

Paola Dazzan: What can we do to understand psychosis?

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Professor Paola Dazzan is a prominent researcher who currently holds the positions of Professor of Neurobiology of Psychosis and Vice Dean for International Affairs at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, UK. She practices as a Consultant Perinatal Psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. Originally from Italy, Professor Dazzan began her academic journey by attending Medical School and becoming a practicing physician. Following her graduation, she continued with her training as a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. She completed her PhD at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience King's College London, and has worked there ever since. She is internationally known for her work using brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) data, stress and inflammatory markers, and reproductive hormones, to understand the onset and outcome of psychoses and of other severe psychiatric disorders. Her contributions have been widely recognized in the international psychiatric community and she is recognized as a leading researcher in the field. We are delighted that Professor Paola Dazzan has kindly agreed to participate in the Genomic Press Interview. We hope that our readers will discover many intriguing facts about her personality, work, and innovative research.

Part 1: Paola Dazzan – Life and Career

Could you give us a glimpse into your personal history, emphasizing the pivotal moments that first kindled your passion for science?

I was born in Italy, and while attending high school, I became familiar with the work of Freud and Jung, which was part of our philosophy curriculum. This triggered my interest in the mind, how our personal experiences shape our behaviour and our view of the world, and how we could intervene to make people feel better. From here, I decided I wanted to become a psychiatrist and attended Medical School with this objective. I was very fortunate to make this dream a reality and have never regretted my choice.

We would like to know more about your career trajectory leading up to your most relevant leadership role. What defining moments channelled you toward that leadership responsibility?

After completing Medical School in 1994, I had the opportunity to spend a period of time at what was at the time the Institute of Psychiatry in London (UK), thanks to a fellowship. My time at the Institute was life-changing, as I was suddenly exposed to an environment where education and research went hand in hand, taught by the big names in psychiatry. I felt like I found my home, and I decided to stay after my fellowship ended. So, what was supposed to be a 10-month experience has become the last 30 years of my life! In 1996, I joined the Maudsley training program to become a specialist, and then in 2006, I completed my PhD under the supervision of Robin Murray. My whole career has been spent in this Institution, where I met many supportive peers who trusted me in taking on more and more senior leadership positions. After I became a full Professor in 2016,



Figure 1. Paola Dazzan, MD, PhD, King's College London, UK.

I took on leadership roles in two areas I am passionate about: diversity and inclusion and international partnerships.

Please share with us what initially piqued your interest in your favourite research or professional focus area.

Being at the Maudsley and the Institute of Psychiatry during my training was like being in a “shopping centre” of psychiatry. Every subspecialty or area of research was suddenly available to study. It was during this time that psychosis caught my interest out of a desire to understand more about how our brain can give origin to such unusual and often distressing experiences. I discussed my interest with Robin Murray, who was always open to discussing research with us trainees, and, following his advice, I spent six months at Johns Hopkins University, in Godfrey Pearlson's laboratory, learning neuroimaging. On my return, I found waiting for me the incredible opportunity to start my PhD with Robin, using neuroimaging in the AESOP study of first-episode psychosis.

What impact do you hope to achieve in your field by focusing on specific research topics?

My area of research is centred on the identification of clinical and neurobiological predictors of treatment response in psychosis. Unfortunately, in the last twenty years, the search for neuroimaging or blood-based





Figure 2. Paola Dazzan in the Seychelles, enjoying herself at one of the world's most beautiful, wild beaches.

biomarkers predicting treatment response and outcome of psychosis has not yet been as successful as we had hoped. Still, I think even these failures have brought us new awareness of the complex heterogeneity of the disorders we are studying and pushed us toward the application of new, different approaches to studying the neurobiology of psychosis. My research will contribute to identifying more effective ways to stratify individuals in treatment trials so that interventions can be as tailored in psychiatry as in other branches of medicine.

Please tell us more about your current scholarly focal points within your chosen field of science.

At present, I am completing the three-year *eBRAIN* study, a large longitudinal study of young adolescents to explore the impact of early adversity on trajectories of brain development and the onset of psychotic experiences and poor mental health in general, also looking at the potential mediating role of the immune system. I am also working with young people to co-develop a framework of guidelines for conducting biological research in mental health in the *CELEBRATE* project. These guidelines will help researchers to recruit and retain representative cohorts of young people in biological studies, using, for example, neuroimaging or collections of blood samples.

What habits and values did you develop during your academic studies or subsequent postdoctoral experiences that you uphold within your research environment?

The principal value that I uphold is respect. I grew up with parents who were always respectful, even when imparting discipline, and growing up, I have expected this from others. As such, I ensure I also respect people, their opinions, and their diversity, independently of their roles, and promote this within my research group. There is always a way to be sensitive and thoughtful when communicating, even in disagreement. Living in a multicultural environment like London has also made me value the power that different backgrounds and perspectives can bring to a common objective and academic and non-academic life in general.

At Genomic Press, we prioritize fostering research endeavours based solely on their inherent merit, uninfluenced by geography or the researchers' personal or demographic traits. Are there particular cultural facets within the scientific community that warrant transformative scrutiny, or is there a cause within science that deeply stirs your passions?

Although some progress has been made, we must still achieve equality and inclusivity in science. We still need to scrutinize our attitude to

gender or underrepresented groups. This remains a massive problem in academia, and science must acknowledge and address these biases. As a woman, I have experienced many of the negative attitudes, whether conscious or unconscious, that can hamper progression for some individuals. We all need to fight these, as you are doing with Genomic Press.

What do you most enjoy in your capacity as an academic or research leader?

Working with young people who have the energy to bring new ideas and new perspectives to old problems.

Outside professional confines, how do you prefer to allocate your leisure moments, or conversely, in what manner would you envision spending these moments given a choice?

I love travelling, so when I am not working, I usually explore or plan to explore other countries. When in London, I run, do yoga, or meet friends in my free time.

Part 2: Paola Dazzan – Selected questions from the Proust Questionnaire¹

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Relaxing on a beautiful beach (see [figure 2](#)) with the people I love next to me.

What is your greatest fear?

Losing my mobility.

¹In the late nineteenth century, various questionnaires were a popular diversion designed to discover new things about old friends. What is now known as the 35-question Proust Questionnaire became famous after Marcel Proust's answers to these questions were found and published posthumously. Proust answered the questions twice, at ages 14 and 20. In 2003 Proust's handwritten answers were auctioned off for \$130,000. Multiple other historical and contemporary figures have answered the Proust Questionnaire, including among others Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fernando Pessoa, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Cézanne, Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro, Catherine Deneuve, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Gloria Steinem, Pelé, Valentino, Yoko Ono, Elton John, Martin Scorsese, Pedro Almodóvar, Richard Branson, Jimmy Carter, David Chang, Spike Lee, Hugh Jackman, and Zendaya. The Proust Questionnaire is often used to interview celebrities: the idea is that by answering these questions, an individual will reveal his or her true nature. We have condensed the Proust Questionnaire by reducing the number of questions and slightly rewording some. These curated questions provide insights into the individual's inner world, ranging from notions of happiness and fear to aspirations and inspirations.

**Which living person do you most admire?**

Nobel Laureate Denis Mukwege, a gynaecologist who has treated thousands of survivors of sexual violence by armed groups, and who fights to have rape recognized as a weapon of war.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Wearing big, chunky, and cheap costume jewellery.

What are you most proud of?

The support I give to those who need it, whether family, friends, or those working with me.

What is your greatest regret?

Not having done a gap year after university. I am now counting on doing a Senior gap year!

What is the quality you most admire in people?

Honesty.

What is the trait you most dislike in people?

The inability to listen to others.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

Extroversion (is it a virtue, though?)

What is your favourite occupation (or activity)?

Reading, preferably while lying on a beach.

Where would you most like to live?

South-East Asia.

What is your most treasured possession?

The gift of unconditional love given by my parents.

When and where were you happiest? And why were so happy then?

I have always been happiest when travelling. I get thrilled by exploring new places and meeting people living in a different environment. While there, I enjoy hiking, diving, or just watching life go by while sitting in a café for a whole afternoon.

What is your current state of mind?

I am happy and satisfied, as one of my PhD students just passed her viva with lots of compliments from the examiners! We will all celebrate her in a couple of hours.

What is your most marked characteristic?

Discretion.

Among your talents, which one(s) give(s) you a competitive edge?

Being an independent thinker.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Having had some young colleagues telling me I have been a role model for them.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

The fact that my face reflects so openly what I am thinking.

What do you most value in your friends?

Loyalty.

Who are your favourite writers?

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Margaret Atwood, Jonathan Franzen, Bernardine Evaristo.

Who are your heroes of fiction?

Nancy Drew. As a young teenager, I loved her books, admired how smart and independent she was, and dreamt of becoming like her!

Who are your heroes in real life?

Those who speak up to defend a just cause, even knowing that they are putting their lives in danger.

What aphorism or motto best encapsulates your life philosophy?

What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.

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