

DELIGHTFUL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PARADOXES IN THE SOCIAL WORLD: DISCUSSION OF M. J. SPINK'S PAPER

Uwe Flick

Technische Universität Berlin, Germany

In her elucidating paper, based on her contribution to the conference in Ravello 1992, Mary Jane Spink deals with two topics: The use of qualitative research in studying social representations and some paradoxes, research on social representations is confronted with in general. She discusses these topics in using examples taken from her own research. These paradoxes and their relevance for the discussion on social representations theory and research can be discussed on a more general level focussing implications for the concept of social representations.

A discussion on this level is provided by Kum-Kum Bhavnani (this volume). In what follows, I want to discuss more specifically methodological implications of Spink's paper and want to discuss especially the methodological strategies, Spink proposes to deal with the third paradoxon she mentions. For this last point I will use some experiences from an earlier study we did with methods quite similar to those Spink has applied.

This article on one hand reveals three paradoxons, that are worth being further study and discussed in the context of social representations theory or in social psychology in general. On the other hand, it hopefully leads to a broader discussion on the use of qualitative methods in the study of social representations. This discussion could have been initiated for quite a while, if some of the programmatic formulations of Moscovici (1984) concerning the character of social representations and concerning methodological principles in studying them were taken more seriously. But in fact, the research praxis still concentrates more or less on quantitative, i. e. experimental or survey, research strategies. So, before starting to discuss Spink's arguments in greater detail, I would like to give reference to some of those arguments from within social representations discourse for using qualitative research strategies:

"when studying a representation, we should always try to discover the unfamiliar feature which motivated it and which it has absorbed. But it is particularly important that the development of such a feature be observed from the moment it emerges in the social sphere" (Moscovici 1984, p. 28).

This programmatic was formulated by Moscovici, but the empirical research praxis shows, that this can be realized only in some ideal cases, because most phenomena are already there and have started to influence the social world when they are discovered for a social representations study. But this programmatic suggests to try to describe the emergence and influence of a cultural object at least retrospectively, for example by asking people to tell the story of a phenomenon or their personal version of this story, their personal narrative, so that we get more detailed, "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) of the phenomena we study before looking at once at their social distribution. These questions of

"how" instead of questions of "how much" can be pursued and answered more appropriately by using qualitative methods aiming for descriptions instead of immediate explanation.

Furthermore, in the study of SR, Moscovici (1984, p. 52sq.) formulates

"..four methodological principles:

(a) to obtain material from samples of conversations normally exchanged in society (...)

(b) to consider social representations as a means of re-creation reality (...)

(c) that the character of social representations is revealed especially in times of crisis and upheaval, when a group or its image are undergoing a change (...)

(d) that the people who elaborate such representations be seen as something akin to amateur 'scholars' and the groups they form as modern-day equivalents to those societies of amateur scholars that existed about a century ago".

These principles had often to be modified in empirical research because those everyday conversations are not always accessible to the researcher studying social representations of a certain phenomenon or are dealing with different topics while accessible. As a substitute, open interviews have been applied with good results - as for example quite early in the study of Herzlich (1973) or recently in combination with participant observation by Jodelet (1989). Good reasons for applying open interviews are that they come close to conversations and give space to develop the image of the phenomenon that is studied. If these interviews have a retrospective design, they can give access to stories of development and changes in the phenomenon and areas under study.

Another reason to emphasize open interviews is, that a lot of discourses among people, who elaborate social representations that are significant for dealing with a certain cultural object in a society and for its social representation in this society in general, do not take place anymore in locally and physically limited contexts, which are accessible for conversation or discourse analysis, but happen in symbolic contexts: For example this is the case in certain professions, where members share a common background in what concerns theories and professional socialization, but do not communicate regularly in face-to-face conversations, although they share common social representations, that have socially important effects on handling objects and problems in a society. So, if we want to study "the unceasing babble" (Moscovici 1984) that produces, changes and exchanges social representations, we should either use methods to interpret ongoing conversations. Or, if this is not possible, we should try to simulate and stimulate parts of this babble in interviews, that do not lay the stress on standardization and big samples but give way to unfolding the viewpoints of the interviewees and the way they re-create reality or the parts of it that are under study.

For somewhat different reasons, Mary Jane Spink proposes the study of social representations with qualitative methods and on the basis of single case studies. But she sees the attempt of applying qualitative methods to the fields of social representations research confronted with three paradoxes:

"1. the concomitance of more permanent and very dynamic content;

2. the possibility of focussing either content or process aspects and the difficulties of keeping both in view;

3. the need to focus the group as the context of production of social representations and the possibility of utilization of individual case studies in order to better understand process."

In the first paradoxon, Spink lays the focus on the problem that we find in social representations permanent (or stable) and dynamic (or changing) aspects. This aspect is crucial to every study of knowledge, which is open to three considerations:

- that most people acquire knowledge at certain moment or period of their lives and
- that they are more or less ready to change this knowledge when they are making new experience and
- that, on the other hand, they need some central parts of their knowledge or worldviews to remain stable so that they do not get lost in total chaos and confusion.

But, the more interesting question here is whether the relations between change and permanence, between stability and dynamism, can be set parallel to the relations between surface and underlying structure, between consensus and creativity, in the way Spink proposes.

Here, we can only raise questions inviting to discuss a little further Spink's ideas: Maybe, producing consensus in a group starting with very different world views held by their members is more a highly creative act than it is the result of power and ideology? Maybe analyzing the underlying structure of the representations held within specific groups shows more the socially unconscious and conflicts in a group than it reveals the powers leading to permanence and consensus? Maybe all that depends on the group as well as on the theoretical point of view we take to approach the group and the relation of surface and underlying structures?

The second paradoxon deals with the relation of content and process in social representations. Again, a crucial point of framing knowledge is focussed, but we can ask, if the relations between content and process are paralleled correctly with knowledge and social practice? No doubt that contents are influenced by social, historical, and other contexts relevant to their production. But, can process only be approached from the points of view of either information processing or praxis? Does not a social representation, not misunderstood as information processing, include processual aspects beyond its application in social praxis? Despite the critiques formulated by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and their colleagues, social representations can still be seen as stocks of knowledge from a processual point of view: As knowledge that changes and develops, reflects and integrates experience and information and enables people to understand the world and finally to develop ideas in the social construction of reality. Social representations can be understood as a model for everyday knowledge in the social construction of world views and this model includes processual aspects beyond information processing and beyond application in praxis (see Flick 1992a).

Up to now, in the first and second paradoxon, Spink's argumentations and my comments kept on the conceptual level, while the third paradoxon leads us to methodological consequences concerning the study of social representations with qualitative methods.

In the third paradoxon, Spink focusses a general problem in studying social representations and a specific problem in using qualitative methods in such a study. The general problem is, how social or collective stocks of knowledge - as social representations are conceived - can be studied: How and where can they be addressed and found? These are very basic questions of research praxis: If we do a survey, it is always the individual subject answering our questionnaire. We look at him or her and at his/her answers as a part of social

entities in our sampling strategies and in interpreting the data, but the act of data-collection is usually based on contacts with (many) individuals.

The specific problem for qualitative research studies mentioned here is that we are dealing with individuals as well, but in a different way: We are doing case studies, we are looking for the subject's point of view (Bergold & Flick 1987), we are studying concrete and real-life conversations or discourses. The attention paid to the subject and the single case is much more extensive than in surveys or experiments where they represent universal entities. A general problem for qualitative studies still to be solved is the question how to generalize findings: How do we come to more general results, how to draw conclusion for greater entities based on case studies, how to combine case studies to greater entities?

This is one central question raised by the paper of Spink. In her studies, she analyzes subjective theories (of doctors) and the use of their contents in doctor-patient-interactions. She does this in case studies to show, how contents of social representations (to be found in subjective theories) are transformed in processes of social practices (to be found in interactions). Here, questions arise that are also discussed by authors like von Cranach (1992) or Dann (1992): How can we find social representations in subjective theories? What makes a subjective theory social or a part of the social representations held in a specific group? What does the observation, that a person acts in conversations according to his/her subjective theory, disclose on the social origin, character or nature of the knowledge contained in this theory and/or practice? With these questions we are confronted again while reading Spink's interesting paper and we are invited to reflect on them a little more generally¹.

In an earlier study (Flick 1989, 1992b), we tried to pursue similar problems. We reconstructed subjective theories on "trust in counselling" and did conversation analyses of counselling interactions to find out how the subjective theories we found were put to action by their 'owners'. At that time we did not yet use the concept of social representations, but our findings led us to applying this concept in later studies and other contexts (Flick 1992c,d).

In the study on trust, we did a series of single case studies: In each case we reconstructed the subjective theory of the counsellor by using an interview and a graphique representation technique and analyzed a consultation he or she did with a client. We studied cases with different professional backgrounds (physicians, psychologists, social workers) working in different institutions of the same kind. To go beyond the single case, we used techniques of systematically contrasting cases to obtain comparative results²: Cases were minimally and maximally contrasted: Those cases, where results seemed to be most similar, were systematically contrasted with each other (minimal contrast). Then those cases that produced results on the level of the single case that seemed to be most different from each other were compared (maximal contrast). The last step was the formulation of ideal types of subjective theories on trust and of counselling interactions in that specific institutional context (see Flick 1989 for further details).

¹ For a more systematic comparison of studying subjective theories with studying social representations see also Flick (1992 c, d).

² This method can be followed back to Max Weber (1904) and was later introduced in the discussion on qualitative research by the sociologists Glaser & Straus (1967) and Gerhardt (1986).

We found through this triangulation of methods systematic variations in the way, how the client and his situation, the counsellor's own scope of action, the institution and the constraints for working with clients and so on are constructed in the subjective theories and how these factors were dealt with in counselling. As points of reference for these systematic variations the different professions emerged, because we found strong indicators that the profession of a counsellor has a strong influence on his or her subjective theory on trust and on the way he or she uses this knowledge in practical action. So we came to the result that the subjective theories we found and studied were more or less socially contextualized theories or social representations of trust. The professions our subjects were part of, were the groups that produced the context for the developing, changing, exchanging, and applying individual knowledge.

In this special case the groups we found to be influential on individual thinking were less interactive than symbolic groups, because their members were not (necessarily) in direct exchange or face-to-face communications. The influence of the group on individual thinking is organized through the membership to the profession and based on the specific professional socialization of the members of the group and on the specific ways to see things supplied through this socialization. In pursuing this idea, we came to the more general conclusion, that most social influence on individual thinking is obtained by those kinds of symbolic groups - professions, gender, institutions, and so on - and that most of this social influence is no more exerted in conversations or face-to-face-communications but through media (telephone, books, common historical backgrounds...) and through symbolic practices.

From this point of view, some questions Spink reminds us of, seem to be more fruitful than the methodological ways she proposes to answer them and the conclusions she draws.

She raises the question how to find the group within the individual:

"The individual, following a Vigotskian tradition, is always a social entity and, as such, a living symbol of the group he represents. Thus, the individual in the group, provided we understand the social context he inhabits (its habitus and the wider web of meanings within which the object of representation is located) can be approached as the group within the individual".

The conclusion she draws is:

"The conclusion, therefore, is that single case studies are possible roads to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cognitive, affect and praxis provided we adopt the collective frame of reference and therefore re-signify the relationship between the individual and the group so as to focus no longer on the individual in the group but on the group within the individual".

But the problem for me is, that the author tries to answer this question on the level of the single case, without specifying methodological procedures, how to pass from the level of the single case to the level of the group and without clearly differentiating, which are the groups of reference and why. So the promising roads from the single case to the social group and the clearing of the relations between the individual and the group are less methodologically paved than theoretically signed by referring to Bourdieu and Vygotsky.

But this article and the questions discussed within and raised beyond hopefully will stimulate further discussions on the fruitful paradoxes of social representations research in general and on the specific perspectives, qualitative research may offer in this field.

REFERENCES

- Bergold, J. B. & Flick, U. (Eds.) (1987). *Ein-Sichten. Zugänge zur Sicht des Subjekts mittels qualitativer Forschung*. Tübingen, DGVV-Verlag.
- Cranach, M. v. (1992). The Multi-Level Organization of Knowledge and Action - An Integration of Complexity. In: Cranach, M. v., Doise, W. & Mugny, G. (Eds.) *Social Representations and the Social Bases of Knowledge*. Bern, Huber.
- Dann, H.D. (1992). Subjective Theories and their social foundation in education. In: Cranach, M. v., Doise, W. & Mugny, G. (Eds.) *Social Representations and the Social Bases of Knowledge*. Bern, Huber.
- Flick, U. (1989). *Vertrauen, Verwalten, Einweisen - Subjektive Vertrauensatheorien in sozialpsychiatrischer Beratung*. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.
- Flick, U. (1992a). Social Representations and the social construction of everyday knowledge. Contribution to the thematic session "Theoretical Aspects of Social Representations" at the XXV. International Congress of Psychology, Brussels.
- Flick, U. (1992b). Knowledge in the Definition of Social Situations - Actualization of subjektive theories about trust in counselling. In: v. Cranach, M., Doise, W. u. Mugny, G. (Eds.) *Social Representations and the Social Bases of Knowledge*. Bern: Huber.
- Flick, U. (1992c). Le Sujet face à la technique - Réflexions méthodologiques sur les représentations sociales des changements techniques dans la vie quotidienne. *Le Travail Humain*. 55, 4/92, p. 313-327.
- Flick, U. (Ed.) (1992d). *La perception quotidienne de la Santé et la Maladie. Théories subjectives et Représentations sociales*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In: Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, p. 3-30.
- Gerhardt, U. (1986). Verstehende Strukturanalyse. Die Konstruktion von Idealtypen bei der Auswertung qualitativer Forschungsmaterialien. In H.G. Soeffner (Ed.), *Sozialstruktur und soziale Typik*. Frankfurt: Campus.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.
- Herzlich, C. (1973), *Health and illness: A social psychological analysis*. London: Academic Press.
- Jodelet, D. (1989b), *Folies et Représentations sociales*. Paris: Presse Universitaires de France.
- Moscovici, S. (1984), The phenomenon of social representations. In: Farr, R. M., Moscovici, S. (Eds.), *Social representations*, p. 3-69. Cambridge: University Press.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and Social Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Weber, M. (1904). Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis. In J. Winckelmann (Ed.), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: Mohr.

Uwe Flick
 Institut für Psychologie
 Technische Universität
 Sekr. DO 303
 Dovesstr. 1-5
 1000 Berlin 10
 Deutschland