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Affect, unconscious and sensemaking. A psychodynamic, semiotic and dialogic model

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The work presents a psychodynamic, semiotic and dialogical model of affect and of the role it plays in sensemaking. The model is based on the following three general assumptions. A) Affective semiosis works in accordance to the dynamic unconscious which Freud conceptualized in terms of primary process. According to this interpretation, the unconscious is the mind's homogenising way of functioning, which transforms every categorical relation into a relation of identity. B) Affect is the generalized, homogenising and absolutizing embodied basic intersubjective meanings according to which experience is interpreted. C) Affective semiosis performs both the grounding and regulative functions in sensemaking, orienting the way people interpret experience.

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1. Introduction

In Summer 2006 Italy won the Soccer World Championship. We were able to witness first hand how a state of collective euphoria and happiness spread through the country. The Italian TV's commentator shouted repeatedly: “Today it is more beautiful to be Italian” (“Oggi è più bello essere italiani!”). Unknown people embraced each other, toasting to the win. The then Prime Minister of the time made a public speech in front of a large crowd and predicted that the GDP would have increased by about half a point, as a result of the feeling of pride and confidence in the country created by the victory.

A film made several years ago tells the story of a group of aluminium casings sales people who meet for a convention. One of them explains his infallible trick to a junior salesman. While he is speaking to a potential buyer, he drops a medium-size bill from his pocket. Soon after it falls, he

picks it up off the floor and gives it to the interlocutor, as if he had accidentally found it and were returning it to the legitimate owner. This surprises and astonishes the potential buyer, who before this had tended to consider him like any other salesman – that is, manipulative and even dishonest, feelings that almost always change into an attitude of trust and willingness to accept him and what he is offering.

A novel tells the story of a woman, quite old and not pretty, working as the doorkeeper of a luxury flat in Paris. The woman has secretly dedicated all her life to reading and study, in this way developing her own spirit and knowledge, for the sake of pure pleasure. She goes to great lengths to hide this quality, as she does not consider fitting to her position. There is, however, one thing she is unable to accept: the ignorance of the rich people living in the flat. When she experiences this, indignation and anger take possession of her; despite her desire to keep a low profile, she literally cannot tolerate the fact that people who have everything and want everything from life can make mistakes with the tense of a verb.

In 1375 saint Catherine of Siena was asked by a political prisoner (Niccolò) to stay with him in the moment of his

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execution. Thus Catherine caught his head in her arms, ending up covered in his blood. Catherine recounts that moment, saying that the blood of the executed man was incorporated into Christ's blood:

"...His head was resting on my breast. I sensed an intense joy, a fragrance of his blood. ..(And) when he had received the sign I said 'Down for the wedding, my dear brother, for soon you will be in everlasting life.' ... His mouth said nothing but "Gesù!" and "Caterina!" and as he said this, I received his head into my hands, saying, 'I will', with my eyes fixed on the divine Godness. Then was seen the God-Man as one sees the brilliance of the sun. (His side) was open and received (Niccolò's) blood into his own blood... Once he had been so received by God..., the Son... gave him the gift of sharing in the tormented love with which he himself has accepted his painful death... for the welfare of the human race" (cited by. *Bynum*, 2007, p. 164).

What do these episodes – so different in terms of content, time, and protagonists, some imagined and some that actually happened – have in common? Descriptively, all of them show an affectively charged socially meaningful action: the euphoric reaction of the Italians, the surprised-willing attitude, the cultured doorkeeper's indignation, Catherine's "intense joy" are all examples of emotions sustaining how people feel, interpret and cope with the experience of a given piece of the world. These circumstances therefore offer cues to the powerful role of the affective process in sensemaking.

The aim of this article is to conceptualize this process – the characteristics of affect and the role it plays in sensemaking. Our ideas are presented in four parts. Firstly, we clarify the notion of semiosis which we take as the basic framework. Our reference is Peirce's triadic model of the sign – grounding our semiotic and dialogic view of psychological processes. Secondly, we discuss the conception of the unconscious that is adopted by our model. This conception merges two traditions of psychoanalytic thought – not usually connected. On the one hand, the semiotic approach to the mind conceives the unconscious as a specific, systematic modality of sensemaking; on the other hand it is a relational model, providing an interpersonal vision of the psychological reality. Matte Blanco's bi-logic theory of the unconscious provides the grounds for this merging. We discuss Matte Blanco's innovative theory in some detail. According to this author, the unconscious is a mind's basic way of functioning, which is radically different from rationality, but is however systematic and specific. Thirdly, we present our model of affect, in the light of the notion of the unconscious as elaborated by Matte Blanco. Our model provides a view of (a) how affect works; (b) some of its characteristics. Finally, we conceptualize the role affect plays in sensemaking.

2. The framework

2.1. The triadic nature of the sign

Our standpoint is the view of sensemaking elaborated by cultural psychology, in particular by the semiotic and

dialogical approach in this discipline (*Linell*, 2009; *Salgado & Gonçalves*, 2007; *Valsiner & Rosa*, 2007; *Zittoun*, 2007). We see the psyche as an ongoing process of shaping experience through the mediation of semiotic devices (meaning, linguistic and aesthetic canons, ways of acting and so forth). We consider these devices semiotic because they work as signs. A sign...

"...or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen." (*Peirce*, 1897/1932, vol. 2, p. 228) "Namely, a sign is something, *A*, which brings something, *B*, its interpretant sign determined or created by it, into the same sort of correspondence with something, *C*, its object, as that in which itself stands to *C*. " (*Peirce*, 1902/1976, vol. 4, pp. 20–21)

Peirce has enabled us to recognize the relational triadic nature of the sign (see *Fig. 1*). It stands for the object through the mediation of another sign motivated "in the mind of that person". It is this "perhaps a more developed" sign (the interpretant) that determines in which "respect or capacity" the sign represents the object. Hence, the sign performs its semiotic function (the standing for something else) through the relation with another sign, this relation being established by the activity of interpretation performed by an interpreter. Semiosis is the infinite process of interpreting the signs by means of other signs, as a way to refer to the reality (the object), which is however grasped only "in some respect(s)" and is therefore always open to a new interpretation. Meaning is what such infinite process of semiosis produces in the interpreter's mind at a given moment – that is, a further interpretant sign in the ongoing chain of signs (*Eco*, 1975; *Gillespie*, 2010).

2.2. Our semiotic and dialogic view of sensemaking

The triadic nature of the sign grounds the constructive and dialogical nature of the semiotic mediation. The use of signs enables human beings to go beyond the immediacy of the experience – to live immersed in the here and now and at the same time to treat it as something else that transcends the present moment and has form, consistence and persistence (*Rosa*, 2007). This process is constructive, in the sense that form, consistence and persistence are not inherent qualities of the object; they are the product of semiosis, the output of the ongoing infinite interpretative chain of signs that continuously re-write the relation of the previous signs with the object. Form, consistence and persistence are given by the capability of semiosis to keep signs in (some kind of) correspondence with the reality they refer to by *means of their connection with other interpretant signs*, in turn in correspondence with reality by means of other interpretant signs, and so on in an infinite stream. Hence, signs are not to be seen as having a fixed pre-established meaning, reflecting their unchanging linkage with the object they refer to. Rather, signs are

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