

Recensioni

Lisa Bortolotti (editor)

Delusions in context

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The relationship between delusional and non-delusional beliefs is a subject of interests across various fields that range from philosophy to psychology and psychiatry. A particularly pressing issue in this debate is whether delusional and non-delusional beliefs can be placed along a continuum. Supporting this hypothesis would challenge the notion of a clear boundary between these two types of beliefs, instead suggesting that the distinction between them may be inherently blurred. This position is advocated by Lisa Bortolotti in her edited volume *Delusions in context*. To explore this issue, the book provides an overview of the extensive, multidisciplinary debate on delusion, organized into four chapters.

The first chapter (RACHEL UPTHEGROVE & S.A., *Delusional beliefs in the clinical context*, pp. 1-34) addresses delusions from a clinical perspective, emphasizing that understanding delusions is essential for both diagnostic and treatment purposes: «delusions beliefs» – they state – «have a core role in distress, depression and risk within psychosis» (p. 1). Upthegrove first examines the phenomenology of delusions: from a phenomenological point of view, delusions are defined as «fixed, false beliefs held with certainty». They represent a «perverted view on reality, held with unusual conviction» (p. 4). The author builds on Karl Jaspers' perspective (*General Psychopathology*, 1913), which posits that delusions develop in two stages. In a first phase, individuals experience a “delusional atmosphere” that eventually “crystallizes” into a full-blown delusion. The author conceptualizes this progression as a transition from a “delusional atmosphere” to a “delusional mood”. Both stages are depicted as «a period of uncertainty, of being aware something is changed» (p. 6). Upthegrove highlight also that this perspective is supported in recent times also by Garety and Freeman who argue that mood symptoms are crucial for the maintenance of delusional beliefs (p. 13). Both theories underscore how the experience of a delusional mood is pivotal in the formation and persistence of delusional beliefs. According to Upthegrove, it is precisely this characteristic that lends delusions their “fixed” quality. Building on these theoretical foundations, the author discusses the clinical implications and treatment of delusions. The interweaving of delusional beliefs and moods has significant consequences for the individual's mental state, often leading to self-injurious or suicidal thoughts. As claimed by Upthegrove, in these circumstances, treatment is essential not only

to prevent and manage dangerous behaviors but also to address other issues such as the sense of shame, disorientation and isolation experienced by the delusional subject.

The second chapter (PHILIP CORLETT, *Delusions and prediction error*, pp. 35-66) discusses the *Predictive Coding Theory*, which posits that «the brain contains a model of the world (and the self as an agent in that world)» (p. 35), using this model to generate predictions and adaptive responses to the surrounding environment. However, like any system, also this one is prone to errors and can give rise to prediction errors. These errors are either ignored or adjusted based on an “adaptive fitness” criterion. In this context, cognitive dissonance theory enhances our understanding of how delusions form and persist. In Corlett's view, the predictions generated by our brain should adhere to a principle of coherence, aligning with a broader belief system. When beliefs formed within this system conflict with reality, prediction errors emerge. The author argues that delusional beliefs represent instances of these prediction errors. Nevertheless, the difference lies in the fact that delusional individuals, unlike “typical” individuals, do not minimize or disregard these errors but instead amplify and reinforce them.

In the third chapter (RICHARD P. BENTALL, *Delusions and other beliefs*, pp. 67-95), Bentall argues that, to understand delusional beliefs, we must first comprehend the mechanisms underlying the general process of belief formation: «the question cannot be resolved without first having an understanding of what is involved in holding an ordinary belief» (p. 67). The next step is to explore the relationship between delusions and ordinary beliefs. Bentall employs the *Master Interpretive System Theory* to approach this. According to this theory, alongside common and conventional beliefs, there exist convictions – such as political and religious beliefs – that, due to their resistance to change and their capacity to evoke strong emotions, can be classified as distinct belief systems known as *Master Interpretive Systems*. The latter originate from our ability to formulate propositions about reality and from implicit cognitive processes that are based on biological and social needs. It follows that these systems play a crucial role in decision-making and behavior, making them powerful organizers of experience. Bentall suggests that some *Interpretive Systems* resemble *Master Interpretive Systems* but are particularly resistant to contradictory evidence. These systems are produce specific emotions tied to the beliefs they generate. Unlike “traditional” systems, however, those that generate delusional beliefs have unique characteristics: «delusions share many of the properties of master interpretive systems but differ

because they are idiosyncratic» (p. 68). Bentall uses “idiosyncratic” to describe several phenomena that characterize delusions and the *Interpretative Systems* that produce them: resistance to change, poor adaption to the external environment, and the generation of associated moods.

In the fourth and last chapter (LISA BORTOLOTTI, *Delusions and other beliefs*, pp. 97-116). Bortolotti argues that, despite the common definition that: «epistemic irrationality concerns the relationship between a belief and the evidence for it» (p. 99), the literature offers multiple explanations of epistemic irrationality. An important assumption is made by the DMS-V, which states that delusions should be considered epistemically irrational beliefs. Specifically, delusions: «are based on incorrect inference about external reality that are firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary» (*Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Edition, APA Press, Washington (DC) 2013, p. 100). Bortolotti seeks to clarify the concept of “epistemic irrationality” in relation to delusions. First, she establishes criteria to define a belief as “epistemologically irrational” and examines whether delusional beliefs meet these criteria and can thus be categorized as “irrational beliefs”. Bortolotti suggests that we are epistemologically irrational when: «(1) we do not have evidence supporting our beliefs prior to adopting them; or (2) we are not responsive to evidence against our beliefs that becomes

available after their adoption» (p. 99). She then evaluates three commonly accepted claims in the literature about epistemic irrationality, questioning their actual validity: (1) holding epistemically irrational beliefs makes our behavior difficult to interpret; (2) epistemically irrational beliefs undermine our mental health and “epistemic status”; (3) epistemologically irrational beliefs represent a deviation from the norm. Bortolotti concludes that, although delusions can be defined as specific “epistemologically irrational beliefs”, they do not necessarily exhibit the characteristics described in these three claims. In fact, they are not merely approximation but are actually incorrect. Therefore, these statements should be regarded as myths.

Bortolotti’s perspective synthesizes and systematizes a thesis that runs throughout all the chapters: delusions and ordinary beliefs form a continuum and delusions are a specific kind of irrational beliefs. She skillfully addresses several assumptions about delusions by connecting insights from different fields. *Delusions in context* represents an excellent and innovative resource on the topic of delusions, posing a challenge and a provocation to those who view delusions as fundamentally distinct from ordinary beliefs. I believe this work should be essential reading for all professionals working in clinical settings.

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