UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Psicologia dei Processi Decisionali

2122-1-FSG01A007

Learning objectives

General theories. This decision making course is a peculiar one. Generally, in a decision process course students are taught general theories (universal theories that are assumed to be valid for any decision process) of how decisions should be made. Biases, heuristics, probability calculations, and the use of formal logic to make decisions are usually included in the program. And normally, in a course on decision making, the teacher is there to teach, even to experts, how to make better decisions.

Local decisions. This course actually presents a different perspective. It highlights how an important part of empirical research on decisions shows, in a quite convincing way, that every human activity requires its own specific forms of decision and reasoning (we could say "local") and how, consequently, it is not useful to talk about decisions "in general" or to suggest general models of decision making.

Interdisciplinary studies. The course then further deepens the critical reflection on the psychology of decision processes. It highlighs how even the products of the most specific and local current research on how decisions are made – in concrete contexts – are generally, with few exceptions (eg. Gigerenzer), of limited use in “teaching experts to make their own decisions”. A study work done “from outside” a specific field, in most cases, does not seem to be able to reach the level of expertise in making decisions that can be reached by the leading experts in that specific sector. And in this sense, the studies of decision-making scholars, even "local" ones, normally have non-experts and other decision-making psychologists as their audience. They explain at a generic level how decisions are made in that sector but are generally not (or appear not to be) of particular interest to experts in that field. This part of the course essentially argues how, in the teacher's opinion, hybrid studies (interdisciplinary studies) of decision-making processes, in which the psychologist enters a field and after learning something (on that subject), begins to teach the experts of that field, don’t seem to be very useful.

Make yourself an expert. Once this limitation is determined, the decision-making psychologist who is interested in really improving the decisions of the experts, can only 1) ask questions to the experts of a specific sector and maybe build models based on how the best of them make their decisions, accepting that anyway in most cases his work will not have real relevance for the experts of that sector or, alternatively, 2) abandon (at least temporarily) the

role of the decision-making psychologist and become an expert in a sector he is interested in. Once he has reached a level of mastery and high experience in that specific field, then, as an expert in that field, "contaminate" it with ideas borrowed from psychology (but also from sociology and philosophy of science), and develop a "reflective" version of the sector he has become an expert on [see eg. Massironi, C. & Guicciardi, M. (2011) Investment Decision Making from a Constructivist Perspective. Qualitative Research in Financial Markets, Vol. 3, N. 3, 158-176 – Note: radical constructivism is one of the most recent incarnations of the pragmatist epistemology which will be discussed below].

Two experts. For these reasons, as examples, the course proposes the study of practical decisions made by two experts in politics and business. One of them, Giorgio Garuzzo (former chief operating officer, or “Direttore Generale”, of the Fiat group), will speak during the course. Part of the course will also be dedicated to the analysis of decisions made in contexts of use of public and private law.

Pragmatist Epistemology. Alongside the psychological part, during the course students will also be presented with some epistemological ideas of the Pragmatist approach (a tradition of thought that proposes a significant revision of the concepts of truth, reality, and reason). They will then be invited, as legal experts, to develop a reflective (pragmatist) and psychological (interactionist) awareness of their decisions.

Interactionism. In terms of a more formal classification of the proposed contents, peculiar in the Italian context, the course offers an Interactionist perspective on decision processes (compared to the more widespread Heuristics-and-Biases and Fast and Frugal Heuristics perspectives).

In the field of sociology and social psychology there is a family of research programs called Interactionism [for reference see eg. vom Lehn, D., Ruiz-Junco, N. & Gibson, W. (2021) The Routledge International Handbook of Interactionism]. The research programs that make up part of this family, however different from each other, have in common an interest in studying the practices by which people construct their meanings by interacting with objects and people of the world around them. And by "people" we mean both the subjects studied and the researchers who carry out the investigations (which leads to a particular attention to the epistemological aspects of doing research, typical of interactionist scholars). This way of carving out one's own object of study (one's phenomenon) derives from the reflections on the interactions between organisms and their environment of American Pragmatism, ranging from the early twentieth century to today, and which, together with European Phenomenology, constitute the philosophical framework (the conceptual approach) for all interactionist research.

The interactionist researchers have dealt with the empirical study of the point of view of the acting subject with different research programs, among which the best known ones are Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, Blumer), Dramaturgical Sociology (Goffman), Social Phenomenology (Schutz), and Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, Sacks). While other interesting contemporary research programs on sociology and social psychology, such as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann) and the discursive turn in psychology (Harré), have important elements of filiation or overlap with the interactionist perspective.

In Italy, starting from the 1970s, in the field of psychology, Alessandro Salvini (in Padua) and Gaetano De Leo (in Rome) developed a version of the Interactionist research program known as Interazionismo italiano (Italian Interactionist School). This research tradition is characterized by an ontologically agnostic position and a certain (pragmatic) way of coming to terms with radical reflexivity, which implies an attitude of theoretical pluralism and cognitive pragmatism (adequacy of the study method to the phenomenon to be "cropped"), with applications mainly in personality psychology, clinical psychology and psychotherapy, and in forensic and legal psychology. The contents proposed in the course constitute an extension of the research program of Italian Interactionism to the psychology of decision processes.

Field experience. Another peculiarity of the course is that of combining the scientific approach to decision-making processes with the teacher’s experience as decision-maker in the financial sector for more than twenty years.

Contents

Module Aims

- To introduce students to the Epistemology of the Psychology of Decision Processes (Pragmatism, Interactionism)
- To train students to assume an attitude of theoretical pluralism and cognitive pragmatism in the Psychology of Decision Processes (Italian Interactionism)
- To introduce students to the research program of Ethnomethodological Studies of Work in its most recent developments (Livingston), highlighting its potential and critical issues (Greiffenhagen & Sharrock).
- To train and enable students to look at (analyse, model and "read") both their own and others' decision processes as "locally situated and historically determined processes, inextricably linked to practical action and to forms of local practical reasoning".

Learning Outcomes

1. To develop the ability to be a multi-level thinker when examining one's own or someone else's decision process.
2. To be able to correctly frame the epistemological assumptions – the postulates, the premises – (implicitly or explicitly) underlying a decision making and the analysis of a decision making.
3. To be able to choose a pragmatically relevant analytical level when deciding to analyze a decision process (ability to act in a context of theoretical pluralism and cognitive pragmatism).
4. To be able to analyze and effectively “read” a decision process in its dimension of locally located process.

Detailed program

The first part of the course illustrates the Pragmatist epistemological perspective regarding constructs such as truth, reality and reason, highlighting how significantly the study of decision processes changes from this perspective.

Among the possible research approaches that are consistent with pragmatist epistemology, the research program known as Ethnomethodological Studies of Work (Garfinkel and others) will be examined specifically. This research program - in the interactionist perspective context – aims at highlighting the situated, material, practical dimension of our actions, our reasoning and our decisions. This program will be presented in its most recent developments relating above all to the study of the reasoning processes of mathematicians engaged in theorem proving (Livingston). Finally, the potential and limits (Greiffenhagen & Sharrock) of this research program will be highlighted for those who, like the teacher, intend to develop from this program an interactionist psychology of decision-making processes that is hopefully relevant to really improve the decisions of the experts.

In the central part of the course, students will then be guided in the application of the proposed interactionist analytical criteria, to analyze and model concrete decisions and decision processes of two experts in public and private organizations. The final objective is to learn to look at one's own and others' decisions from an interactionist perspective.

Prerequisites

No prior knowledge of the topics that will be treated is required.

Teaching methods

The learning and teaching methods include:

- Lectures.
- Group / class discussions, where possible also with the participation of expert decision makers.
- Classroom exercises/activities.

The lessons will be videotaped and at the end of the lesson they will be made available to students on the Moodle platform.

Assessment methods

The summative assessment for this module consists of an oral exam.

The exam will basically a) verify the mastery of the conceptual and analytical armamentarium of Pragmatism and Interactionism; b) verify the knowledge of the research program of Ethnomethodological studies of work in its most recent evolutions (Livingston), and of its strengths and limitations (Greiffenhagen & Sharrock) to develop an interactionist view on decisions; and c) verify the student's ability to analyze one or more decisions among those described in the texts by Garuzzo and Bueno de Mesquita in an interactionist key (see below).

The reference texts for the exam are mostly in English. For students who have difficulties with this language, to supplement lecture notes and videos, it will be possible to replace the publications in English with an alternative bibliography in Italian as indicated below. For all students, the lessons and the exam will be in Italian.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Psychology of decision-making

Both mandatory:

- Livingston, E. (2008) Ethnographies of Reason. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing. – The parts indicated in class.
- Greiffenhagen, C. & Sharrock, W. (2019) Tensions in Garfinkel’s Ethnomethodological Studies of Work Programme Discussed Through Livingston’s Studies of Mathematics. Human Studies, 42, 253-279.

Alternative bibliography in Italian:

- Notes of the lessons and videos of the lessons (with particular care).
- Livingston, E. (2011) Etnometodologia sotto le cancellature. Quaderni di Teoria Sociale 11, 35-59.

Pragmatist Epistemology

- de Waal, C. (2022) Introducing Pragmatism: A Tool for Rethinking Philosophy. New York: Routledge. – Chapters 1 to 4 completely, plus the parts indicated in class from chapters 5 to 8 and chapters 11 (Richard Rorty), 14 (Legal Pragmatism, to be studied with particular attention), 16 (The End (s) of Philosophy).

Alternative bibliography in Italian:

- Santucci A., a cura di, (1970, reprint 2017) Pragmatismo. Novara: UTET/De Agostini Libri. – The following chapters: PEIRCE: Il fissarsi della credenza, Come rendere chiare le nostre idee; JAMES: Il sentimento della razionalità, La corrente del pensiero, Il significato del pragmatismo; MEAD: Psicologia sociale e comportamentismo, La relazione della mente con la risposta e l'ambiente; SCHILLER: La verità; VAILATI: Sull'importanza delle ricerche relative alla storia delle scienze, Alcune osservazioni sulle questioni di parole nella storia della scienza e della cultura, Pragmatismo e logica matematica.

Practical decisions in business organizations and public organizations

Two texts, chosen from the following list, to be read "as a novel": in class and then during the exam students will be invited to choose passages from the texts they read and to use them to demonstrate their ability to analyze the described decision process, highlighting its local, situational, interaction components, and in terms of the actors' beliefs connected to practical actions and forms of practical reasoning.

- Garuzzo, G. (2018) Quando in Italia si facevano i computer. Tricase, Lecce: Youcanprint.
- Garuzzo, G. (2012) FIAT, i segreti di un'epoca. Roma: Fazi Editore. English ed. (2014) FIAT: The secrets of an epoch. Berlin: Springer.
- Bueno de Mesquita, B. & Smith, A. (2012) The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Bueno de Mesquita, B. (2009) The Predictioneer's Game. Random House. Italian ed. (2011) L'Uomo del Destino. Milano: Rizzoli.