USING SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS TO NEGOTIATE THE SOCIAL PRACTICES OF LIFE

COMMENTARY ON THE PAPER BY C. P. DE SÁ

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This paper by Celso de Sá (1994) extends beyond the current social psychological literature in order to talk about social representations in new ways which overcome some conceptual problems (Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Páez & Gonzaléz, 1993; Potter & Litton, 1985). To do this, he draws upon the work of both Pierre Bourdieu and behaviour analysis. This goal of Sá was foreshadowed in an earlier paper:

> ...social practices must be seen as indispensable objective referentials for representations. The practical knowledge that links a subject to an object is, above all, a practiced knowledge. It should not just be supposed, but must be detected in behaviours and communication that actually and systematically occur in the everyday functioning of social groups.
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> To implement this proposal, behaviour must be dealt with explicitly, and not as an obvious consequence of thinking, as in strict cognitivism. The appeal to social practices, in order to take into consideration the collective nature of such a behaviour, is certainly correct, but it does not solve the problem completely. The notion of "practices" is not clear itself nor consensual amongst those who use it; and it is used as much as imprecisely as it happens with "social representations". (Sá, 1993, p. 111-112)

A few preliminary comments on Bourdieu and behaviour analysis

It is significant that Sá has seen beyond the common misrepresentations of behaviour analysis (Todd & Morris, 1992), which have misled otherwise insightful social psychologists and historians of social psychology. Putting all behaviourisms under the one banner for the purposes of criticism is like criticizing cognitive social psychology and assuming that this devastates social representation theory and all other social psychology.

As argued in a recent book (Chiesa, 1994), in the future it will be wondered why radical behaviourism was ever called a behaviourism at all. It is a psychology about contingencies, not behaviour. Contingencies equally involve the environment and behaviour, and the important aspect for our purposes is the extent to which the social environment is said to determine human behaviour and go beyond the constraints of the physical world (Guerin, 1994a). Similarities with Mead, for example, have been drawn out (Blackman, 1991; cf. Farr, 1993, on Mead).

Bourdieu, likewise, is concerned with practice and action and does not wish to leave everything to an autonomous agent or homunculus posited to originate and thoughtfully decide all action. His work has been directed towards showing the multiple influences and systems dynamics of human social behaviour (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) while maintaining a decentered subject:

> The conditions of rational calculation are practically never given in practice: time is limited, information is restricted, etc. And yet agents do do, much more often that if they were behaving randomly, 'the only thing to do'. This is because, following the intuitions of a 'logic of practice' which is the product of a lasting exposure to conditions similar to those in which they are placed, they anticipate the necessary immanent in the way of the world. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 11)

It is, then, an interesting and revealing mix of authors to whom Sá turns. Both behaviour analysis and Bourdieu want the (social) environment to play a larger role in explaining human behaviour but without turning this into a simple-minded, mechanistic exchange between agent and environment. Bourdieu therefore writes about his unit of analysis as *habitus*, by which he means an interplay of the two, or rather, an interplay in which the person is partly *in* the environment and the environment is *in* the person. This mirrors exactly the *contingency* of behaviour analysis (Guerin, 1994). A behaviour cannot be defined at all without including the environment which occasions it and the history of effects it has had in the past. Such contingencies are the building blocks of behaviour analysis, not isolated behaviours.

Thus there are many similarities in the goals of behaviour analysis and Bourdieu despite seeming miles apart intellectually. The paper of de Sá needs to be read against such a mix of backgrounds. Both behaviour analysis and Bourdieu are working towards realistic and practical knowledge while eschewing mechanistic, physically defined approaches, and merely verbally reported, lived-experience approaches.

The social/verbal/cultural basis of most human behaviour has been extensively studied by Bourdieu over many years (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). While this social basis has been theoretically appreciated in behaviour analysis for many years (Skinner, 1957), it has not, however, been developed until recently (Glenn, 1988; Guerin, 1994). So while the "rule-governed behaviour" discussed by Sá has been experimentally studied within behaviour analysis (Hayes, 1989; Riegler & Baer, 1989), the essential social basis of it has remained theoretical.

Sá has done well, then, to see through this literature to the social basis of rule-governed behaviour, since many behaviour analysts have not, and he has accurately described what is meant by the term. People can learn to do things because of the effects from the physical environment, as when they burn themselves on a hot stove and learn not to touch it again. But if they are brought up in a verbal community then they can also learn to follow a verbal rule when someone tells them not to touch a stove because it is hot. It should be clear that this depends upon the social relations between the people involved and the training within the verbal community: to say it again, rule-governed behaviour is a social event.

This means that in a full study of human behaviour we must study interactions with both the physical and social worlds and how people negotiate their way through each. So to study the social practices of a group of people we need to look at how social representations are used to regulate social behaviour.

My only slight disagreement with Sá's interpretation of behaviour analysis comes with the idea of "intraverbals" (p. 10). Intraverbals are verbal behaviour units which are occasioned and maintained by other verbal behaviour. For example, if someone remarks to me, "I think that I shall never see...", I might reply either "A poem as lovely as a tree" or else "A Noam as lovely as Chomsky", depending upon the verbal communities I interact with.

Calling these "intraverbal chains", however, gives the idea of a chain of associations contained within the person, or within a neural network, to use the more trendy jargon. However, the intraverbal, like all verbal behaviour, is essentially social. We only learn such responses (strictly speaking, such contingencies) through other people, and the interactions which maintain such responses are with other people. If I moved to a foreign country I would soon stop saying the phrases mentioned, or in a non-academic setting I am unlikely to say the second of the two phrases.

What is interesting about the verbal behaviour approach (Skinner, 1957), therefore, is that there is such a broad social basis for it, even to the point of making word associations or cognitive networks essential social events. The intraverbals do not "connect" up together

inside my head, but only "connect" through interactions with people in my verbal communities.

The major points of the paper by Sá

Let me summarize the major points of Sá's argument, as I see them. Social representations are said to arise ("genése sociale") from the social negotiations of everyday life, but that process basis has not been spelled out fully in social representation theory and it is not immediately apparent, even for participants. Social representations have an unconscious character, in the sense that people use, alter, and develop social representations during interactions without consciously (verbally) telling themselves that that is what they are doing. Social representations just function in everyday life and it might only be social scientists who go on to ponder the question of why someone said what they did and where they learned it from.

The major approach to help this scientific pondering about why people say the things they do has been to *describe* the content of social representations. This has been done through interviews, content analysis, questionnaires, etc. (Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell, 1992). While certainly useful and important, Sá argues that the research techniques themselves both involve social negotiation, which is outside of everyday life but still very real, and also involve scientific inferences which give more homogeneity to social representations than might be warranted. This does not argue to stop such research, but to reflexively consider the effects of the research itself.

The argument of Sá, then, is that investigating the social negotiations ("genése sociale") which function through the everyday utilization of social representations might prove more fruitful than trying to measure and describe any content of "coherent" social representations (which might not exist coherently in the first place). There are all sorts of loose ends to just trying to plot or describe what a particular social representation looks like, so it might be more useful to study the everyday social *processes* or social *practices* which involve social representations in addition to mapping the content of those social representations.

To this end, Sá looks to Bourdieu and behaviour analysis for new ways of studying the interplay between regularities in what people say and the everyday social negotiation and practices of life. [It should be noted in passing that the minority influence and other literatures also contain much material pertaining to everyday practices which involve the maintenance and change of social representations (Doise & Mugny, 1984; Doms & Van Avermaet, 1985; Moscovici, 1976, 1980; Mugny & Pérez, 1991)]

Both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis treat the interplay between individuals and the environment without the problems mentioned earlier, although behaviour analysis has been less sophisticated so far in dealing with the social environment and its special properties (Guerin, 1994a). Both views avoid the common pitfalls of treating everyday life as originating either totally in the person or totally in the environment. Bourdieu does this with his concept of *habitus*, while behaviour analysis is based on the *contingency* as its basic unit (primarily social and verbal contingencies with human behaviour). Likewise, social representations have been said to be as much "out there" as "in here" (Moscovici, 1987).

Both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis view everyday behaviour as involving unconscious or unreflected events. We engage in the "give and take" (Moscovici, 1987, p. 518) of our lives without usually reflecting on what we are doing. If we do reflect, it behoves us to use the terms and ideas learned from our social groups in any case. Thus our attitudes, attributions and excuses about our own actions are also negotiated through social groups (de Rosa, 1993; Guerin, 1994b, in press; Hewstone, Jaspars & Lalljee, 1982), what our social

groups allow us to get away with saying and doing. For example, most of my social groups do not let me get away with saying that nuclear reactors are wonderful things, or that Mozart's music is appalling. My interactions with such social groups, the social habitus (Bourdieu) or verbal communities (behaviour analysis, Skinner, 1957), have very negative consequences if I say such things and the habitus or social contingencies would change detrimentally if I did.

The other point that Sá shows is usefully contained in both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis is that the maintenance of so much of our everyday life depends upon the groups and communities we live in, not with contacting the objects we might talk about or represent. This means that purely fictitious "knowledges" or social representations become possible through our social groups (Bourdieu, 1991; Guerin, 1992a). There is no need to posit etheral universes of discourse in these views, because the maintenance of such fictions comes about from social negotiations. For example, if a great part of my everyday life and social contacts depends on doing "Santa Claus" actions once a year, then these are worthwhile fictions. The only reality to such actions are the effects from my social groups, not some Santa Claus universe of discourse. Bourdieu (1984) in this way similarly traces the very fine "distinctions" in art and culture made by various social groups. Thus the social practices (social negotiations) are very real and grounded but the purported content of the social representations can still be fictitious.

Finally, Sá makes the nice point that almost any social event could be classified as a social representation but that this is counter-productive: "De meme, si, pour une raison quelconque, la practique se maintient au niveau automatique de base, il ne semble pas justifiable de parler de représentation de l'objet en question." (p. 2). If, on a rainy day, two people remark to one another "It's rainy outside", we would not want to say that they were negotiating a social reality or a social representation.

This means that social representation theory should be pondering the conditions of social practice under which we would want to class any talk as a social representation, rather than pondering whether coherence or consensus allow us to classify talk as social representations (Páez & Gonzaléz, 1993). Some likely candidates for such conditions are talk about fictitious events, ritual talk which only functions to maintain a social group (Guerin, 1994a), talk about unknown or unknowable events (Guerin, in press; Moscovici, 1984), and talk which closely involves the resources and supplies of a social group (Bourdieu, 1977; Durkheim, 1912; Glenn, 1988, 1989).

Some critical reflections

Putting social representations into the study of social practices rather than the study of the content of representations, as Sá has very usefully done, raises some more critical reflections. From both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis it is clear that "power", authority, or functional consequences are prior to, or concurrent with, the use of social representations (Bourdieu, 1991). This is equivalent to Durkheim's idea of pre-contractual contracts. If people are using the same terms or social representations, and perhaps even have a consensual and coherent social representation, then social power relations must have existed before this was possible. Social representations are only made possible by prior social power relations, and these are what need to be studied as social practices.

One critical point with social representations has been that consensual agreement between a social group is never likely (Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Potter & Litton, 1985). If we *were* to describe a social representation that was consistently held by all members of a social group, this would tell us more about the extreme social power relations

of that group than about the content of that representation. So the points raised by Sá also emphasize that whether or not a social representation is well-defined, coherent, and consensual depends upon the practices of the social groups, and not necessarily on something inherent in the content itself.

It is more usual that members of a social group "know" a variety of viewpoints or social representations about everyday life, but that they use some of them consistently in most social situations (see the well-balanced results of Potter & Litton, 1985). The source of this consistency, however, lies in the consistency of the social situations themselves, not in some person-originated "need for consistency" (Guerin, 1994b). As Moscovici (1990) and others (Giddens, 1991) have pointed out in many places, the plethora of social groupings in modern life means that we can either adapt and negotiate our social representations depending upon the group we are dealing with at the time (including a research interviewer, as Sá points out), or fiercely, and at some cost, defend one viewpoint across all the people we might come into contact with (cf. Moscovici, 1961).

Another critical point raised about social representation theory through the analysis of Sá follows from the social and cultural basis of the language used with social representations. This conception of the social basis of language practices is very similar in both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis, and Sá develops this point nicely when discussing regularities deriving from a consistent habitus versus regularities from rule-governed behaviour (a consistent social habitus). Bourdieu himself puts this nicely:

> Since the habitus, the virtue made of necessity, is a product of the incorporation of objective necessity, it produces strategies which, even if they are not produced by consciously aiming at explicitly formulated goals on the basis of an adequate knowledge of objective conditions, nor by the mechanical determination exercised by causes, turn out to be objectively adjusted to the situation. Action guided by a 'feel for the game' has all the appearances of the rational action that an impartial observer, endowed with all the necessary information and capable of mastering it rationally, would deduce. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 11)

And this echoes the same point made by Moscovici:

> And yet I knew that, in the life of societies, as was observed by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, relationships, beliefs, or institutions are seldom created deliberately and reflexively. That is to say, shared motivations and significations, just as the representations rooted in a language or culture, because they are the work of a collectivity, cannot be entirely conscious. (Moscovici, 1993, p. 40)

But this raises the critical point from both Bourdieu and behaviour analysis (Bourdieu, 1991; Guerin, 1992b) that *all* language use must be studied as functional, performative, procedural (Echebarría & Gonzales, 1993), and oriented only toward "la maitrese du milieu social, matérial et idéal" (Jodelet, 1984, p. 361). Language does not interact with the physical world or habitus; you cannot negotiate with the physical habitus using language forms: shouting at rocks does not make anything happen. Words only have effects on people, and that applies to all words. Even saying "That is a cat" only has an effect on a person, albeit this might be the same person who is speaking.

To summarize, this last point echoes the whole theme of Sá's paper, that even the "purely descriptive" content of social representations, whether consensual or not, is performative and procedural in the social groups in which they are found. If we find that one set of people in a society tend to talk about an event in a particular way then this functions to keep the group together and to facilitate social interactions. "Autrement dit, l'origine de la formation et de la transformation des représentations sociale se trouverait dans un processus concret de problématisation des pratiques" (Sá, 1994, p. 41).

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