Discussion

INTELLIGENCE, SCHOOL, MARKS AND PUPILS: A REJOINDER TO RAETY AND SNELLMAN'S (1995) "ON THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF INTELLIGENCE"

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Just at the end of an interesting discussion of a doctoral dissertation on social representations of intelligence which recently I was a member of, a colleague discreetly said to me: "Do we really need the notion of social representations?" "What does it add to our toolbox of notions and theories?" Räty and Snellman's paper (1995) gives the opportunity to remind the social representations (SR) community of some arguments in favour of the usefulness of the notion of SR through one of the most intriguing, polisemic topics in SR: intelligence. I will start with some considerations about the straightforward empirical evidence offered by Räty and Snellmann.

1. The figurative aspects of intelligence are once more confirmed (masculinity, high education, and social success) when the targets are both pupil and a generic intelligent person; what one could see as a trivial result meets the same requirements introduced some years ago by an eminent scholar like Neisser (1979) when he suggested of studying intelligence no more as a concept but as a prototype. Since the beginnings, the issues of social power and social positions are well established; intelligent cannot be anyone: adult professor, scientist, executive are the more favourite candidates for being assessed as intelligent people by children before they are capable of conceptualising reality. As illustrated by social psychology of development, social norms are well established and constitutive tools of the everyday routines in and through peer culture (Corsaro 1992; Carugati & Gilly 1993; Carugati & Selleri 1995a).

2. In a second set of studies on conceptions of intelligence and development, Räty and Snellman give cross-cultural confirmation of the influence of social positions and social identities in building up intelligence as a cognitive poliphasia, as many-sidedness, as a matter of social controversies where the final verdict is emanated in terms of "natural giftedness" (cf. Mugny & Carugati 1985). The notions of "fosterhood" and of

"teacherhood" are well chosen by Räty and Snellman for underlying the constructive function of school (and I suggest to add the family) as two carrier systems (cf. von Cranach 1992) which build up intelligence both as inherited gift and as criterion for differentiating children and pupils; a corollary of this line of argument is that inter-individual differences are supposed to manifest themselves quite early in children's life and they are viewed as a plausible legitimisation (as a rhetorical tool for school professionals and parents - I suppose mainly of bright children!) for streaming pupils. As documented by Mugny & Carugati (1985) a phenomenon (the inter-individual differences) becomes one more the argument of causation for manifestation of cognitive abilities, i. e. intelligence; thus the issue of explanation in SR theory is empirically illustrated (Wagner 1995). More particularly, a specific example of modal reasoning underlying SR of intelligence has been already illustrated in women as empirical evidence of the usefulness of the notions of "teacherhood" and "fosterhood", proposed by Räty and Snellman. Women who are asked in the socio-cognitive conditions of being either mothers-non-teachers or teachers-non-mothers (cf. Carugati, Selleri & Scappini, 1995) seem to reason in a very different way: mothers-non-teachers underline intelligence both as logic and social, whilst teachers-non-mothers conceive of intelligence either logic or social. In other words, for mothers discourse on intelligence seems to the be sustained by the logical form of P & Q being true, while for teachers P & not Q or Q & not P being true.

These results are very interesting for the main issue Räty and Snellman raise on how the social, is woven into the fabric of intelligence (178): in the same vein of the authors, I suggest the social is woven as far as it makes up the form of reasoning adults use for relating different contents of "what intelligence really is" for them.

3. The third set of results offered by Räty and Snellman is related to the modern concept of intelligence and its association with the establishment of compulsory mass education and the practical needs of classifying pupils. Once more the unceasing dialogue between academic productions and institutions (i. e. school needs) is apparent in discourses about intelligence. What Räty and Snellman illustrate as a chronology of Finnish directives (cf. 1920s Act of Compulsory Education) parallels academic scholars' debate on definitions and measurement of intelligence, promoted in 1921 by the "Journal of Educational Psychology" (cf. Carugati & Selleri 1995b). The Zeitgeist of psychometric model (hence the legitimisation of measurement, assessment and streaming) is apparent both in Finnish Act and in academic debates, with the anecdotal specificity of scholars both agreeing and disagreeing on "what scientifically intelligence is". Even in more recent efforts to match the aims of education and of the cognitive science perspectives through a proposal of "seven intelligences" (Gardner 1983; Kornhaber et al 1990) the fundamental claim of individual-differential psychological notion of intelligence still has its social-academic power, with the minor concession that the "American invention" (as Gould 1981, suggests) of rendering intelligence as a reified, inherited notion, is mitigated in terms of a cultural-differential psychological notion (e.g. USA vs. Japan cultural variability in distribution of seven intelligences). A major question unresolved by the multiplicity of intelligences perspective is that educational systems and carrier systems (according to Räty and Snellman) must measure, assess and stream pupils even in terms of which intelligence/s each pupil does posses (or is supposed to possess) (cf. Selleri, Carugati & Scappini. 1995).

4. The most original result offered by Räty and Snellman does concern the relations between conceptions of intelligence and explanations for school success, i. e. the distinction between 'genuine achievement' originating from natural, spontaneous and inborn abilities and 'pseudo-achievement', usually labelled as 'school skills', originating from hard work, industriousness, memory and rote learning, and conformity; this distinction is paralleled by two different models (prototypes) of pupils: those who are naturally gifted 'though sometimes lazy' and those who are able to bluff their teachers by working hard and doing well in examinations. This distinction, running throughout the Western educational systems (it is a claim, for the present discussion - still with some empirical evidence - which could produce a non trivial research programme for European scholars in SR and in education), presupposes a possibility for pupils to be assessed as successful for "wrong reasons", girls being the pupils more expected to be classified that way!

Thus the historical analysis in Finnish school culture has the merit of underlying some interrelated issues: intelligence as a differential psychological notion based on the psychometric model; genuine and pseudo achievement; differential assessing and streaming for girls and boys pupils, at least in terms of explanations (and legitimations) held by school professionals.

Moreover the differential-psychometric model of intelligence is showed as the guideline for the establishment of the comprehensive school system in the 1970s and for the educational perspectives for the 2000s, which is expected to be characterised by two contradictory discourses: 'market-orientation' and 'freedom of choice'. Possible concrete social dynamics predicted for the coming years would be that the increase of (pretended) individual choice (from the part of pupils and parents) will further increase the need (from the part of school systems) for psychometric comparison, based on normal distribution and standardisation both of genuine and of pseudo achievements.

Then we are at the core of the social fabric of intelligence and of social representations approach: conceptions, attitudes, prototypes are all woven into the dynamics of cultures, institutions, group's relationships, social identities of professionals, social influence and social conflict.

Räty and Snellman's contribution is an example of the dynamics of socio-genesis of social representations (in the case of intelligence) in the Finnish context, example which could be fruitfully verified in other countries. But it is also a case which illustrates the fruitfulness of approaching a cultural polisemic issue (intelligence) not more as a singular (narrowly defined) cognitive notion but as a cultural artefact, whose construction should be understood through a complex moulding of some major dynamics described in social psychology: intergroup relations, social identity, contextual (or situated) reasoning, social influence.

5. Last but not least, the controversial dynamics in SR are the underlying major issue of the paper which becomes clear when Räty and Snellmann write on the confidence in institutional definitions of intelligence: nature vs. culture; relativistic vs. innate; academic vs. everyday knowledge; integration vs. segregation at school: all these controversial issues are by no means a property of academic esoteric clubs, but prominent questions concerning the main values of our cultures and education policies. Thus the hegemonic vs. polemic dynamics of SR (Moscovici, 1988; Vala 1995 inter alia) are confirmed

through a multifocal study, which starting from the Finnish culture, sheds light to other cultures and offers an interesting opportunity for SR theory.

Turning out to the questions our colleague asked me so kindly and discreetly, I would provisionally end up with few remarks. Räty and Snellmann as well as other researchers in Europe (Poeschl, 1992; Faria & Fontaine, 1993; Amaral 1996) and in Far East countries (Hyun sub Yun, 1992) have been documenting the consistency over time and cultures of specific dynamics governing how conceptions are socially organised, associated with prominent hierarchical social positions, moulded by social identities, and showing hegemonic vs. polemic controversies. These conceptions show a chronological (if not historical) dynamics as well, with unceasingly back and forth of some seminal controversial issues. Should this amount of empirical evidence be reduced to a singular notion, be it conceptions, prototypes, attitudes? Could the relations between contents and dynamic forms of communicating them be theoretically constructed in a different way? a way that respects and reflects the poliphasia teachers and parents (inter alia) employ when they are asked about a topic which is relatively inexplicable, salient, intriguing, and threatening or positively stirring up their social identity, and last but not least, the inevitability of decision making?

Some researchers are prone to benefit from the SR approach, as a heuristic construct. Other constructs are welcome, with a the condition that they enable us to better understand the richness of the phenomena we have been describing.

Let me end up with a brief quotation from Italo Calvino, an Italian writer, untimely dead, who was invited in 1988 by Harvard University to give the “Charles Elliot Norton Lectures”. He choose as title of his Lectures: “Six memos for the next millennium”. Calvino concluded the fifth lecture entitled “Multiplicity” with these few words:

Who are we? Who is each of us apart from a combinatorial of experiences, information, readings, figments of our imagination? Every life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a sample of styles, where everything could be continuously shuffled again and again, and rearranged in every possible ways (120).

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