SOCIAL COGNITION VS. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS – A COMMENT ON DUVEEN & DE ROSA

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In their paper Duveen and De Rosa contrast the approach of social representation research with the more "classical" approach prevalent in social cognition research. Specifically they focus on developmental studies that were pursued in each of the two theoretical and methodological traditions. Within both approaches there can be found empirical research on the children's development of knowledge about economic processes as well as on their understanding of mental illness. By comparing specific results within both approaches, they come to show that social cognition's primary interest lies in uncovering stages in cognitive development, whereas social representation research concentrates on the children's attainment of specific cultural and therefore evaluative, symbolic knowledge as a consequence of group membership. Such theoretical analyses are badly needed if social representation theory wants to progress conceptually. I enjoyed reading the paper, because it touches upon issues which have to be discussed and conceptually sharpened.

Despite my general agreement with the authors and my appreciation of their interest to look into such issues, I have my reservations concerning the specific approach they use to investigate this intricate relationship between "classical" social cognition theory and social representation theory. If one is to analyse and compare conceptually two or more theories, one needs to depart from a superordinate theoretical position which allows to anchor and relate the concepts used in the analysis. Usually it would not suffice to simply describe differences and/or similarities.

Duveen and De Rosa base their comparison on the two concepts "content" and "process". They argue that social cognition research elaborates on stages in the development of mental process features, and social representation research emphasises content of developmental knowledge structures. What I feel is lacking, is to probe and to define the meta-theoretical "ecology" of each approach: that is (a) the population of subjects investigated, (b) the problem or object aimed at, and (c) the explanation space, which can be covered by research within each of the two approaches. The points (a), (b), and (c) obviously are intimately related. The intended explanations determine the research problem and this in turn determines the choice of research subjects. In the following I will elaborate on these issues, because in my opinion they are the basic prerequisites for an analysis like this one.

Population and Reference

If we look at differences between research orientations like social cogniton and social representation research, we are well advised first to look at the specific understanding of the subjects or research "objects", the respective orientations maintain. If a research orientation intends to investigate the knowledge system of middle class Italians, the researcher will choose his or her subjects from this population; if researchers want to investigate the cognitive deficits of elderly people in a peasant population, they will look for exactly those

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subjects in exactly the right population; if one is interested in general developmental stages of young humans, one may select any being that fits the condition of being young and human, be it a Middle European citizen or a Maori from New Zealand. This is evident, of course, but what does it imply?

In any investigation I will recruite my research subjects from the population whose mental processes or knowledge structures I want to probe. Thereby I restrict the space of generalizability of any research finding. It is a well known practice to name the reference population for any investigation, where my findings are supposed to hold: The middle class Italians, the elderly peasants, and the human beings in general. We equally know that the research questions that can be answered depend crucially upon the reference population: We may probe subjects from a specific social or cultural group for their common knowledge in certain areas of their life, but it would not make much sense, trying to probe subjects drawn randomly from different cultures of the human race for their common knowledge system on any relevant aspect of their lives – and it even may prove impossible to find any aspect of life that is common to all of them. On the other hand, if I am interested in general mental processes, cognition, etc., that are rooted in the biological constitution of the human race – as it is the case with cognitive psychology, for example – I would not fare well recruiting my subjects only from middle class Italians or New Zealand Maoris. Thus, I want to call reference population the total of individals, for which a given finding is supposed to hold, or – put differently – the total of individuals, where a phenomenon under scrutiny can reasonably be expected to occur (Wagner, in press a; in press b).

Social Cognition. Social cognition, also developmental social cognition, on the one hand is concerned with social knowledge and on the other hand with cognitive processes. While, however, the respective authors in social cognition are rather vage and diverge in their understanding of the relevance of social knowledge for social cognition, social psychology of cognitive processes is conceived more or less uniformly as "an analysis of the stages, structures, and dynamic mechanisms involved in mental activity, including both the receipt of information from the environment and the initiation of responses. It is concerned with processing stages such as encoding, storage, and retrieval; it includes memory structures such as schema and prototypes, ..." (Ostrom, 1984, p. 21; also Eysenck, 1984; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Holyoak & Gordon, 1984). Whereas social knowledge may differ between social groups, cognitive processes are expected to work in all individuals, independently of the specific content of knowledge systems. They are basically seen as attributes of the human species. Consequently, testing the generalizability of psychology's findings is seen by many as the basic task of cross-cultural psychology (Jahoda 1970; Pepitone & Triandis, 1988; Triandis, 1974).

There is some discussion in the literature on whether specific contents may interfere with processes (e.g. Evans, 1991). This would be an indication that there may exist group specific cognitive processes, thus challenging the assumption of a cognitive uniformity of mankind. But even in this research – as for example with the Wason-Selection Task – it is not the process itself that changes with content, but only the correctness and not the inference process itself. Inferential correctness in such research is supposed to depend either upon individual experience with (Cheng & Holyoak, 1985), upon cultural availability (D'Andrade, 1989), or upon evolutionary relevance (Cosmides, 1989) of specific schemata.

There are examples of supposedly general cognitive process characteristics that turned out to be cultur specific and therefore content in the strict sense. The so-called "fundamental

attribution error" is a rather prominent one (e.g. Ross & Anderson, 1980). It was shown that this process attribute more or less holds only in Western industrialised cultures and not in more collectivistic cultures, like for example the Indian one (Miller, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). It was concluded that this characteristic of attribution processes is a cultural "artifact", a consequence of cultural ideology and therefore content rather than a general process.

Hence, the social cognition paradigm can be pinned down on research concerning process that is considered generally valid. Its reference population is the human species considered as a cognitive process unity. This is also the point where social cognition connects intimately with general psychology's cognition research. This implies, as Duveen and De Rosa argue, that also developmental studies within the paradigm of social cognition (a) center around process characteristics, respectively developmental aspects of cognitive abilities; and (b) therefore need a reference point of "correct" cognition. Such a reference point in the majority of cases will be the level of cognitive performance of a competent adult and/or scientific models of logically correct inference. Within the inherent logic of cognitive psychology's paradigm such a procedure is inevitable. It is, however, a different question, if it does justice to everyday and real life cognitive processing. This must not interest us here (cf. Gigerenzer & Murray, 1987; Wagner, in press a).

If this analysis pictures correctly cognitive social psychology's present implicit research interests, its procedures and specific findings do not result from a "biased" or unrealistic model of human cognitive performance as, e.g., the metaphor of the naïve scientist seems to imply. Also, the image of the "social actor" figures equally in social cognition as is does in social representation research (e.g. Ostrom, 1984). But it is not a social actor that is seen as a modal representative of a specific culture or definite social group or society. Rather it is a social actor stripped of any particular cultural, ideological, and social attributes; an actor reduced to its basic cognitive equipment enabling him or her to become a competent member of any society, culture, or group.

Social Representations. Social representation research, on the other hand, is explicitly interested in culture and ideology. In contrast to the social cognition approach its reference population, wherefrom it picks its subjects and informants, is a specific social group. Cultural and social contents characterize, define, and differentiate social entities making them to the specific entity they are. They determine the modal mental "topography" or mental "morphology" of a society. No student of social representations would claim that his or her finding, e.g. the social representation of the economic system found with subjects from Western European nations, could be generalized to other social or cultural groups, while not denying that any other group does have its own social representation of economic processes and economic objects. It is the specific form of the representation that interests us here, its peculiar metaphoric relationships, and the particular structure of its central nucleus, being the characteristic of competent members of a social group.

Therefore, any developmental study generally will reveal both, the development or attainment of cognitive abilities to generalize and to abstract, as well as specific views of what is socially correct and admissible and what is not. It is not exclusively either the one or the other, but both at the same time. Only the focus of attention of the respective research – abilities/processes versus contents – determines its outcomes, and defines the population of reference implied by its interests.

Content, Form, and Process

Duveen and De Rosa point out the finding in developmental research that children seem to attain first the evaluative aspects of their social surroundings, before they become able to grasp cognitively – or conceptualy – what is going on. The consequence is that children seem not te exhibit any development at all with regard to contents, but only with regard to form, switching from a purely evaluative/affective representation to a somewhat more cognitive one later. The authors illustrate this important finding with the development of the representation of social inequality. But also, in my opinion, the research in the representation of mental illness makes the same point. If the youngest children picture mentally handicapped people as totally dehumanized "monsters", this seems to equal the evaluative/affective stage in the representation of inequality. Consequently, the later stages of "deviance" and "medicalisation" in the representation of mental illness remind one of a more cognitive/conceptual representation.

The authors argue that this constancy of content within changing forms points to a crucial difference between cognitive and representational developmental research. This makes me ask two questions: (a) Doesn't this change of form necessarily also imply a change in process? and (b) Is it reasonable to call the first purely evaluative/affective form already a social representation?

ad (a): It is true that social representation research has sharpened our awareness for mental processes beyond the purely cognitive ones, be they called evaluative or symbolic. But what a change in form indicates, clearly is a change in mental processing. Hence, the difference between more classical developmental research and the social representational one, is not the exclusive concern with developmental stages in the first, and concern with content in the second. Both reveal stages in the development of children, and both have to show the implicitly assumed generality of these developmental processing stages.

ad (b): This question refers to a very central definition problem of social representations. Does it really make sense to call a purely evaluative and affective "statement" a social representation, even if it seems to exhibit the same content, as interpreted by the researcher? A tendency to evaluate without being able to elaborate verbally on the justificatory superstructure of this evaluation equals more what Bourdieu (e.g. 1980) has called "habitus" than what we call a social representation. In fact a finding like the one mentioned before, in my opinion illustrates the ontological genesis of a social representation from more basic habitual reaction tendencies. Only as soon as the habitual tendency to evaluate is accompanied by a more or less elaborated quasi-theoretical framework – usually with justificatory moral elements – can we reasonably speak of a representation. Habitus and habitual evaluations – as we know – are not arguable. But argument, discourse, and communication are theoretical prerequisites for social representations to evolve.

Let us consider the finding of the developmental forms of the representation of mental illness. The first magical-fantastic stage, if exhibited by children, does not not contain any reference to the "normal" social life or to a specific social group. This becomes different with the second stage, the representation of madness as deviance. In order to being able to categorize a person as deviant, one needs a representation of what is normal. Otherwise the term "deviant" would not make sense. Thus, this form of representation or stage would not be possible without a more or less coherent knowledge of which rules usually govern social life. Only given this knowledge, deviance can be recognized as such. Therefore I would

hesitate to call the first representational form a social representation in the strict sense, whereas the second stage clearly is. Finally, the third – medicalised – representation seems to exhibit the typical modern form of a social representations, since it is enriched by popularized scientific knowledge.

Spaces of Explanation

While the vast majority of social representation research can be understood as content oriented "anthropology of modern societies" (Moscovici, 1987), tapping the specific contents of the mental topography of cultural/social groups and subgroups, only a minority of such research can be said to contribute to a general theoretical understanding of social representation processes. Duveen and De Rosa name some of the best of such research in their article. This tradition of research has shifted our attention away from the purely individualised orientation of mental processes prevalent in social cognition, and focused onto the top-down social processes forming the individual's mentality. It has switched the explanation space from the individual to the social.

An explanation space is understoood here as a set of concepts which can be connected by implicational relations to yield logically valid explanations (cf. Putnam, 1974). Generally the set of concepts forming an explanation space will be located within the same level of analysis. Hence, the social cognition approach generally works with concepts located within the intra-individual level of analysis. As a consequence social relations as social aprioris fall beyond the immediate space of social cognitive explanations. Any attempt to include concepts describing more macro-social phenomena in a social cognition explanation will necessarily result in a (micro-) reductive explanation with all its logical shortcomings (e.g. Alexander, 1981; Friedman, 1981). Social representation theory, on the other hand, explicitly acknowledges an integrative conceptual framework, where the social apriori and individual mental performance are "macro-reductively" (Friedman, 1981) connected with each other (Wagner, in press a). This allows to construct explanations which conceptually free the individual from its bodily boundaries and opens a conceptual gate for culture and society to enter.

Conclusion

Although not explicitly, Duveen and De Rosa seem to acknowledge these different spaces of explanation for social cognition and social representation orientations. If, however, two theories such as the two are to be compared and contrasted, the authors would have needed to make the different presuppositions of the approaches more explicit. Only from the point of view of each theory's prerequisites, their respective merits and shortcomings can be evaluated. It is certainly not enough in my opinion, to condense the traditional developmental cognition approach to the metaphor of the "naïve scientist" and the social representation approach as being concerned with the "social actor".

There are many parallels in both approaches, as process is concerned: assimilation and contrast, schemata and prototypes, and attribution..., in social cognition, are processualy comparable to anchoring, structural properties of central nucleï, and explanatory function of representations..., in social representation research. There are almost no parallels in both approaches, as content and social embedding of subjects are concerned. Each parallel and contrasting feature can only be evaluated with regard to their respective spaces of explanation, reference population, and, finally, the phenomenon they want to describe and

explain. And – honestly – I am not sure, if social cognition really is interested in the concrete, rather than the abstract social being.

I admit having mixed several lines of argument in my comment and having refered to different analytic levels. Also I have touched metatheoretical issues which were not in the center of Duveen and De Rosa's multifacetted paper. But in the light of their argument I found this deviation necessary. Doubtlessly Duveen and De Rosa have the merit to have pointed out some crucial and basic differences between developmental aspects of social cognition and social representation theory.

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