Re-Representing Representations - Discussion of Räty & Snellman

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Räty and Snellman have provided an admirably lucid overview of some of the problems that have been raised with the theory of social representations. Since both of us have written separate critiques, which Räty and Snellman discuss at length, it might be opportune for us to comment jointly on some of the issues which are raised in their paper. These relate to the specific criticisms, which have been made of social representation, the relations between the different sorts of critique, and, also, to the areas of agreement between the critics and the theory of social representation. In particular, we would not wish to exaggerate the differences between the critics (as if each were merely attempting to push a particular self-interested form of theory); in addition, we would wish to stress the major areas of overlap between our approaches and the basic problematic of the theory of social representations.

In this discussion we will (a) explore further one of the lines of criticism that is relatively undeveloped in Räty and Snellman's paper; (b) comment on their identification of four 'traits' in the critical literature; (c) make a more general plea for social representations researchers to transcend disciplinary boundaries; and (d) lastly emphasise the continuities between the problematic of social representation theory and that underlying the critiques.

Representation, Individualism and Discourse

One issue which unites the four critiques and the theory of social representations is an opposition towards current cognitivist trends within psychology. The critique from discourse analysis (Potter and Litton, 1985) suggests that there are traces of cognitivism still remaining with social representation theory, as currently formulated. At the centre of the theory of social representations is the idea of a shared image; the 'iconic matrix' or 'figurative nucleus'. It is this that supposedly provides the means for people to make the unfamiliar familiar as people locate novel aspects of the world within existing classification schemes. Quite apart from important conceptual difficulties that this idea faces (which we explored in McKinlay and Potter, 1987; McKinlay, Potter and Wetherell, forthcoming), this emphasis on cognitive processes of anchoring and objectification is in fundamental tension with Moscovici's claim that representations are developed in the 'unceasing babble' of ordinary talk. If anchoring and objectification are seen as fundamental cognitive mechanisms, then SR theory will drift towards cognitive reductionism. However, as Billig (1988) argued, there are good reasons for re-interpreting objectification sociologically rather than cognitively. In spite of this, the cognitivist interpretation is already apparent in more recent empirical developments in SR research (e.g. van Dijk, 1991). The risk is that attention will be directed towards cognitive events within individuals rather than features of argument and conflict taking place within talk, texts of other symbolic media and distributed across different social practices.

This trend can be observed in the adoption of cognitivist notions (or notions reconstructed *via* cognitivism) such as prototype, image, memory, and, of course, representation itself. The concentration on such matters draws attention away from the tasks of theorising and analysing the "unceasing babble": talk is taken as unproblematic, something we as researchers already know about. Indeed, this particular formulation is notable for the rhetorical work it does in characterising talk as something chaotic and messy, something that has to be categorized from a distance rather than engaging with its moment-to-moment orderliness (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Once the researcher draws on the ontology of cognitivism, which has been refined in the decontextualized, desocialized and uncultured universe of laboratory experiments, there is no unproblematic way to connect these ideas to processes of talk. By contrast, once the pragmatics and rhetoric of talk and texts are theorized and analysed, the traditional ontology of cognitivism itself starts to look fragile (Edwards and Potter, 1991). Indeed, discourse analytic work poses important questions for cognitive psychologists concerning what might count as an adequate explanation (Edwards, 1991; Edwards, Middleton and Potter, 1992).

This is not the place to rehearse the discourse alternative in detail, which is based upon developments in rhetoric, conversation analysis and semiotics (Billig, 1987, 1991a; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). It has a major concern of examining the pragmatics of discourse, focussing upon the way that representations, and other social psychological phenomena, are achieved in practice through talk. Such analyses concentrate upon the various practical ends of representation (Billig, 1991b; Potter and Edwards, 1990, Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Potter, forthcoming). We believe that this alternative is better suited to the analysis of dynamic processes, and prevents reconceptualization in individualistic terms.

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE FOUR "TRAITS"

Räty and Snellman present four traits, which, they claim, characterise the criticisms of SR theory. Comments here will be made about traits one, two and four - trait three will be discussed in the following section.

First Räty and Snellman complain that critics are not engaging fully with SR theory because they are too bound by their own conceptual frameworks. Actually, this critique of the critiques could be turned around. SR theory is a genuinely challenging and sophisticated development in social psychology and as such it has provoked an unusually high degree of conceptual and theoretical debate. It is precisely a sign of the health of this debate that it has revolved around competing theoretical frameworks. It has not remained at the level of many psychological debates, which focus exclusively on empirical adequacy. The intellectual debate of the 'thinking society' should neither be characterised by 'monologue', nor 'dialogue striving after a common goal'. Instead, there should be searching and vigorous *argument* which explores the adequacy of different positions. Moscovici, himself, should be applauded for introducing a level of argumentation - even at times polemic - into the rather tepid discussions of social psychologists. In turn, by engaging with Moscovici, each of the four critics is emphasising the importance of his ideas. It is hoped that by playing his ideas off other positions, the debate can be dialectically advanced.

The second complaint by Räty and Snellman is that by focusing attention on problems in operationalizing social representations' critics are helping reconstruct it in terms of methodological individualism. There is justice in this complaint. However, this arises more

from the responses to the critiques, rather than the spirit of the critiques themselves. Although we can only speak for two of the four critics, we feel sure that all four would heartily endorse Moscovici's impatience with experimentalists' obsession with operational definitions. His comments about theoretical innovation being stifled by research procedures strike a chord with all of us. However, some of the theoretical issues, raised in the critiques, have sometimes been reinterpreted as 'merely' methodological points. And example can be given from Potter and Litton (1985). In responding to this critique, SR researchers have commonly reconstructed the point about the problematic notion of consensus as a *technical* one; that is, something that can be solved by better statistics or more subtle sampling procedures (Augoustinos, 1991; Hraba et al., 1989), rather than something that requires a major theoretical reorientation.

Our own stress on rhetoric and discourse (and certainly Jahoda's on anthropology and Harré's on ethogenics) is designed to prevent methodological individualism. It is one of the assumptions of discourse analysis (and an assumption shared by the theory of SR) that talk cannot be understood in terms of mental models contained within the heads of the participants. Thus, the rhetorical perspective stresses the role 'common-places' in everyday argumentation: common-places are the socially shared topoi of common-sense (Billig, 1987, Billig, 1991b; Billig, et al, 1988). As such, the notion of 'common-place', in classical rhetorical theory, could be seen as a forerunner of Moscovici's concept of 'social representation'. Allying the concept to rhetorical theory, however, would prevent the tendency to individualistic reductionism which characterises a sizable minority of research done under the rubric of social representations.

Similar points can be made about Räty and Snellman's final criticism, which is that critics neglect to discuss the social aspects of SR theory because of their allegiance to a fundamental individualism. This may be too simple: Potter and Wetherell (1987) and McKinlay, Potter and Wetherell (forthcoming) distinguish different senses of the 'social' in social representations theory. Moreover, SR theory can itself be criticized along these lines for implicitly understating the potential for social conflict by treating conflict as something that happens primarily between groups and individuals with differing representations. At present SR theory does not theorise conflict which occurs between people or groups who 'agree in representations'; for example, it does not address the idea that representations can provide an arena for dispute (Litton and Potter, 1985; Billig, 1991b; Billig, et al., 1988).

PARADIGMS AND DISCIPLINES

Räty and Snellman's third diagnosed trait is a failure to address issues about scientific paradigms. This criticism can be turned on its head. SR theory has built in important assumptions about the nature of science and scientific discourse. This is apparent in its central distinction between the reified and consensual universe, and the identification of a seepage of scientific ideas into public consciousness as a, or perhaps even *the,* central mode for the generation of representations. Unfortunately, some of the most interesting analytic and theoretical work on science, particularly sociology of scientific knowledge (for recent overviews see: Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Ashmore, 1989; Myers, 1990; Mulkay, 1985; Woolgar, 1988) has tended to be ignored by SR workers. This is doubly striking as some of the most profound developments in the area are also French (Latour, 1987; Callon and Law, 1982), and they are having an important impact in other areas of social science.

It may be that social representations researchers have looked at this literature but found it unfamiliar and unhelpful - it does not seem to conceptualize science in a way that is easily amenable to SR theory. Yet, if this has happened the researchers have not considered *why* there is this unfamiliarity. Is it, for example, that the views of science that come out of this work do not fit the relatively simple model of science deployed in SR theory? Is it that this work makes the distinction between a reified and consensual universe extremely problematic? This is not the place to explore systematically how well SR ideas survive when considered from the perspective of this work - but this is a long overdue task.

The more general point is that the theory of social representations is at the boundary of a number of social sciences disciplines - and yet it has been developed in social psychology, looking to social psychology's traditional problematics, and paying scant attention to the wealth of relevant research in neighbouring areas, including those of conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Much the same argument could be developed with respect to anthropological research - elsewhere in psychology there has been a fruitful and creative interchange of ideas (Lave, 1988; Stigler, et al., 1990).

Looking towards such rapprochements is not the same as attempting to push SR theorising into narrow, theoretically preferred perspectives. Quite the contrary, it stems from a desire to open up social psychological theorising. In this respect, unqualified tribute must be paid to Serge Moscovici. He has a broad, intellectually open vision of social psychology. His work on social representations constitutes one of the most important reactions against the antiintellectual ethos which stifles most orthodox social psychological writings, particularly in the 'official' journals.

Moscovici is absolutely correct in asserting that a more intellectually adventurous social psychology is not to be developed through precise definitions (whether for the concept of 'social representations' or whatever) or through tying all ideas to experimental techniques. By contrast, there needs to development of the 'problematics' of social representation theory. This was the underlying theme of the critique in Billig (1988). Historical and anthropological sciences tend to have different problematics - the former concentrating upon the historically particular and the latter on the culturally universal. At present the two problematics are sometimes confused in SR writing (and, indeed, in the concept of social representations itself). The argument is not that SR theorists should only use the concept of SR in the particularist sense (and, here, Räty and Snellman oversimplify the critique): but, if the problematic is a historical one, then the concept should be used in a particularist, historical sense. This would be in line with Moscovici's theory that SR's are a modern form of commonsense. And it is this line of inquiry which makes Moscovici's problematics so intellectually challenging. One final point can be made about the similarity between all the critics and the so-called object of criticism. Räty and Snellman mention briefly the difficulty which unorthodox researchers face in having their studies published in orthodox journals. Curiously, they mention this only with respect to social constructivism, and not to SR theory itself or to the work of the critics. All four of the critics have pursued unorthodox investigations - and certainly, two at least have faced difficulties with publishing in standard journals. This difficulty, we suspect, is one faced by qualitatively inclined researchers generally, including (or perhaps especially) SR researchers who pursue qualitative methods. As Moscovici has argued, many of the problematics of SR theory demands qualitative investigations. These are precisely the sorts of investigations which standard social

psychology journals resist publishing, but which arguably best express the intellectual spirit of SR theory. It is probably safe to assert that all four critics applaud the intellectual openness of that spirit. Moreover, by their critiques, the critics hope to further that same openness in a discipline which has for too long been burdened by the narrowness of intellectual orthodoxies.

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