THE OPENNESS AND CLOSURE OF A CONCEPT: REPLY TO ALLANSDOTTIR, JOVCHELOVITCH & STATHOPOULOU

Martha Augoustinos

University of Adelaide, Australia

Allansdottir, Jovchelovitch & Stathopoulou argue that the inherent versatility in the concept of social representations makes it vulnerable to appropriation by individualistic mainstream approaches within social psychology. The versatility of social representations as a concept is characterised by its 'openness'. Social representations, as defined by Moscovici (1981; 1984), is an "all encompassing concept" incorporating components of traditional social psychological concepts such as attitudes and values. As such, social representations does not stand on its own as a unique concept, but is in part defined and constructed by traditional notions. Furthermore, as 'irreducible explanatory devices' social representations determine attributions - another individualistic and mainstream concept.

Paradoxically, the 'openness' of the concept can lead to its closure. This is brought about by what the authors refer to as 'gluing practices'. These practices refer to attempts to combine or integrate social representations theory with traditional social-psychological frameworks such as schema or attribution theories.

I have addressed my thoughts regarding these issues in the context of the two levels employed by Allansdottir and her colleagues: the conceptual and the operational/ methodological.

Conceptual Gluing Practices

Most commentators would no doubt agree that the theory of social representations as elaborated by Moscovici has introduced an interesting and dynamic perspective into social-psychology. While most of us share a broad common understanding of social representations theory and research, many of us differ on the finer elements of interpretation, and particularly on 'how to do social representations research'. While the concerns expressed by Allansdottir et al. have been articulated within the context of an interesting paradox (the openness and closure of the SR concept), similar concerns have been expressed by others. For example, Parker (1987) predicted that the theory of social representations will be accommodated and absorbed by the social cognition mainstream. His concerns, however, are based on a critique of the cognitivist elements contained within the theory of social representations, a critique that I will to return to later. For the moment, I would like to focus on my own work which has explored the possibility of integrating social representations theory with mainstream approaches and consider the legitimacy (or otherwise) of such attempts.

The paper by Augoustinos & Innes (1991), as was made clear, was a preliminary and exploratory effort at integrating the concept of social representations with the more conventional work on social schemata. This was done by very carefully articulating the similarities and differences between the two approaches. While we discussed possible points of convergence between the concepts, we also emphasised the different epistemological

status of the concept of social representations compared to social cognitive constructs such as schemata. We do not regard this articulation of similarity and difference (another paradox) as a 'gluing practice', nor as a means by which to add a 'convenient social package' to schema theory. Rather, we view attempts at integrating different conceptual approaches as an essential reflexive exercise. The plethora of concepts, theories and approaches within social psychology (not to mention psychology) defies imagination. The occasional effort to disentangle these threads is necessary. Let me make clear, however, that this exercise was not motivated by faith in a unified positivistic philosophy of science (Staats, 1991). Nor do we conclude in the paper that the two approaches can be (or should be) integrated. We are not prescriptive about this.

I believe the juxtaposition of the social representations concept with other mainstream concepts is an intellectual 'practice' which can expose the concept of social representations to a wider audience and avoid it from becoming marginalised within Anglo-American social psychology. There is no clearer way of demonstrating the limitations inherent in information processing approaches to social cognition than through the process of articulating the similarities and differences between social representations theory and mainstream concepts. I have certainly found this to be true in my teaching. Students can grasp in a very concrete way the shortcomings of social cognitive models when introduced to social representations theory and research. They do not need to be convinced through epistemological and philosophical arguments alone.

However, social representations theory goes well beyond simply emphasising the shortcomings of social-cognitive models. Despite the fact that it is in part constituted by mainstream concepts, it does stand on its own as a unique and dynamic conceptual framework. It not only places social life and communication at the centre of social psychological concern, but also replaces the study of process with content by reinstating the social and collective character to thinking.

In reference to some social representations research Allansdottir et al. argue that,

" although the concept of social representations is there to foster a societal perspective, the social reality is absent from the development of the research process. It is just added ex post facto to explain the results."

My research on social representations and attributions is cited here as an example (Augoustinos, 1990). The 'social reality' of an Australian social-political culture was the context from which the study of achievement attributions was conceived and elaborated. A social representations perspective was not a 'tacked on' after thought to explain the results. The results not only confirmed the dominance of internal attributions, but also demonstrated how their prevalence increased with age. It was argued that the widely shared individualist representation of the person within Australian society formed the basis from which explanations for success and failure were made. Furthermore, the paper also discussed the ideological and social functions of such a representation.

This issue of a 'social reality' however, opens up interesting questions in relation to social representations theory. Apart from occasional references to Durkheim, there is no explicit 'theory of society' which accompanies social representations theory. As researchers, the relations we articulate between the individual and society are very much determined by our implicit theory of society. Yet postmodernists warn us that there are no easy ways of defining social reality. This may be true, but there are certain societal realities which social representations theory needs to articulate more clearly; for example, the realities of power and

inequality as reflected in race, class, and gender relations. To date, the issue of power has not been adequately discussed within social representations theory, yet this is crucial when considering the power some groups have over others in constructing and disseminating certain representations or definitions of social reality.

Method and Theory

Allansdottir and her colleagues argue that "The social remains, in essence, unexplored in so far as it is approached in the research process through unchanged practices". Here they seem to be expressing reservations about the use of traditional quantitative methodologies to study social representations. Specifically, they are critical of operationalising the 'social' in social representations theory in terms of high agreement between individuals on a given issue, and by the use of statistical techniques like multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis to identify a social representation. The authors claim that such methods 'statisticalise' the concept.

I agree that the use of quantitative techniques can objectify the concept of social representation so that a social representation is merely defined by its consensual nature or clustering structure. However, the notion of sharedness in social representations theory is central and quantitative techniques to measure this, albeit limited, are nevertheless useful. Sharedness however, should not be the sole defining feature of a social representation. In addition, other features need to be considered such as the centrality of the phenomenon in social life, the extent to which it is objectified and the social functions it serves. A social representation is not based on sharedness alone. Likewise, not every social object is a social representation (this can be contrasted to social schema theory where a defining feature of a social schema is that it refers to a 'social object' so that any social object can have its own organisational schema).

While multidimensional and clustering techniques are useful methodological tools, I agree that a social representation should not be equated with an identified cluster or structure alone. My own research on representations of the Australian social structure investigated both the extent to which this representation was shared, how it differed between social groups and how it changed over the course of adolescent development. Furthermore, the objectification of the resultant social-hierarchical representation was discussed, as were the social-ideological functions associated with such a representation (Augoustinos, 1991).

I think we need to be very cautious about methodological 'dogma' in social representations research (how one should do SR research). It is important that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are used. I make no claims that the empirical research I have done can answer questions about how social representations emerge in the cause of everyday conversation, how they are constituted and transformed through discourse and or socio-historical circumstances. There is little doubt that research of this type is qualitatively different and can provide richer contextual insights. There is little doubt too that research of this kind is being done and is not being over-run by more conventional approaches. Any methodology (quantitative or qualitative) should be used to demonstrate the social and historically specific context of psychological life. Unlike traditional social psychological approaches, method should not be the driving force behind social representations research.

Should we 'Tighten-Up' the Concept of Social Representation?

Allansdottir et al. argue that " . . . the very openness of the concept of social representations allows for almost any conceptual combination". It is clear that these authors are somewhat unhappy about the all encompassing nature of the concept. How then do they suggest we 'tighten-up' the concept so as to make it less likely of being (mis)appropriated? Some suggestions here would be useful. Moscovici has been reluctant to limit the versatility of the concept and this, in itself, has meant that the theory has grown and developed in different and possibly (though not necessarily) contradictory directions. While the Anglo Saxon treatment of the concept has been rather more conventional, this is not the only, nor dominant, manner in which the concept has been applied and elaborated.

Allansdottir et al. claim that they are not opposed, in principle, to combining concepts and approaches, though they are critical of combining social representations theory with traditional *social cognitive* concepts. While they are not specific about their objections, it seems that there may be an underlying antipathy towards social representations being defined, at any level of analysis, in cognitive terms. Yet the inherent cognitivism of social representations theory is difficult to deny. Subjective meaning and interpretation (the re-presentation of reality) features largely in the theory. As Parker (1987) emphasises, the theory embraces both the social-symbolic level and the individual cognitive level. As such, the dichotomy of the individual and society is reproduced within the theory. In 'practice' this dichotomy is difficult to avoid. The social-symbolic level is always the context within which the individual reflects and acts, but ultimately, social representations are also apprehended at an individual level.

Potter & Billig (1992; p. 15) claim that because the processes of anchoring and objectification, which are central to social representations theory, have cognitivist traces, the theory "will drift towards cognitive reductionism". This depends largely on how one views a cognitive process. Cognitive processes are not necessarily asocial processes. Clearly, cognitive contents are determined by social interaction and exchange. If new concepts are anchored to existing categories, this does not necessarily make anchoring a cognitive process alone. The existing categories to which the unfamiliar is compared and contrasted, are derived from social and collective life itself.

Allansdottir and her colleagues are silent on the inherent cognitivism within social representations theory and yet this is one of the most fundamental challenges to the theory to date. Ultimately we must decide whether there is a place within the theory for cognition and subjective meaning. If so, then efforts at integrating social representations theory with more traditional approaches are legitimate and potentially useful exercises. If we decide otherwise, then we must rid the existing cognitivism within the theory. This will necessitate denying the role of cognition in the construction of social reality, or at the very least, remaining agnostic on this issue. This, of course, raises other issues concerning the re-conceptualisation of social representations in non cognitive terms, such as linguistic repertoires or discursive practices (Potter & Litton, 1985).

Conclusion

The concerns raised by Allansdottir and her colleagues regarding the appropriation of social representations theory by mainstream approaches are legitimate concerns. Given the predominance of individualistic conceptual and methodological frameworks within our

discipline, the concept of social representations does run the risk of losing its unique perspective. However, I feel that these dangers are being exaggerated. There is little evidence to suggest that social representations theory has been 'appropriated' by the mainstream. There are certainly no traces of this work in the *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* to date, and despite Fiske & Taylor (1991) claiming that the second edition of *Social Cognition* acknowledges the work of European colleagues, there is no mention of the concept of social representations in their book. Importantly, while Allensdottir et al. would like to delimit the versatility of the concept of social representations, they give no concrete or specific suggestions in this regard. If the concept is 'too open' or versatile, then what types of constraints should we place on the theory?

Mainstream concepts such as schemata, prototypes and attributions are the 'reality' of contemporary social psychology. It is inevitable, as Moscovici's theory suggests, that the concept of social representations will be anchored in what is already known (schemata, attributions, etc). Whether as a result of the anchoring process the concept becomes 'objectified' (simplified, misappropriated) is still to be determined. Discussions such as this are an important process in preventing this from happening.

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Martha Augoustinos
Dept. of Psychology
University of Adelaide
GPO Box 498
5001 Adelaide
South Australia