The Self/Other as an Epistemological Thema: A Commentary on Smith, O'Connor and Joffe, and on Moloney, Gamble, Hayman and Smith.

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The two articles in this Special Issue, on which I am commenting, form the latest contributions in the series of papers on themata by two distinguished teams, one led by Hélène Joffe in the UK, and the other directed by Gail Moloney in Australia. Both teams have been theoretically developing the concept of themata over a number of years, as well as applying their ideas in empirical studies of high societal relevance. These two articles involve some themes that run through both of them; other issues are more specific to one article or the other.

In my view, the most interesting common feature in the work of both teams is their focus on the Self/Other. In the authors' regard, the Self/Other is not bound together by factors that could be evaluated in terms of cognitive and formal-logical decision-making. Rather, the Self and

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Others evaluate and attribute responsibility and blame to each other, whilst at the same time they justify their own actions. These mutual evaluations form presuppositions on the basis of which the authors build their main arguments, and for which they provide numerous empirical justifications.

Smith, O'Connor and Joffe treat the Self/Other as the central thema by means of which the public understands the contemporary threatening events and associated problems. In their previous studies the team has explored social representations of the risk of earthquakes, emerging infectious diseases and climate changes. In referring to these explorations, the authors state in the present article: 'Research on social representations of risks has revealed that a single thema, *self/other,* shapes public engagement with a diverse range of threats. The current paper leverages this case to develop theorization of the role played by themata in the construction of common sense, and to advance understanding of the underlying drivers of social responses to contemporary risk issues'. For these authors, the Self/Other is an epistemologically unifying thema that arises from common sense. It underlies the ways by means of which the public confronts the risks that threaten individuals, groups and communities.

Gail Moloney's team, too, views the thema Self/Other as having 'the generative potential' as 'the basic thema'. The authors suggest that the Self/Other thema underpins the public understanding of blood donation and that it affects the individual's engagement or disengagement with blood donation. Adopting the idea of the figurative kernel in social representations, the authors argue that it is constructed through the thema Self/Other. This basic thema activates the occurrence of other themata and generates representations that are either salient for the Self, like anxiety, fear of needles, or for the Other, like helping Others and saving their lives.

In both papers, therefore, the Self/Other is conceived as an epistemological (Marková, 2016) thema. It guides the direction in which thematic concepts (content themata) develop and form meaningful networks of meanings, for example, needles/help, blame/blameless, dirty/clean, among others.

DOES THEMA GENERATE A REPRESENTATION OR REPRESENTATIONS?

This is the main question raised in the Moloney et al. paper: 'The question of whether each of the antimonies in a thema gives rise to separate representations or whether it is as a pair that antimonies generate a representation is inextricably linked to how logical a representation is theorised to be'. This important question cannot be answered without referring to the issue of independent and interdependent dyadic oppositions. If one returns to Holton's (1975) examples of 'elements' *versus* 'waves' (Marková, 2016) then, clearly, the strong commitment to one dyadic opposition leads to the theory that rejects any alternative position. Or one could say that in this case each element in the dyadic opposition leads to a separate representation (or a theory). Allegiance of the researcher to either of these elements precludes the possibility of one joint theory or representation.

In contrast to Holton's case, in which the thema (elements *versus* waves) was formed of two independent dyadic oppositions, Moloney et al. endorse the view that in the thema Self/Other the two components are interdependent. It is with this in mind that the authors suggest two possible alternative answers to the question whether one or two representations are generated.

According to one supposition, each of the two interdependent opposites in the Self/Other thema gives rise to a separate social representation. Bearing on this supposition, one can envisage

two kinds of extreme situations in which two separate social representations could be produced. In one case, the Self could present him-/herself as being totally self-centred, paying absolutely no attention to the Other, in which case the social representation of blood donation would be dominated only by self-interest. In another case, the Self could ignore one's own interest and comfort, such as one's own illness or fear of needles, in order to safe life of the Other. But even in this latter case we can visualise two crucial positions. On the one hand, blood donation could be a spontaneous response to a tragedy, whether a natural disaster or a terrorist attack, provoking thousands of people to queue in order to give blood, as was the case in the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015. This kind of a spontaneous and unreflective response (e.g. Ichheiser, 1949; Levinas, 1961/1969; 1968/1996) is unlikely to count as a representation: rather, one could say that it is an impulsive spur-of-the moment action reflecting the dialogical nature of human beings. On the other hand, blood donation could be a social representation in which the act to donate blood would be based on a reflective decision of the individual as a member of a community to help Others in need. These examples, one centred on the egoistic individual, and the other focused on the selfless individual show that 'each of the antimonies in a thema gives rise to separate representations'. Of course, between these two extreme cases there could be other instances involving mixtures of spontaneous and of reflective decisions; in these situations it would not be clear what counts and what does not count as a representation.

In the case of Moloney et al., however, the Self/Other does not consist of two independent, but of reflectively interdependent components, although each component has different priorities: 'When blood donation is considered in relation to Self, those aspects salient to the Self are elicited. Conversely when blood donation is considered in relation to Others, aspects salient to Others are elicited'. These forms of salience are in tension and the direction in

which a social representation is actualised, depends on the relation between the individual and social context in which the struggle for priority takes place, and consequently, which themata are deduced from the Self/Other. Nevertheless, since the Self/Other are conceived as interdependent, they generate one representation. In order to identify the themata deduced from the Self/Other, Moloney et al proceed in two steps. First, on the basis of associations they identify categories that pertain either to the Self or to Others and from these they construct the common figurative kernel of the social representation. In the second step the authors deduce themata pertaining either to the Self (pain, anxiety, needles) or to the Other (help, saving lives). To my mind, this imaginative manner of identifying themata could be pursued further in and through participants' thematisation in narratives, arguments and justifications. The analyses of these could then be employed in instituting the changes in education practices related to providing information to citizens about blood donation.

ASYMMETRIC RELATIONS WITHIN THE THEMA SELF/OTHER

Privileging the Self, (his/her family, clan or group) over the Other is a common sense assumption in the history of humankind. The eminent anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1942, pp. 98-99) observed that the belief in superiority of one's own group over another group has a very long history; already in human prehistory, 'we' and 'they' relations were fundamental to life. Those who did not belong to one's own tribe, were not people 'with whom my own tribe had common cause' (Benedict, 1942, p. 99). The preference for one's own group is very deeply and unconsciously rooted and therefore, hard to eradicate or even to reflect on it. A social psychologist Gustav Ichheiser (1940; 1949) noted that whilst beliefs in moral and intellectual

superiority of one's own group over another one are difficult to abolish, one can at least recognize that these beliefs are part of life. Ichheiser pointed out that humans are inclined to consider own habits, ways of thought and of living, values, institutions and the point of view as a norm, while those of Others as an evil. Rather than admitting to ourselves our moral, intellectual and other kinds of shortcomings, we attribute them to Others, rationalize our thoughts and conduct, and invent fictitious notions and reasons to justify our behaviour. (Ichheiser, 1951).

Moscovici (2012) expressed a related idea in what he called a paradox in intergroup or intercultural communication. There are three features of this paradox by means of which the Self can close oneself in and through language and communication. First, this paradox consists in incompatibility of implicit as well as explicit ethnocentric beliefs. Such beliefs, on the one hand, are based on imbedded assumptions of superiority of one's own group, and at the same time, groups explicitly propagate multiculturalism. The second feature of this paradox, Moscovici notes, is that the Self (groups, cultures) in general believe that Others understand their point of view; on the contrary, however, the Self is not always capable of understanding Others. Groups are often closed to the perspective of other groups, and communication between these is absent even if they occupy the same public space. Finally, incommunicability is not just about language but it affirms mutual incompatibility between different social representations and diverse forms of communication. For instance, there could be incommunicability between social representations expressed in daily language which is characterized by creativity, imagination and invention, and social representations that are expressed in a specialist language of ideology, religion or science. Each of these languages uses their specific linguistic strategies that may not be mutually comprehensible.

Thus we observe that asymmetric relations between the Self and Others have been long-lived in the history of humankind; they take on different forms and are filled with tensions, conflicts and misunderstandings. Through language and communication they are expressed through diverse routes, once leading to an intersubjective understanding, once to a conflict, negotiation, compromise or an expression of fixed convictions. Transformations of the Self/Other relations arising from these kinds of interaction take place in specific socio-cultural and historical conditions.

If we turn to Smith et al., their research shows ample forms of asymmetric relations between the Self and Others, both at theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, the authors refer to the creation of social distances by means of which the Self represents oneself as having a positive valence in contrast to the Other, who has a negative valence. Social distances pertain to different Self/Other relations which exist among individuals, groups, institutions and even cultures. For instance, empirical research of Joffe's team in different domains of risk shows that blame, guilt and accusations for spreading the disease and other misfortunes are all attributed to Others, that is, to individuals, governments, marginalised groups or the minorities. In such situations the Self enhances his/her position and denigrates the Other in the manner that we noted above in referring to Benedict and Ichheiser. These social phenomena, such as Self-promotion and Other-denigration, form vicious circles: in strengthening one's own position, the Self perpetuates discrimination of marginalised groups and increases a social distance from them. As the authors note, the social distancing is accompanied by other forms of distancing (e.g. spatial or temporary) and by constructing the Self as being immune from the threats of Others. These analyses of content themata arising from the Self/Other interdependencies are very effective in bringing together the past, present and future imaginations of risks in different spheres of life and

their management. The authors emphasize that common sense involved in the Self/Other relations in risk situations plays an identity-protective function. The dynamic nature of the Self/Other thema enables adaptation to diverse contexts in which the Self and the Other are embedded in different socio-cultural traditions. One can suggest that the authors' effective analyses of asymmetric relations between the Self and Others can be extended to extreme situations of risk, such as the contemporary forms of present terrorism and migrant crisis. Within these, the Self/Other interdependence takes on unprecedented forms of asymmetries that operate in networks of thematised justice, blame, responsibility for the victim and many others. Their forces throw away the established routines that function as norms under the situations of relatively stable situations. Such extreme events bring themata and their re-thematisation into the acute consciousness.

USING THEMATA TO UNDERSTAND SOCIALLY IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

The authors of both articles pose questions about the implications of themata in general, and of the Self/Other specifically, for social practices. This question indeed is fundamental because it concerns the relations between theoretical social psychological constructs and their societal significance. Theoretically and empirically, the authors provide ample examples showing that

- the Self tends to enhance oneself whilst distancing oneself from threats coming from Others

- common sense involved in the Self/Other relations in risk situations has an identity-protective function

- the Self/Other are in tension in struggling for the direction in which to actualise social representations in question

- the Self/Other mobilise self-protective strategies in order to cope with situations of conflict and risk

However, none of these interactions are neutral exchanges of information. Instead, the Self and the Other are intimately bound together by ethical relations: they evaluate one another, they trust and distrust each other, they take responsibility for one another and equally important, they attempt to avoid it. Each Self is the centre of his/her Selfhood which arises in and through Others. As Paul Ricoeur (1990/1992, p. 3) clarifies: '*Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms'. It is the ethics of the Self/Other interdependence that contradicts the neutral and objectivist cognitive perspective and information processing. Instead, dialogical relations involved in language and communication are vital means of the Self/Other interdependence; meanings of words in daily life are often used unconsciously, without awareness of the effect they may have on Others. Therefore, while the improvement of reflective perspectives on Selves and Others are important for improvement social practices, these perspectives need to be based not just on cognitive capacities, but on ethical considerations: they require caring about one another. The authors of the two articles are fully aware of that.

Moloney et al suggest that communications seeking to encourage the public to donate blood should be re-thematised. Rather than focusing merely on encouraging the public to donate blood, communicative strategies should not ignore issues related to the Self, such as the fear of needles, the blood, anxiety and perception of pain. The authors suggest that the antinomies in a thema are interdependent, and that it is the tension between antinomies that drives how blood donation is socially understood (Moloney et al., 2012). It is here that we need to add that re-thematisation should emphasize the ethical features of the Self-Other interdependence.

Communications and information given to the public about blood donation should acknowledge that both kinds of factors, those related to the Self, and those related to the Other, are associated with blood donation.

Smith et al. remind us of the fact that the use of categories is never neutral, but is imbued with emotions: 'The strong emotional impulse to protect the self and denigrate the other drives the way themata manifest in thought and behaviour, with very tangible consequences for intergroup relations and behavioural responses to risk'. Here again I would add that these emotions carry ethical evaluations which the Self/Other interdependence cannot escape. We have seen that ethical considerations, self-promotion and other-denigration are of long duration, often perpetuated implicitly, without being brought to explicit awareness. As the authors note, it is only when themata are brought to conscious attention that the change in behavioural patterns and in social representations can take place (Joffe, 2011). Bringing phenomena to consciousness is the first stage in promoting the change. This must be followed up by an appeal to change evaluations of the Self and Others and promote the ethics of *Oneself as Another* to use Paul Ricouer's words. It is this perspective, focusing on the interdependence of the Self and Other that is often forgotten in the contemporary overload of information, bureaucratisation and overtechnisation of human practices. The study of themata and their communicative nature therefore, has significant potentialities for improvements in understanding of human activities. The article by Smith et al. and by Moloney et al. indicate clear ways by means of which these potentials can be transformed into real changes in social practices based on the Self/Other relations.

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