

# **A JIGSAW PUZZLE WITH MISSING PIECES: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE SYSTEMATIC EXPLANATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROCESSES OF REPRESENTATIONS AND IDENTITY: DISCUSSION OF M. AUGOUSTINOS**

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This paper brings together some rich ingredients which somehow fail to gel. Augoustinos' study claims to have deconstructed the representations of the Australian national identity in a cultural product and investigated the public response to it. This, we are asked to believe, demonstrates the usefulness of social representations theory in enabling us to understand both the processes which generate and sustain representations of national identities and how the latter are used by individuals "to make sense of their every day social existence in a complex society". We would argue that though the paper contains many interesting ideas, the study has failed to achieve its aims because of its conceptual confusion and methodological weaknesses.

Nevertheless, the ideas put forward in this paper are worth examining because they throw some light upon an area which must be studied by social representations theorists: the relationship between processes of identity and representation. It is possible to identify some of the pros and cons in the approach adopted by Augoustinos.

**1 Pro:** Augoustinos, in her study, takes advantage of what was actually a major natural experiment - the celebration of the Australian bicentenary. She is involved essentially in opportunistic research. It is important for social representations researchers to be opportunistic, to explore the naturally-occurring changes in representation in their social context.

**Con:** It is a pity that the opportunism did not stretch to anticipation of the bicentenary with data collection beginning prior to the appearance of celebratory propaganda. As it is, there are significant problems facing anyone trying to interpret the data provided on the sample's subjective impressions of the advert since data were collected some considerable time after both the bicentenary and the advertising campaign.

This means that responses to the advert might be influenced by at least two factors:

a) attitudes towards and construal of the bicentenary itself developed during the celebrations, and

b) the extent of differential prior exposure to the advert - not just in terms of the frequency or amount of exposure but also in terms of the contexts in which exposure occurred and the opportunities these provided for social reconstruction of the meaning of the advert in discussion with others.

Both these factors actually concern the need to take account of contextual factors when examining the impressions evoked by social products such as adverts. Additionally, of course, it could be argued that Augoustinos fails to consider the impact of the context in which impressions are elicited from her sample. It seems this was unlikely to encourage revelations of the potentially deeper personal meanings this advert had for her sample.

Also, had Augoustinos collected data before the beginning of the campaign and immediately after its conclusion, the study might have thrown some light on the effectiveness of the campaign in producing change in the representations of Australian national identity held by her sample. Given her theoretical concerns with the process of creating and sustaining representations of national identities it seems strange that a time dimension was not built into the design of the study.

**2 Pro:** Augoustinos explicitly sets out to evaluate the "maker's" ideas about the images and themes which the makers of the advert considered important in encouraging national sentiment by describing the socio-historical context of the creation of the advert and its content. Ichheiser's distinction between the 'expressive' and 'impressive' functions of a message is vitally important. The makers obviously have an expressive (what Augoustinos calls 'objective') purpose which may be somewhat different from its 'impressive' effects upon the audience. What is transmitted may not be what is received in such acts of communication. Indeed, the disparities between expression and impression may be shaped substantially by pre-existing social representations. Audiences interpret the new message in terms of the extant social representations.

**Con:** Given this laudable objective of establishing the "makers" expressive purpose or intentions, it is a pity that Augoustinos could neither collect data from them directly nor describe the background to the genesis of the advert in a theoretical and systematic way. The background on the genesis of the advert given is useful (and very unusual socio-historical information for a social psychology paper) but inadequate. It fails to place the emergence of competing representations of Australian national identity in a historical perspective and to show how these representations, and in particular that contained in the advert, were used by different groups in society to achieve their particular goals. A theoretically informed analysis of the socio-historical information given, in combination with appropriate data obtained from the makers of the advert themselves, might have produced useful insights on the relationship between social representations and identity at a group level.

Further, and perhaps most importantly, the description of the content of the advert was also inadequate. Maybe it is inevitable, given that the paper deals in text and the advert is audio-visual, that the full contents of the advert itself cannot be described. But this serves to make data on the actual intentions of the makers even more desirable. It is not good enough to assume that Augoustinos offers us an unbiased description of the images in the advert. She too is representing the advert rather than presenting it. In this context, the researcher's duty is to evidence her representation in some way which allows other researchers scope for reanalysing her representation. Discourse analysis requires data to be substantially available to allow for counter-interpretations. Alternatively, she should provide separate data on the maker's intentions. It is not enough merely to infer their intentions from her own representation.

Once the issue of context of the advert is considered, it becomes evident that not only the context of its production, but also the contexts of its distribution and reception may be highly

influential in determining its impact upon nationalist sentiments. These second two types of context are unfortunately never addressed in the Augoustinos paper.

**3 Pro:** Augoustinos attempts to quantify the images perceived in the advert by her sample. It is useful to have something more than impressionistic descriptions of "public" reactions to such social products.

**Con:** Augoustinos uses a "convenience sample" of undergraduate psychologists. Such a decision indicates a lack of real commitment to establish what the public thinks. Of course, we are all guilty, at some time, of such shortcuts to publishable data but if we do it then it is necessary to be very open about the implications it has for our findings. The problems associated with this type of sample (viz effects of homogeneity of age, educational standing, academic discipline, ethnic/national backgrounds) should be examined.

Also, having embarked upon a quantitative exploration of her data, Augoustinos fails to develop the statistical analysis fully. For instance, the number of images identified per person is not presented. This could be important if examined for co-occurrence of images. Though this might be very difficult since, from the limited descriptions give, it seems the categories of images erected are not mutually exclusive. Given the size and structure of the sample, to report percentages giving responses in categories which are not discrete leads to some difficulty in interpretation.

**4 Pro:** It is vital for social representation theory to explore affect. In measuring the affective response to the advert Augoustinos is pushing forward in the right direction.

**Con:** The measurement is apparently wasted. It is not related to the perceived images. One might expect that the reason for testing affect would be to examine the relationship between it and imagery (eg: if national unity images dominate, is affect more positive?) As it is, there is no relationship specified between type of imagery and affect.

**5 Pro:** Augoustinos queries the relationship between perceived unity and diversity in such attempts to represent national identity. This is clearly a significant piece in the model of national identity.

**Con:** Augoustinos may be wrong, if fashionable, to invoke Mick Billig's ideas about contradiction and counterargument to eliminate the issue. There is no contradiction in the existence of diversity and unity. Unity does not equate with the sameness of constituent parts. Diverse entities can unite. It is rather a fascist notion to assume a nation is comprised of similar people, undifferentiated in terms of creed or colours.

**6 Pro:** Augoustinos is right: social representations theory may inform us "where representations of Australian society come from and how they proliferate in everyday life".

**Con:** Unfortunately, this paper does not show us how. There is no serious explicit attempt in this paper to connect the research with the tenets of social representations theory. It would be intriguing to do so. As a basic minimum, it would be necessary to show that the advert had asked either to reflect a social representation or to influence social representations.

**7 Pro:** Augoustinos emphasises the need for us to examine representations of national identity.

**Con:** There is no examination of national identity contained in the paper. There are just assumptions that the images perceived to dominate the advert are representing "identity". Augoustinos never checks this basic assumption. It would have been relatively simple to

establish how far the sample considered the images used did reflect or change their sense of their own national identity. There is basically no "identity information" collected. This is a great pity.

The whole issue of the relationship between identity and social representations is vital. It is fascinating at both the level of the identity of individuals and of groups. However, despite its title, Augoustinos' paper never quite gets around to putting the identity piece into the jigsaw puzzle.

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