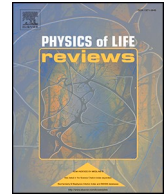


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Persons and their affective experiences. Comment on “The affective grounds of the mind. The affective pertinentization (APER) model” by salvatore et al.

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In their paper, Sergio Salvatore and his colleagues propose a new theoretical model of meaning-making, the *Affective Pertinentization Model* (APER) [12]. APER designates a person’s constant and permanent affective multimodal, physiologically anchored, response to their changing environment. According to the model, this body-mind affective field is the ground for sense-making, and thus guides – enables and constraints – thinking and reasoning. APER can be described along a series of dimensions still to be defined, which then become also the dimensionality of sense-making. These affects emerge through ontogenesis as the person interacts with their environment; more basic affects may remain the kernel of more complex and differentiated ones, and they are shaped by larger contextual meaning-dynamics, such as the political atmosphere within a country. APER has as implication that one does not “have an effect”, one is embedded in their affective fields.

1. Strengths of APER

The APER model has many strengths and qualities, and it opens promising routes. Its first, incontestable strength, is its integrative scope. Psychology has been extensively denounced as fragmented in a myriad of subfield, with their own language games, often to designate comparable phenomena [16,17]. This paper by Salvatore et al. participates to an integrative effort to overcome this state of things, which is a condition for developing complex and accurate models. Here, the authors review and integrate the contributions of decades of theoretical and empirical studies on emotions and affects, in mainstream psychology, the neurosciences and psychoanalysis, combined with their own survey and clinical work. Theoretical integration requires not only the command of many subfields in psychology and across disciplines, but also theoretical creativity [14,26].

The second important quality of this work is that, putting affects at the centre of human thinking, it expands and supports a vision of the psyche that draws on the Spinozian tradition [13] which, although it has been largely criticised, has great theoretical and heuristic power. It joins recent attempts to similarly propose a metapsychology, a model of embodied mind admitting both the primacy of affects and the centrality of meaning-making, and acknowledging its sociocultural embeddedness [8,15,20,23]. They also all admit the necessary multidimensional nature of sense-making, and the complexity of fully identifying and operationalising such dimensionality [4,8,11]. With its grounding in psychologies past and present, APER may also play a role in the integration of these various of integrative models.

A third important aspect of the proposition is its admission of the complex layering of affects, and their inclusion in a more general regime of emotions. Ontogenetically, affective experiences are central to humans’ first interactions to their environment, albeit in massive and basic forms, characterized with primary positive or negative valences. These may then remain at the heart of later, more differentiated affective emotions, which complement them; “more differentiated modes of meaning-making integrate the less differentiated ones, but the latter do not disappear” ([12], p. 148). According to Salvatore et al., affects, as non-intentional and not always conscious states of activation, can thus be differentiated from emotions – resulting from their reflective apprehension and

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related to objects -, and from moods, which are generalised affective states. In any case, we are in a permanent state of being affected, which can change in intensity and valence, and thus “affect is a fundamental form of interpretation of the ongoing relationship with the world” ([12], p. 148).

2. Challenges

The three main challenges of these model are partly identified by the authors. First, such a model is based on the principle of multidimensionality of affects. Admittedly, positive and negative, passive or active, strong or weak, inside and outside, are such dimensions, as highlighted by various domains of psychology. Affects related to common emotions – such as anger and fear – can easily be qualified along such dimensions. But if, with the authors, we admit that affects can become differentiated within the sociocultural world, what about more complex affective states, such as these of culturally mediated experiences? Cultural experiences are indeed offer very interesting entry points in people’s complex, semiotically cultivated affective experiences [15,21,25]. So how can APER enable us to account for the ever-changing aesthetic affective experience of, say, the visitor of an art gallery? How to define these dimensions, if these affects themselves are not always easily turned into nameable emotions, or if externalisation requires a reduction of these dimensions? The first challenge consists in the possibility of identifying the dimensionality of complex affective states.

The second problem is precisely connected to the layering of affective states. The authors admit that older layers of less differentiated affects may constitute the kernel of affective states triggered by one’s environment. In addition, lived experience mostly take place in environments which are not homogeneous, but defined by complex, multiple, at times contradictory subzones. Imagine a diner table with one loving parent in a good mood, and a parent impatient because of their professional life. That environment is itself eliciting simultaneously affective responses which may run in opposite direction – love and feeling trusted, anchored in infantile experience, with fear and a more differentiated anger related to the other parent. How to qualify such a composite? Or take even a more complex, culturally shaped environment: a large art exhibition hall, in which the visitor is exposed to different artefacts chosen by the gallery curator, which all require some affective and aesthetic response. Each new piece of art if apprehended by the person along a visit unfolding in time and space, on the ground of what has just been seen [18]; each individual artefact may trigger very different composite affective response: a simple pottery may call for a simple positive affective valence; next to it a complex more figurative collage may elicit a different affective state; a third piece, a large floating tapestry, may awake a much more abstract aesthetic experience. This, undoubtedly, generates a complex, moving, multilayered, affective experience, with more or less differentiated zones. It is likely that the resultant will be a “mood” – but before this, how to account for this coexisting, differentiated, nuanced, affective space? For now, the APER model is not yet able to account for such complex affects, partly because of its own trajectory, stemming on the one side of the analysis of microgenetic encounters and on the other side from more political moods at a sociogenetic scale. More complex, culturally shaped experience will need to be accounted for, to fully deploy the intricacies of the model.

This, third, is connected to the methodological means the authors consider for grounding their model. Their work is based on abductive reasoning [9,22]: their integrative effort includes revisiting historical theoretical models in philosophy and psychology, and binding them to empirical evidence, and back. The text opens with three examples of unique and situated individuals (these of John, the football fan, Charles, the jealous husband, or Eleanor and her imaginary pains). However, the empirical data used to support the argument does not account for unique person’s perspectives. It is mainly taken from a large series of studies examining primarily physiological responses to various stimuli, such as studies in neurosciences and based on fMRI, and is complemented by the authors’ work on aggregates responses to questionnaire linked to nationalism. Hence, although the theoretical integration of the authors is very complex and encompasses affects from different degrees of elaboration, deeply related with meaning making, the empirical evidence eludes the level of individual sense-making. Indeed, physiological responses are pre-symbolic – or gathered in experimental settings where the cultural meaning or the personal sense of the situation is not taken into account – and responses to items related to nationhood are not related to personal experiences either. My suggestion is that it may be possible to fully capture and describe the complexity of people’s affective orientation and meaning making only once methodological choices are done so as to capture individual cases of sense-making over time. In such complex matters, and to fully apprehend the depth and multidimensionality of affects, rich case studies may be required. Longitudinal case studies have historically been the means to develop the most complex ideas in psychology [3,7,24]. Of course, one may need more aggregated data to identify dimensions of affects; but today, idiographic case studies can be combined with more nomothetic approaches [5,7].

3. Conclusion

Psychology is still a fragmented field. Its lines of fractures follow old philosophical debates – the relationship between mind and body, reasons and affects, personhood and social life. Yet psychologies of the twenty-first century have also found both the historical and theoretical, as well as empirical groundings, for developing new, integrative, non-dualistic perspectives on human and psychic life – from enactment models [1] to psychoanalysis [6], from sociocultural psychology [10,23] to psychosocial approaches [2]. One of the most elusive issues remains the problem of affects – so feared, so badly understood, so often reduced to their most elementary part, and thus losing the fact the millennia of cultural development have greatly aimed at shaping our emotional lives [19]. Salvatore et al.’s APER model is a long-hoped for, much needed, ambitious attempts to put back affects at the centre of our enquires, and at the junction of today’s psychologies; perhaps complex case studies may constitute a useful passage point for APER to reach its ambitious goals.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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