

**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS,
SOCIAL PRACTICES AND CAUSALITY
– A REPLY TO W. WAGNER**

Agustin Echebarria Echabe

University of Basque Country, San Sebastian, Spain.

Abstract. This article is a reply to Wagner's (1994) criticisms addressed to the Echebarria and Gonzalez's (1993) research on "the social representations of democracy and the prediction of voting". We argue against the sterile attempts to prove the superiority of "rationalistic" versus "rationalizationistic" models of human behaviour. We also present a model which tries to integrate both positions in a general model of social representations and social practices. Moreover, we criticize the strategy of "picking" a specific research out from the context of a general study which in turns could led to some misunderstandings such as those shown by Wagner. Furthermore, we criticize the caricaturistic picture of the concept of "behavior" presented by Wagner as support of his criticisms.

The present paper is a reply to the theses posited by Wagner (1994) in his paper entitled "The fallacy of misplaced intentionality in social representation research". Two levels of criticisms will be developed in the following pages:

- (a) A general criticism to the general thesis defended in the article, and
- (b) a more specific criticism aimed at showing the misunderstandings about the position adopted by Echebarria and Gonzalez (1993). Misunderstandings which could be explained by the strategy used by Wagner to support his thesis and which could be resumed as the procedure of picking a particular research out from the context of a general study or position.

Social representations, social practices and causality

The main criticism that Wagner makes to the Echebarria and Gonzalez's (1993), Thommen, Ammann and Von Cranach (1988), and Kempton (1987) researches is that of using social representations as independent variables in order to explain behaviors. According to Wagner, these authors are putting folk-beliefs or common-sense knowledge about the causality (behaviors are caused or induced by previous beliefs, intentions, etc.) into the scientist work and, in this way, their conceptions of causality are not different from the common-sense knowledge which they are studying. The western cultural model of mankind, the authors implicitly are taking as an a-priori meta-model, is that of "people as rational-beings". This conception of mankind implies that (a) people behave according to their opinions and beliefs, and (b) people try to achieve congruency between their opinions/beliefs and behaviors (Beauvois & Joule, 1981). In terms of scientific inquiry, this means that researches assume a certain direction of causality which goes from representations to behaviors. In other words, social representations are regarded as independent variables whereas behaviors would be the dependent variables. As Wagner said, "this paper argues that social representations cannot be used as independent variables

in causal explanations of social behavior". In opposition to the theses defended by the authors, Wagner adopts a model which is close to the "theory of rationalization" developed by Beauvois and Joule (1981) according to which ideology (here social representations) results from a process of rationalization or justification of prior behavior. In Wagner's terms, "social representations... reflect this practice (behavior) in cognitive, symbolic, and iconic terms".

Whereas the "rationalistic" model defended by other authors is suspected of being not more than a cultural model unconsciously assumed as a valid "scientist model", Wagner offers a model that, implicitly, would be less contaminated by folk-beliefs and, in this way, will be more suitable for guiding research on social representations. Wagner chooses the "formal logic" as a strategy for proving his claims.

As we have written elsewhere (Echebarría, 1994), this is an old non-resolved controversy that could be routed in the debate between rationalists-idealists and empiricists-materialists. Nowadays, this controversy could be illustrated by Abric's (1994) opposition to Beauvois and Joule theses (1981) on the relationships between social representations and social practices.

Could this controversy be definitely resolved, demonstrating the superior validity of one thesis over the other? Our answer is "no". As Wittgenstein pointed out, it is not possible to resolve disagreements between different meta-theories. More than proving the superior validity of his position, Wagner is engaged in a strategic argumentation in a rhetorical context (Billig, 1982, 1987, 1989) where we could never prove the superiority of one meta-model over another. In fact, the strategy chosen for developing this argument ("logic") is the best example of a rhetorical strategy.

It is curious to find the author following this strategy. I suppose Wagner agrees with the traditional criticism against the social psychological mainstream (social cognition). These criticisms reject the "amateur scientist" metaphor of mankind as well as the use of the formal logic as the model against to which human functioning is contrasted (biases and shortcomings). However, Wagner's paper is an example of "logical" dissertation.

Now, it could be interesting to quote a large paragraph extracted from Foucault (1961/93, p. 130 and 135) (in this paragraph Foucault is writing about the "scientist" explanation of mental illness but it can be extended to other kinds of explanations):

"If mania, if melancholia henceforth assumed the aspect our *science* knows them by, it is not because in the course of centuries we have learned to 'open our eyes' to real symptoms; it is not because we have purified our perception to the point of transparency; it is because *concepts were organized around certain qualitative themes* that lent them their unity, gave them their significant coherence, made them finally perceptible... The essential thing is that the enterprise (science) did not proceed from observation to the construction of explanatory images (models); that on contrary, *the images assured the initial role of synthesis*, that their organizing force made possible a structure of perceptions, in which at last the symptoms could attain their significant value and be organized as the visible presence of truth".

This paragraph could be applied to both the rationalistic and the rationalizationistic positions.

Why must we oppose these models? The general model which guides our researches integrates both positions. This general model could be represented as follows (Figure 1):

This model assumes: (a) The importance of the temporal dimension (history) in the study of social representations; (b) the dynamic and changing nature of representations, practices, and contexts; (c) the multiple analytic causality among practices, representations, and contexts; (d) the constructed nature of the social environment (context); and (e) the context-dependent nature of social representations.

Moreover, we are not specially worried about the problem of validation of this model (understanding the "validation" as the process of testing the fit between a model and an "external, more-or-less-objective reality"). In Foucault's terms, we regard this model as an image that assures the role of synthesis, an organizing force that made a structure of perception (and understanding) possible.

After these comments on our general model, we may go into the specific criticisms to our research addressed by Wagner.

First, the research chosen by Wagner to develop his criticisms (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1993) is a study on the processes of decision-making. The main goal of it was that of criticizing the "individualistic" approaches to this topic by stressing the limitations that social representations impose on the available alternatives. Moreover, the study also tries to analyze the reciprocal influences between social practices and social representations.

After reviewing the polemic between the "rationalistic" and the "rationalizationistic" models, we stated (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1993, p. 28) the following position: "We assume a half way position between these two perspectives. We think that social representations are developed as rationalizations of previous social practices as well as transpositions of previous values and ideologies held by social groups" (this positions is far from that Wagner endorsed us).

Moreover, Wagner makes a caricature of the concept of behavior (the dependent variable) describing it as "putting ballot papers in the ballot box". I have the impression that Wagner did not carefully read the original paper (instead he seems to have used the paper as a "projective material" against which to project his ideas). Wagner uses the ambiguous concept of "social practice" (central in his thesis) without defining it. By contrast, we defined "voting" as a "social practice" and we proposed an explicit definition of what a social practice means for us (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1993, pp. 27-29):

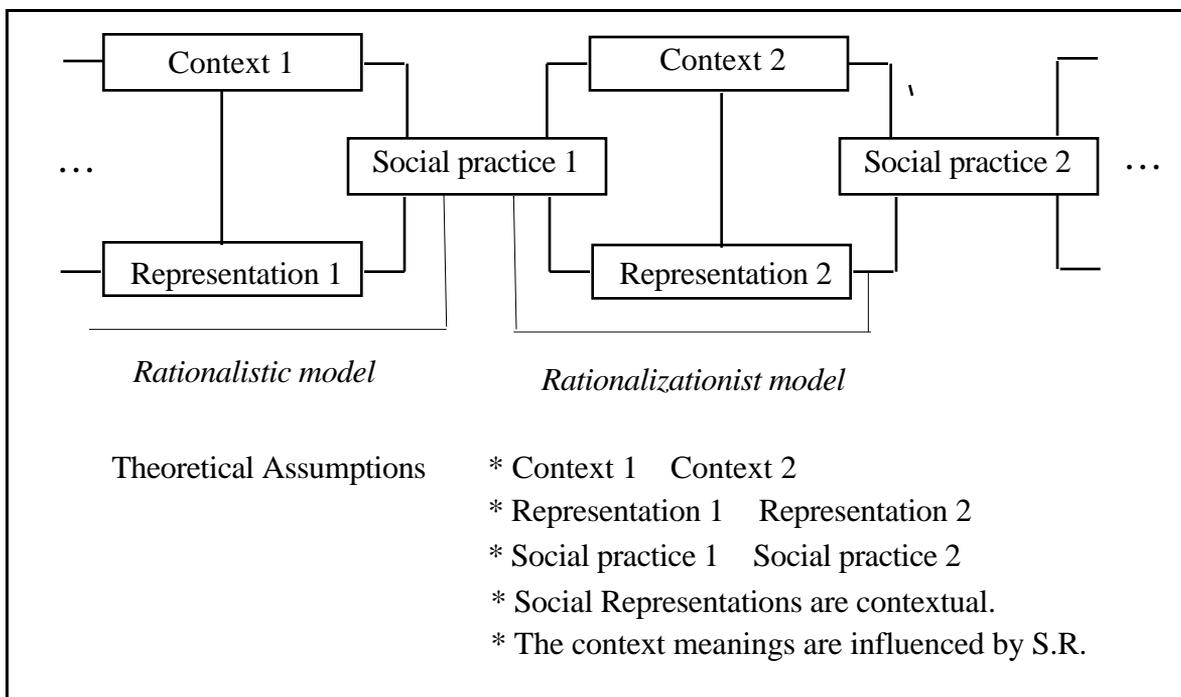


Figure 1
General model.

"Social practices are ritualized social actions. The definition which Harré uses when talking about action is similar to what we understand as social practices. For Harré (1981, p. 214) 'action draws our attention to the unfolding structured sequence of actions by which the actors, in role, perform the acts called upon by the public demands of the situation and setting in which they are found themselves'... Social practices may also be linked to the sociological concept of 'rituals' and 'commemorations' (Durkheim, 1912/82). Social practices are common actions which are periodically created and recreated. They give community unity and personality".

After this definition we explained why voting could be regarded as a 'ritual' or a 'social practice' which plays a central role in recreating and defining a subjects' country as a "democratic" society. Moreover, this social practice (voting) becomes itself the "iconic" representation of freedom and democracy. Given the central role of this concept in both, our paper and Wagner's criticism, it is curious not to find any explicit definition about what Wagner understands by social practice. I think that the real understanding of our paper shifts completely if "voting" is defined as a "social practice" instead of as the "physical movement of putting ballots in boxes".

The theoretical position which Echebarría and Gonzalez (1993) are said to endorse is incomplete (if not incorrect). This is the result of the strategy of "picking" an isolated research from the overall empirical trends followed by the criticized authors.

Testing the overall model we have exposed above is onerous in economic and temporal terms. The alternative strategy is that of testing parts of the model in several researches. This has been our strategy.

Some researches have analyzed the influence of social representations on perceptions and behaviors. Thus, we have experimentally studied the effects of social representations of AIDS on memory (Echebarría & Páez, 1989); the impacts of social representations of drugs on social perceptions of drug-users and social explanations of interactions when drug-users were involved (Echebarría, Fdez Guede, San Juan & Valencia, 1992). We also have studied the relations between social representations of health and medicine and habitual self-prescribed medicine consumption (Echebarría, Ozamiz & San Juan, 1992).

On the other hand, we have studied the dynamic and changing nature of social representations (which become the "dependent" variables"). Thus, we have tested the influence of social values and overt intergroup conflicts on the social representations of Europe (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1993); or the relations between social identities and the social representations of Europe (Echebarría, Elejabarrieta; Valencia & Villarreal, 1992); or the impact of punishment on the social representations of tobacco (Echebarría, Fdez Guede & Gonzalez, 1994); or the influence of social debate on the social representation of tobacco (Echebarría, Gonzalez & Fdez Guede, 1994b); or, even, the influence of social status and perceived threat on the social representations of immigrants (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1994). Theoretically, we have stressed the influence of social practices on social representations (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1993, 1994b; Echebarría, 1994).

It is because of all this that we do not feel identified with the portrait which Wagner has drawn of us.

We would now like to answer some questions Wagner, emphatically, posed to himself. He says "by the same logic we could assess a representation R by observing some overt behavior B and causally predict subsequent verbal behavior V by stating: 'The representation R, with a content described by means of B, determines the verbal behavior V'. Such a statement will probably be rejected because of its strangeness... It does not conform to the psychologists' expectations to look first at overt behavior and then at verbal behavior". Coming back to our model, our answer to the possibility of such a statement is "YES". It is

from the logic model which the author follows in his argumentative strategy that this statement could be regarded as unlikely.

Wagner also points out that "the result of interpretative work is the statement that 'P thinks R'. The data are at the beginning of the interpretative work and suggest such an inference. The statement 'P thinks R' also suggests that future data obtained from the same set of subjects at time T2- assuming reasonable stability over time - will let us infer the same or similar set of beliefs R". How has he jumped to this conclusion? Neither from our model (which explicitly assumes the changing and context-dependent nature of representations), nor from a rationalist model (which assumes that beliefs cause behaviors) can it be concluded that beliefs have to be stable.

Finally, there is an interesting proposition that could enrich the studies on social representations: the need to include outcomes along with representations-plus-behaviors. Nevertheless, this is an old sociological tradition. For example, Durkheim (1893/1982, 1912/1982) or Halbwachs (1968) did not separate social beliefs from the functions (outcomes) they fulfill in social groups. For example, when racism is defined as the systems of beliefs based the superiority of a group over other groups, developed for justifying, reinforcing, maintaining and creating unjust structures of social relationships among social groups, the outcomes of these systems of beliefs occupy a central role in the definition and study of racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1994). There are many instances which exemplify the importance of outcomes in the study of systems of social beliefs.

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Agustin Echebarría Echabe
Dpto de Psicología Social
Universidad del País Vasco
Avenida Tolosa 70
20009 San Sebastián
Spain