



**British Journal of Education, Society &
Behavioural Science**
4(11): 1525-1535, 2014



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Common Sense: Psychosocial and Educational Perspectives

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Author's contribution

This whole work was carried by the author ET.

Short Communication

Received 7th May 2014
Accepted 28th June 2014
Published 15th July 2014

ABSTRACT

This work proposes: 1. to identify the complex nature of the common sense phenomenon, 2. to elaborate a pattern of the psychological and psycho-social structure of common sense, 3. to conceptualise the process of formation and education of common sense. All over the work there are performed several stages representing also answers to the main questions formulated relating to the structure of common sense: common sense – behaviour or conduct? perceptive compound of common sense, rational compound of common sense, affective compound of common sense, attitudinal compound of common sense, biological compound of common sense, common sense as social representation, motivational items of common sense. The work refers also to the knowledge of common sense, relating to the psychology that we consider to have treated common sense and that we designated as Common sense psychology (humanist psychology). From the point of view of formation and development of common sense, the work applies the pattern of L. Kohlberg to the evolution of common sense in the child's ontogenesis on 3 levels: the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning, the conventional level of moral reasoning, the post-conventional level of moral reasoning. The conclusions of the work highlight the common sense as psychological product, the common sense as compound of the character structure of personality, the common sense as socio-cultural product and the role of self-education in valuing common sense.

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Keywords: The common sense as socio-cultural product; formation and education of common sense.

1. INTRODUCTION

As inter-relational phenomenon of great complexity, common sense is difficult to research and measure because of its numerous objective and subjective sides, of its interdisciplinary and paradoxical character (even if its performance seems a matter-of-course, common sense is frequently breached).

What is the nature of this phenomenon whose complexity we “support” every day?

Common sense was treated as a philosophic concept, of humanist nature, investing the individual as supreme value, from the Antiquity up to the present, without being circumscribed to a particular school or philosophic orientation: the stoics, Aristotle [1], Descartes [2], Kant [3], Wittgenstein [4], G.E. Moore [5].

Wittgenstein [4] asserts that common sense is the principle on which any world pattern may be built – including that of human person – We consider in agreement with these authors that common-sense may be constituted in a real conception about world and life, if built around it as nucleus, in a conscious and persistent manner a theory of equilibrium and measure, constantly implemented.

Is common sense an ethic concept? We enquire ourselves, as ethic works authors. The essence of this concept is ethics and it may lead – we consider – to the elaboration of a new ethic discipline designated as “Common sense ethics”, being based on the principle value which Common sense is and on subordinated values, such as: respect, dignity, decency, but also on norms and rules regulating these values. We frequently find the concept of common sense at the interaction between knowledge and practice, between philosophy and ethics, in the area of ethic philosophy.

2. PSYCHOSOCIAL STRUCTURE OF COMMON SENSE

2.1 Common Sense – Behaviour or Conduit?

The behaviours we consider as common sense behaviours are most frequently obvious, external, noticeable and easy to describe. But is common sense only an external, situational behaviour which depends exclusively on the situation? The behaviours describing common sense such as: apologising when going wrong, not making a fuss at all costs, not using words that may injure human dignity: fool, cretin, idiot, not having an aggressive language or behaviour, defending one’s own rights without breaching the others’ rights (assertiveness) are not just external, noticeable behaviours. From the psychological point of view, according to the conduct psychology of P. Janet as support Teodorescu S [6], common sense is a conduct which has also internal, organisation and regulating elements of the behaviour (images, ideas, affects). Relating to the examples given, we query what is human dignity, which are its coordinates, why we must respect the others’ rights, which rights relate to common sense? Common sense involves also a manner of thinking, refers to the

understanding of human dignity, to the representation of the other one's rights, to the empathic communication with the other?!

2.2 Perceptive Compound of Common Sense

From the perspective of the relationship of common sense with the level of individual sensorial knowledge, one may say that common sense is not a product of perception, it does not depend essentially on sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, but it is a 6th sense, or a synthetic sense communicating us a final result of reception by – as we consider – combining sensitivity and intuition. By using common sense tool one intuits, globally, which is the most adequate behaviour in a situation and one implements it, finding the way of equilibrium. Intuition as “immediate knowledge form of truth according to experience and knowledge previously got, with no preliminary logic reasoning [7] is the one that establishes the relationship of common sense with the second level of world reflection – thought.”

2.3 Rational Compound of Common sense

In general, common sense is often defined as a set a cognitive processes (knowing, understanding, perceiving) or a belief system that is shared by most people without need for debate [8].

Aristotle, cited by Nirestean, Ardelean, Melian, Tg. Mureş, [9] relates to common sense as an *exercise of virtue*, representing the “capacity to deliberate and to make the adequate thing, in the adequate manner, at the adequate moment” *proving equilibrium and measure* (*The Nicomachean Ethics*). *The cultivation of virtue means choosing the medium way, as Aristotle says, between too less and too much, avoiding excess. It is possible by the free decision of the individual*, as they consider Mircea Lazarescu, in 2007 [10], which means a certain self-determination, self-formation freedom. The virtue is defined by Aristotle, as consider Purdel ,as being the aptitude gained by exercise, so the aptitude to always act according to reason, which means always keeping the medium way, the way between the extremes [11]. From the point of view of thought, Descartes [2] used to think about Common sense as “the power to judge well and to distinguish what is true and what is false” identifying common sense with reason. Having common sense – considered Descartes in 1637 – means being rational, relating to reason, not being irrational, “the power to judge well and to differentiating the truth and the false and this is properly designated as common sense or reason.”

It is important the rational compound of common sense (not passing from an extreme to the other, arguing what you are asking for, being rational, respecting elementary logic, keeping the medium way) – but it is not the only one and none the definitive one. The everyday experience, the psychological literature, especially the psychotherapy experience (the role of unconscious mind) proved that people may differentiate the truth and the false without having obligatorily common sense, they may act in a conscious way avoiding common sense, breaching deliberately the rules of common sense. Why, we may ask ourselves?

What other psychological compounds enter in the structure of common sense beyond reason, together or in contradiction with reason?

2.4 Affective Compound of Common Sense

Theodule Ribot [12] speaks about the logic of feelings, about a type of affective reasoning, beyond the cognitive one. The affective reasoning is compounded of concepts and judgements which have a certain emotional coefficient. Other researchers (1993) shows that if in case of the intellectual reasoning the series of the terms conditions the conclusion, in the affective logic, the conclusion conditions the series of the terms involved.

Abstract and general ideas of the rational logic are replaced in the feelings' logic by values – concepts or value judgements.

Consequently, by applying the concept of affective reasoning, we consider that common sense does not represent only the power to make rational judgements, but also to apply value judgements to a certain behaviour, to a certain situation. But which is the hierarchy of values of a given society? At what value level is situated the said behaviour? Who appreciates the said behaviour? If a maid is expecting from an old person to walk in order to for her to hand in a document that the old person asked in a legitimate way, the behaviour of the maid has no common sense and breaches an elementary human right! But it depends on who makes the labelling, in what context this appreciation is made? Among all the affective reasoning forms that Ribot presents: passionate, unconscious, imaginary, justificatory and mixed (composite), the one specific to common sense – as we consider – is the mixed one, which is based on all the other forms.

Making a value judgement has more a practical than theoretical character, means implementing an appreciating reasoning, having the determination to apply this reasoning in practice “When we speak [13] about value judgements, we understand those judgements where we appreciate, value for practical achievement, values expressed by existential judgements” How is it made, at individual level? In a paradoxical manner, by means of social attitudes!

2.5 The Attitude Compound of Common Sense

The attitude, even if individual, has a social origin – as we consider together with Chircev. Chircev [14] considered that there are only social attitudes, in the sense that they are obtained by interaction with the others. “From the point of view of the psychology of social attitudes, the human person lives in a subjective environment formed of all the faiths, opinions, biases, and attitudes relating to different social and cultural forms – Chircev, 1941.”

Common sense is structured in the psychical evolution of the child as such an attitude, according to the development of the capacity to understand the values, by the operation of filtering the social representations by the young individual's personality, in the mature stage of character structuring.

Common sense is as the other attitudes both a “mental state” (preparation for action) and a “physical action”, the proper behaviour. Common sense is formed – as we consider – as the other attitudes, of tendencies, wishes, habitudes, feelings and opinions.

Psychologist definitions of the attitude explain the attitude according to the individual factors (moods, feelings), and the socialising definitions are centred on social factors (social conceptions and values). We consider that social factors, such as social conceptions, values, the psychosocial factors, such as opinions, faiths, biases are filtered by the psychological and individual factors (moods, feelings, will) for resulting common sense behaviours or those breaching common sense.

If within the current Romanian society, common sense is considered a value, if the opinions concerning common sense are positive, individual common sense behaviours shall be stimulated to develop and to manifest. On the other hand, when a society appreciates directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, the breaching forms of common sense, the breaching behaviours of common sense shall be stimulated. The common sense individual behaviours shall be implemented, by effort, by the individual action against the wave.

Allport [15] makes the distinction between 2 types of attitudes – motivational attitudes where the tendencies and instrumental attitudes prevail where directives prevail.

Chircev [14] defines as follows the social attitude: “attitude is a directional mood, having a less cognitive substrate and a more affective and conative substrate, a less native and more social nature, and a more dynamic and less postural and static character.”

Common sense – as we consider – is an instrumental attitude, of altruist nature relating to the others, where directives or the inclinations to action prevail. We hereby enumerate some of these instrumental attitudes, of altruist nature, which are specific – as we consider – to common sense.

1 modesty 2 self-trust and trusting the others 3 sincerity 4 being opened with the others 5 empathy 6 soul warmth 7 goodwill 8 simplicity 9 propriety 10 communicativeness

2.6. Biological Components of Common Sense

From the biological point of view, many researchers, in 2004-2005 demonstrated that altruistic attitudes have a genetic basis:

- sth-rh hormone causing the activation of networks of neurones in the brain cortex which explain the altruistic attitudes of the person.
- male hormones of the elegant behaviour – B type and rosterones contribute to the activation of cortex areas responsible for the breaking of instinctive behaviours.
- after the age of 20, serotonin hormones encourage the manifestations of altruistic behaviours. These genetic researches should encourage the possibility to educate common sense if there were not other factors intervening and influencing common sense development, such as social representations.

2.7 Common Sense as Social Representation

Does common sense function in a world of individual, absolute subjectivity, a world with no rules, where everyone makes what he/she wants or in a world of communication interrelation, empathy, value judgements, socially, historically and culturally determined?

We consider that common sense functions in a world of collective subjectivity, different from a social and historic stage to another, in a nodal relationship with the images, faiths, biases of a social category, of a professional group, of a community.

Which are the images associated to a common sense person within the current Romanian society? – quiet – boring – decent – fool – uninteresting – as he/she must be – Are these images stimulating for the multiplication of common sense?

Which faiths dominate within the current Romanian society concerning common sense? I select some of the personal notices on certain different categories of people:

- punctuality is a desirable behaviour, but being late a little means letting yourself expected, so being in focus when arriving”.
- respecting the others' rights is a desirable behaviour, but one's own rights are more important than the other rights.
- respecting human dignity is a desirable behaviour, but this notion is too abstract. Getting safe of any situation not necessarily standing up is more useful!

Which are the biases specific both to professors and students, but also to the parents of the current Romanian society? Have they any relationship one with the other?

- “today's students do not learn as much as we used to learn once”
- “today's teachers are corrupt”
- “today's students' parents do not take care anymore of their students”

Consequently, if one analyses these social representations [16,17] of common sense of the current Romanian society, what is the conclusion?! That, the current Romanian society does not stimulate the common sense development. And then we ask ourselves which is the common sense statute, what is its importance within the society, on what valuing level is it situated? We consider that there are not the society or the external factors which have a determinant final role in forming common sense, but self-education, volitional and activating elements of the individual's personality, conscience level of the person.

EINSTEIN used to consider common sense as “an assembly of biases which form up to the age of 18”, in the sense that common sense is formed of preconceived ideas, which are common to a given collectivity, has a common positive or negative affective colour, but the volitional and activating elements are particularly individual.

2.8 Motivational Elements of Common Sense

From the motivational point of view, common sense is it a duty or an obligation? The response depends both on the society we live in and on the social group and on the person itself involved in a certain social relationship. We consider that common sense is part of the duty morality and not of the obligation one. The main motivation of the duty morality is derived, according to Kant, of the stipulation of the existence of an intrinsic purpose. As we cannot build a geometry with no axioms, we cannot either build a moral which does not stipulate something as intrinsic purpose, something valuable by itself, something that cannot be transformed in a mean for another purpose [3]. Kant [3] delimitates two intrinsic purposes: life and humanity of the person of any human being. Due to the first purpose, we may found the perfect moral duty of non-suicide, due to the second one, we may found the practical imperative: I.Kant: the human being is an intrinsic purpose, not only a mean. Imm. Kant founds the manners' philosophy on a "gold rule": treating the others as one would like to be treated [18].

The practical imperative [3] tells us: act in order to treat humanity, both in your person and in any other's person, always and at the same time as purpose and never only as a mean. Such an action is – as we consider – the action of common sense, in the philosophy and ethics of common sense.

Common sense is – as Goethe considered – the humanity genius – or – in our vision the corollary of humanitarian behaviours, from the point of view that it synthesises those highly humanitarian, altruistic behaviours where the human being is valued by the others at the level of purpose and not of mean, is appreciated, stimulated at the highest level.

3. COMMON SENSE KNOWLEDGE. COMMON SENSE PSYCHOLOGY

Such a psychology valuing the human being at the highest level, elaborating valid concepts and explanations for every day's life is humanist psychology. Considering that the entire human being and not only parts of it should constitute the subject matter of psychology, humanist psychology appeared, with its main representatives such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Carl and Charlotte Buhler, Rolo May.

"I believe that humanist psychology must treat more the important issues of the human position in today's world and I say it because all the important issues of mankind – war and peace, exploitation and fraternity, hate and love, disease and health, understanding and conflict, bliss and sadness – lead to a better understanding of human nature and to a psychology with direct application for human life" [19].

Humanist psychology considers that:

- the stress must be places on several human qualities, such as: the capacity of choosing, creating, self-realisation against some external stimuli acting on it;
- the human being is and imposes to remain a value, capable to adapt and to model in order to become what it is maximum possible to become.

Rogers speaks to this end about an actual Self, which develops by reporting to a imaginary (ideal) Self, considering that between them there may appear an agreement, a congruence or a disagreement, an incongruence. The favourable conditions of the congruent person development are treating it with respect, trust, empathy, acceptance, (common sense psychology).

This therapeutic vision on human being, which characterises the therapy centred on the client, may and must be extended in every days' life – as C. Rogers [20] considers – in order to develop the human being, in order for it to become a person.

Healthy persons, as Rogers puts it, are: experience-opened, they live here and now, they manifest the freedom to experience, and they are creative. All these characteristics do not exclude the responsibility of the human being.

Where is common sense situated in the motivational pyramid of Maslow? Of course, at the level of appreciation, esteem and respect so at the 4th level of human needs. This position is significant for the difficulty of individual achievement of common sense, which must overpass the first 3 levels in order to become active. But according to the functioning laws of the pyramid of Maslow, we may put between brackets, for a determined time, the inferior levels of the pyramid and to activate in a conscious way the level of interrelation appreciation, of esteem and respect of oneself and of the other. The activation of common sense insures the respect behaviours for the others, which come back and contribute to the development of the self person respect. Maslow's pyramid highlights again the circularity between the self respect and the others' respect.

4. COMMON SENSE FORMATION COVERS THE SAME DEVELOPMENT STAGES AS THE OTHER MORAL BEHAVIOURS, ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN OF L. KOHLBERG [21]

4.1 The Preconventional Level of Moral Judgement (Early and Medium Childhood)

Judgment based on personal needs and on the others' rules – Stage 1 of punishment and submission: the rules (common sense) are respected in order to avoid sanction (good and evil are evaluated according to the physical consequences of the action: if common sense is compensated, it receives an impulse in its development; if it is punished, by non-appreciation, common sense may be inhibited or may develop in a difficult way. Pay attention in this case to the family education of common sense, to the examples provided by the parents, to the learning by imitation of the children. Stage 2, of the individual instrumental purpose and exchange (naive instrumental hedonism): the good (common sense) and evil (breaching of common sense) are evaluated according to the personal needs: it is good what brings advantages to us; it is bad what it does not bring advantages to us; the orientation is made in order to obtain a rewarding. Usually, common sense breaching brings benefits: not returning borrowed things, sitting on a chair in front of an old and ill person standing up, using the labelling of fool, incapable puts for a moment the person using them in the opposed position. During the medium childhood, common sense develops according to the instrumental hedonism action. If we extend the psychological explanations at the level of the

society, we may say that our current Romanian society is placed at this stage. But it would be a psychologist conception.

4.2 Conventional Level of Moral Judgement (13-16 Years Old)

The judgment based on the others' approvals, on the family's expectations, on the community's values and laws – Stage 3 of the interpersonal mutually conformity (morality of good relationships if having good relationships with certain persons, one manifests common sense relating to them, if social relationships are not good, one breaches the common sense rules, the good (common sense) and evil (breaching common sense) are appreciated according to the actions producing pleasure and as they are appreciated by the others (being good/evil) – Stage 4 of the social system and of conscience (order and duty morality): law and order oriented; the authority must be respected and the social order must be maintained.

4.3 Postconventional Level of Moral Judgement (16-20 Years' Old)

The judgement based on abstract concepts – Stage 5 of priority rights and of social contact: the good (common sense) is appreciated according to what the social establishes as standards of individual rights – Stage 6 of the universal ethic principles: the good (common sense) and the evil are issues of the individual conscience and involve a series of abstract concepts as justice, human dignity and equality.

At this last level, it is maximum developed common sense as moral principle, a synthetic value as treated within the work.

5. TRAINING COMMON SENSE

Even if it has a biologic, genetic content, the manifestation of common sense cannot be explained only at this level. The family education provides essential models the formation of common sense relates to, insures the affective training of common sense [22]. The school education develops the rational compounds of common sense, the equilibrated judgement, the measure of appreciation. The institutions outside the school (NGOs, foundations, associations), the social and cultural activities particularly enlarge the sphere of experiential learning of common sense. But – as we consider – self-education is mainly responsible for common sense training.

6. CONCLUSION

1. Common sense as complex psychological product is formed of cognitive, affective, volitional, attitudinal and behaviourist compounds.
2. Common sense as compounding part of personality takes part of the character structure of personality.
3. Common sense as socio-cultural product represents a valuing mixture (respect, self-control, altruism, responsibility), being represented by social attitudes.
4. Common sense has a genetic basis, but is formed and develops in the context of significant inter-human relationships.

5. From the psychosocial point of view, the social and individual circularity is significant, the social representations of common sense are generating common sense general schemes, but the individual conscience is responsible for the concrete manifestation of common sense.
6. Self-education is mainly responsible for common sense.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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