

ON SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND CONTEXT: COMMENTS ON ECHEBARRÍA AND GONZALES

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Echebarría and Gonzales take up a very central issue in their article: the defining of social knowledge in relation to social representations. The article clarifies some issues concerning the nature of the social that are quite topical in the theory of social representations. Concerned as it is with the key issues of the theory, the article also brings out the basic difficulties which seem to face all researchers working within the theory. This comment will address some of these, ones that appear to be common in the recent debate on the theory of social representations.

To start with, we agree with Echebarría and Gonzales in that the structured social practice is an essential part of social knowledge, and that the use of other methods besides the traditional verbal ones is therefore called for. Generally speaking, the dominant academic norms seem to have resulted in an overemphasis of verbal models and methods and in a belief that the essential phenomena are verbally transmittable or that a verbal description is the same as the phenomenon itself. Criticism of this state of affairs should not, however, lead into a categorical division of the methods into verbal and nonverbal ones, which often manifests itself as an assumption that nonverbal methods, by virtue of their nonverbality alone, should yield more profound insights. Such assumptions are liable to lead the investigator into assuming contrasting universes, such as 'discoursal' and 'practical' ones. Attitude research is a warning example of the results of such artificial distinctions, evincing endless puzzlement over and attempts at solution of observed 'non-correspondences'. In other words, there is the risk of going back to the very same basic contrasts as the theory of social representations is attempting to rid itself of.

For their starting point in defining social knowledge, Echebarría and Gonzales adopt the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge as it is formulated in the social cognition paradigm. According to this distinction, social representations manifest themselves in two forms, one that is expressed by language and one that is expressed by action (p. 3). We fear that this starting point will eventually lead into problematic juxtapositions. In particular, the separation of language and action seems to lead into a problematic conception of human behaviour and into somewhat fruitless ponderings of the correspondence between language and action. How could one imagine a ritual without symbolic meaning? Actions are meaningful precisely because they are tied up with symbolic meanings (Koski, 1992). This interdependence, however, works both ways: "Symbols, signs and language only become meaningful because they are lodged in the practical, social activity of the group. Activity is therefore the bedrock of meaning and thus, the practical and expressive cannot be separated" (Burkitt, 1991, p. 191). True enough, learning the identity of a witch doctor or of a modern professional, eg. a psychologist, entails learning practical actions, but those are imbued with symbolic meanings, and besides, the learning of verbal rituals is also involved.

Behind these problematic dichotomies - procedural and declarative knowledge, language and action, etc. - we seem to discern the old individual vs. society dichotomy, ie. the problem of the social again. According to the theory of social representations the social element is a constitutive rather than a separate entity (Allansdottir et al., 1993), and we may well have to accept the notion that "all efforts to find the 'relationship' between the 'two' are wasted, for when we look at society and individual we are viewing exactly the same thing - social being - from two different angles" (Burkitt, 1991, p. 189).

The authors examine social identity and acquisition of social knowledge in terms of role and social practices. That seems a promising point of view because it clearly ties up the formation of knowledge and identity with the social context. However, their notion of social identity remains at a rather general level as yet. What seems to be needed, rather, is discussions of social knowledge that also says something about who knows it and the perspective from which they know it (Jodelet, 1991). Clearly, the kind of social system in which individuals and groups formulate their social knowledge and identities is far from insignificant. Von Cranach (1992) argues that social representations, like any other knowledge, presuppose a carrier system, ie. either an individual or a social system such as family, group, organization, or society, to carry them. The specific functions of any given knowledge in its carrier system and the characteristics of that system determine the form and content of the knowledge.

We faced the problem of context, when we have studied the social representations of intelligence. The most important context and carrier system is perhaps the school. Like any other organization, it has a set of basic assumptions, which are realized as 'the normal practice of school' and thus represent taken-for-granted reality. These assumptions correspond to Moscovici's (1984) characterization of social representations as constituting "an actual environment" that is routinely taken into account just like any physical environment. The representations of intelligence and educability are integral parts of the organizational arrangements, behaviours, relationships, practices and rituals that define how things stand at school. Similarly, these hegemonic representations of intelligence are an integral part of the reproductive functions of the school system, providing a legitimation for pupil classification. The representations of intelligence that a group and its members hold will thus be governed by the relationship of the group to the school and to education in general. The specific relationships between a group and a social system determine the dynamic, even dilemmatic content of the social representations of that group.

Echebarría and Gonzales' article contains interesting openings for further discussion, such as the relations between language, action and consciousness, or the idea of a close relationship between social knowledge (ie. structured group practices) and social identities. We share the authors' hope that their article will initiate a stimulating discussion about the forms of social knowledge - in context, we would like to add.

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