

**THE PERVASIVENESS OF THE
BELIEFS IN CAUSALITY AND
COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY:
SOME COMMENTS ON A PAPER
BY W. WAGNER**

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Wolfgang Wagner's efforts to uncover some of the assumptions, preconceptions, and beliefs that may shape the approach of social scientists in general, and of social representations researchers in particular, are a welcome contribution to a critical and constructive discussion of our work. Wagner's analysis opens with a thoughtful examination of three studies investigating the representation-behavior relationship. Based on their conceptualization of the representations, (which were assessed first) as independent variables, and of the behaviors (measured later) as dependent variables, the researchers derived causal interpretations from their empirical findings. Wagner correctly points to the arbitrariness of this temporal sequencing, which he attributes to a belief in intentional causality deeply ingrained not only in common-sense but also in socio-psychological investigation. According to Wagner, the discourse framed in causal terms is valid for subjects' reporting of their own psychological processes, but it is invalid within the framework of researchers' analysis of their data. He then claims that "if the researcher's personal folk belief in intentional causality is the reason to implicitly assume representation-behavior causality, we'd better do away with it".

This is undoubtedly a valuable suggestion, but we would like to question its feasibility. Forty years ago, George Kelly (1955) claimed that the psychological processes guiding the researcher's work cannot be different from those attributed to the individuals under study. More recently, Putnam (1990) discussed the division made in the physical as well as in the human sciences between the system and its observer. Such a division sees the behavior of the observing scientist as excluded from the theory that is applied to the things studied. In Putnam's terms, the observing scientist seeks "a God's-

eye view", a pure seeing that somehow does not implicate the observer (Sampson, 1993). The "folk belief" in intentional causality might be especially difficult to discard. It has been suggested that causality is deeply embedded in the structure of language and narrative (Linde, 1993; Peterson & McCabe, 1991). Thus, language may impose a heavy constraint on any attempt at overcoming the folk belief in intentional causality when using language for describing human behavior. If individuals tend to describe their psychological processes, and their behavior, in narrative forms which are generally framed in causal terms, the narratives of research reporting may not easily become an exception to this rule. It should be noted that Wagner is aware of the pervasiveness of the folk belief in causality, when he states that the belief in intentional causality "intrudes quasi automatically" into the investigator's theories.

Wagner proposes an alternative to this folk belief: rationality and consistency. He conceives of social representations as rational systems: People are required to conform in their overall behavior (thinking, speaking, acting) to the socially created belief systems as long as they adhere to them. Within such systems thought and behavior are logically -- or psycho-logically -- interconnected, and "glued together by the overarching belief ... that rational behavior is always justified and implied by foregoing rational beliefs in an appropriate situation". Wagner's conception of human rationality is close to that implied by consistency theorists, which "view people as essentially thoughtful and rational, adjusting their attitudes and behavior in accordance with incoming information" (Oskamp, 1991, p. 231). As pointed out by Eagly and Chaiken (1993), one principle has dominated psychologists' descriptions of the relations between and among people's mental representations of their beliefs, attitudes, and attitudinally significant behaviors. This principle of cognitive consistency holds that these various elements of the "attitudinal cognitorium" are mutually interdependent parts of a system that tends towards a state of harmony, balance, or consonance.

It may turn out that by accepting Wagner's suggestions, we are trading one folk belief, that of intentional causality, for another folk belief, that of cognitive consistency. Some scholars have voiced their criticisms against such a conception of human behavior. In 1970, D. Bem vividly stated that "inconsistency is probably our most enduring cognitive commonplace ... I suspect that for most people most of the time and for all the people some of the time inconsistency just sits there" (p. 34). For decades, social psychologists overlooked Bem's claims, and stuck to cognitive consistency. But when looking forward towards future trends in attitude research, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) foresee some critical discussions of this approach; they are aware that "consistency and inconsistency can exist in many aspects of attitude structure – for example, between evaluation and belief, between evaluation and affect, and between evaluation and behaviors. In addition, responses within or between any of these classes can be consistent or inconsistent with one another" (p. 669).

Social representations theorists have generally adhered to such a cognitive consistency view. This belief, which may share the pervasiveness and intensity of the folk belief in intentional causality, may explain the relative neglect of discussions on aspects of internal conflict in social representation discourse. It should be noted, however, that Michael Billig (1987, 1991) consistently claimed that common sense possesses its own contradictory themes. When conceptualizing social representations, Wagner suggests that we should take into account the totality of social practices, which combine thinking, acting, and interacting. Such an organic view which connects thinking, verbal report, and

behavior would allow us to overcome the folk belief in intentional causality, a product of a compartmentalized view of cognition and action. It is important to note that this line of thought is consistent with views which have conceived the development of higher mental functions in individuals as deriving from social life (Vigotsky, 1962) as well as with sociolinguistic approaches (e.g. Gee, 1992) which view language not only as reporting on reality but as taking part in its construction as well. When thought, language, and action are thus all considered as products of social activity, they -- in concert and dialogue -- construct, mediate, and form each other, making a linear causal understanding of reality problematic. Within such a dialogical perspective, consistency is no longer a necessary feature of the system, since it allows for internal conflict and argumentation. Wagner's conception of social representations may thus help to reassign the status of praxis and action both to word and to thought in socio- psychological discourse.

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