning and meaning making in a group context are compatible with and highly relevant to the issues discussed in the paper. In brief, Bion, following Freud (1921), assumed that group membership can weaken the individual members' ego functions, leading to affectively charged and volatile states of mind that are easily transmitted between group members; such

processes can lead to intense identification with a leader or an ideology at the cost of adaptive ego functioning. Building upon Klein's work on primitive anxieties, Bion further suggested a distinction between Work and Basic assumption mode of group functioning. The former operate rationally and display mental functioning designed to further the group aims and tasks; basic assumption groups, on the other hand, are organized around unconscious fantasies and function in ways that either avoid or turn away from an orientation towards work, the achievement of the groups tasks, and rationality (Hinshelwood, 1989; Wilson, 1983). Basic assumptions refer to aspects of group culture that concern unspoken beliefs about and dispositions towards the group, its tasks, its leader and the role of group members; they operate unconsciously and suffuse the emotional atmosphere of the group (Vermote, 2019).

Bion (1952) suggested three 'types' of possible unconscious fantasy in basic assumption groups. In groups operating under the 'fight or flight' basic assumption, members share an excited and violent fantasy of a threatening enemy that they need to either fight or flee from. This threat is usually located outside the group and the group's identity and cohesion are organized around this shared fantasy. 'Dependency' groups assume a passive position and operate under the assumption that someone or something else, often the assigned group leader, will address all the group's difficulties. Finally, groups that operate under the basic assumption of 'pairing', invest hope in a creative act that will lead to someone or something with magical qualities, a Messiah of sorts, who will cover all the group's needs. A single group may function along different basic assumptions at any given

time and shifts between operating under different basic assumptions may occur frequently or over longer periods. Another related approach to group functioning that focuses on the way social systems (e.g. hospitals) become defensively organized has been described by Jaques (1955) and Menzies-Lyth (1988), with important implications for a psychoanalytic understanding of organizational culture.

The psychoanalytic descriptions of group functioning outlined above share many features with some of the most prevalent symbolic universes identified in the Re.Cri.Re. programme. The functioning of basic assumptions groups is conceptualized in terms of affectively charged, impulsive, primitive psychic functioning, in response to underlying intense anxiety that the group defends against, similar to the colonization of the social sphere by affective meanings. As such, the psychoanalytic literature following Bion's conceptualization of basic assumptions groups and that of social systems as defensively organized against anxiety can be utilized to promote theorizing about the underlying semantic structures in different social groups, and point to ways of shifting group functioning from a basic assumption to a work mode.

Another important argument developed in the paper concerns the cultural roots of affective meanings; this adds an important dimension to our understanding of the recursive relationship between intrapsychic, interpersonal and socio-cultural levels. The concept of 'symbolic universes' (Salvatore et al. 2018; Salvatore et al. 2021), which centres on specific, culturally situated affective meanings, shares several features with the concept of discourse, as developed in post-structuralist accounts (Parker, 1992). I believe that cross-

fertilization between these domains could foster fruitful developments. Post-structuralist approaches propose well-developed accounts of subjectivity and meaning construction in relation to discourse, ideology and institutions (e.g. Guilfoyle, 2012; Henriques et al, 1998) that can help enrich the concept of symbolic universes. On the other hand, the central role afforded to affect in conceptualizing symbolic universes can help refine the notion of discourse to more explicitly include the affective dimension in meaning making processes and promotes theorizing in this direction, in line with the growing recognition of the need to include affect and embodiment in discursive accounts (e.g. Blackman et al, 2008; Wetherell, 2013).

Semiotic capital and the third

In my view, the concept of semiotic capital and its central role in counteracting the negative effects of affectivization is one of the main contributions of the paper, which merits further mention. Psychoanalytic theories have examined in depth both the symbolic content of mental processing and the process of symbolization itself, variously termed as thinking, dream-thought (Ogden, 2005), psychological mindedness (Coltart, 1988), mentalizing (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004); the ability to mentalize and symbolize is often juxtaposed to overly simplifying, 'paranoid' thinking. Salvatore and colleagues link the concept of semiotic capital with primary processes of symbolization and use the psychoanalytic notion of desire to describe thirdness as the result of reality 'resisting' the subject's desire. Following Klein's observation that the frustration of desires and needs is experienced as the presence of a 'bad' object (e.g. Segal, 1964), the authors suggest that one possible outcome

of such frustration is the construction of an enemy; otherness and differentness are not tolerated, as they signify frustration, and are therefore imbued with hostile meanings. Alternatively, if frustration can be tolerated, it can open up a transitional space of creativity and play, as the recognition of the limits of our desire fuels the capacity to symbolize (e.g. Winnicott, 1953). Frustration, when tolerable and developmentally appropriate, fuels separation, the capacity to symbolize and our entry to the symbolic order and the social world. In this framework, appropriate and tolerable failures of environmental provision are considered an important springboard for the move towards the relative dependence and reality orientation that characterizes psychological maturity; thus thirdness is intimately linked with the semiotic capital.

Psychoanalytic theories suggest that the capacity to play, evolves within our early experiences with the other (i.e. our primary caregivers) (e.g. Winnicott, 1953). A key question here concerns the social conditions that can foster this mode of mental functioning. The authors point to the importance of engagement with and participation in ‘intermediate settings’, social and civic activities, as a primary route for the development of semiotic capital and community wellbeing. It is worth noting here that the notion of the semiotic capital as described here is in line with social constructionist and dialogical approaches to subjectivity, mental health, and psychotherapy that underscore the importance of multiplicity, flexibility, inclusiveness and polyphony in self-narratives for subjective wellbeing. This literature, and primarily constructionist and discursive approaches to processes of change in psychotherapy (e.g. Avdi & Georgaca, 2007; Smoliak & Strong, 2018) can provide

another useful resource in developing practices that increase communities’ semiotic capital.

“An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard”

Given the importance of the concept of the third, I briefly refer to two contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers who have developed the concept of thirdness and expanded its relevance beyond clinical practice, as a key element of an ethical position towards the other in both personal relationships and the social domain. Thomas Ogden (e.g. 2004) has developed Winnicott’s theory on the importance of transitional phenomena and refined the concept of the ‘analytic third’, a form of third subjectivity that is created in and through interaction: ‘the product of a unique dialectic generated by/between the separate subjectivities of analyst and analysand within the analytic setting (Ogden, 2004:168) with a life of its own.

Jessica Benjamin (2018) has extended the concept of the third in her theorizing about sociopolitical phenomena such as polarization, populism, conflict and violence. Benjamin defines thirdness in relation to a process of intersubjective mutual recognition, whereby we recognize the other as distinct from us yet equal to us. Such a psychological position transcends oppositions of us/them, good/bad, perpetrator/victim, active/passive, doer/done-to. Thirdness relies on the, often painful, process of surrendering one’s subject-centred perspective in order to recognize and validate the other. Recognition entails witnessing, validating and dignifying the others’ suffering, as well as acknowledging our role in causing it, and an awareness of the other as potentially equal co-creator of shared alignment in situations that would otherwise lead

to conflict or disregard for the other. However, when faced with the other, defensive splitting and dissociation often come into play; these defences can result in dehumanizing and enmizing the other, so that their suffering is rendered somehow less worthy than ours. Thirdness is therefore difficult to achieve and fragile to maintain on both individual and collective levels. Benjamin juxtaposes thirdness with the doer/done-to dynamic, a dynamic typical in interactions between independent subjects in opposition to each other. She argues that the unconstrained individualism and neo-liberalism typical in western societies is organized around a doer/done-to dynamic, where in the end only 'one can live'. She also discusses the position of a 'failed witness' that is the position of a passive bystander in the face of social injustice, violence and suffering. In addition to these theoretical developments, Benjamin has been involved in social activism, such as the 'Acknowledgement Project' (2005-10) which she initiated with the Palestinian psychiatrist El-Sarraj. The project entailed a series of dialogues between Israeli and Palestinian mental health workers with an aim to help the two sides create connections with each other, so as to recognize and begin to process their respective collective trauma. She suggests that a shift to an embodied orientation can reanimate processes of witnessing and recognizing the other, through restoring the humanity of our enemies. Benjamin's work is another psychoanalytic resource that could contribute to both theory development and the development of social practices that can help foster the capacity for thirdness.

This leads me to the final point I would like to raise as a response to the issues discussed in the paper, which relates to morality. In Freudian theory, the moral sense is associated with the development of the superego, a

distinct, mostly unconscious, psychic structure that is formed through processes of internalization of parental/ social prohibitions during development, primarily around oedipal conflicts and desires. Klein's theory of early development adds the dimension of recognition of one's hostility that leads to concern for the object and a desire for reparation. In Kleinian thought, the moral sense, that is the disposition to be concerned for the wellbeing of others, arises in the context of the depressive position and the associated wish to repair and restore. From this perspective, psychological maturity and integration of the self are closely associated with a moral sense, which in turn are associated with a capacity to take responsibility about one's hostility and capacity to harm, as well as one's reparative wishes. In this theory, the moral sense arises not only from an internalized fear of punishment in the form of a superego, but also from concern for the other and a wish to repair the damage inflicted on the other, in reality or in phantasy (Klein, 1959). This concern for the well-being of the other is in essence motivated by recognition of otherness and an innate concern for it. As already mentioned, the recognition of the other is closely associated with the capacity for concern as developed in other psychoanalytic and relational approaches (Benjamin, 2018; Winnicott, 1963). In brief, contemporary psychoanalytic theory underscores the need to rediscover our mutual interdependence and care for each other, as a deep existential condition of life that is essential for physical and psychic survival. Inclusion of concepts around morality when discussing the dynamics implicated in socio-institutional crisis could provide another fruitful development.

Conclusions

In sum, the positional paper by Salvatore and colleagues is an important contribution that sets the scene for an interdisciplinary dialogue between psychoanalysis and other disciplines on contemporary social phenomena. The theoretical diversity the paper draws upon and its integration under a meta-framework of psychoanalysis is a key strength of the

paper. Another important contribution is the empirical grounding of the core tenets underlying the theoretical model proposed, through projects such as Re.Cri.Re.; this is particularly important given the challenges of operationalizing and empirically studying such complex intra- and intersubjective phenomena. I look forward to future contributions of this creative group of scholars on both a theoretical level and on the levels of policy.

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