

# **INTELLIGENCE AS A SECRET CHARM OF SCHOOLMASTERS: A COMMENTARY ON RÄTY AND SNELLMAN**

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*Abstract:* Social representations are utilized in institutional contexts in ways that fit different goals of the persons who use them. Some of those uses carry the function of social suggestion in consumer-producer relationships in the societal texture. Unity of seemingly mutually contradictory social representations may be discovered when their use in communication process is contemplated. The social representer is the active constructor of social representations, in the process of communication between different social role perspectives.

When my grandfather—an Estonian peasant—decided to support his son's desire to continue his education beyond the gymnasium and attend the university, his well-meaning village folk warned him: "don't do that. He will become a horse-thief." This happened in the middle of the 1920s. Their prediction was only partially wrong-- the son indeed entered into a career of no return to the village life, but instead of stealing horses he became a gymnasium teacher, and later-- teacher of teachers. The striving for knowledge led the young man into the world of social construction of the educational institution as such-- far away from the social values of the village. Instead of horses, he became a kind of "thief of children's souls" (or-- if seen from a different perspective-- the "saver" of those souls).

Each social institution-- extrapolating from the story narrated by Rätty and Snellman-- creates its own myths (in the sense of Boesch, 1991) to divide and govern the populace, as well as socially legitimize its own functioning. Social representations are constructed semiotic means in that process. Psychologists have rarely become aware of that semiotic role of the concepts they use (and study), possibly because it is suggested to them by the very same social institutions that create (or propagate) the social representations used that those are not social at all! Thus, "intelligence" is projected-- by social suggestions

emanating from educational institutions-- into the children, rather than considered to be a process that takes place between person and the cultural environment (see Valsiner, 1984 for an elaboration). This projection may become semiotically protected through evoking myths about "genetic determinancy" of such "intelligence." Psychology uses mythological means of claiming the "biological" or "hard-wired" status of many of the properties of psychological kind that are projected into the person. Claims of such "hard-wiring" are socially constructed myths, since the actual biological bases of such claims are rarely (if ever) directly investigated.

In joining with the construction of the person, psychology becomes a part in the institutional system that creates the perspective from which research questions in empirical domains are habitually asked. Many of those questions-- as is persistently being pointed out by Jan Smedslund (1994, 1995)-- are elucidations of the existing "common sense" (or of social representations). Their empirical investigation often takes the form of pseudo-empiricism (in Smedslund's terminology)-- the supposedly empirically discovered knowledge is already pre-set through the semantic fields of the social representations themselves.

Räty and Snellman demonstrate how social talk about "intelligence" is situated within the institutional context of school. Different persons relate to the school as institution from different social positions, and the set of social representations utilized by them varies in relation to that position. This picture, however, is merely a simplification of the complexity of the development of the school as the "institutional carrier" of the discourse about "intelligence". As Räty and Snellman point out,

"We are now moving towards a new educational ethos that can be characterized as 'market-orientation' and 'freedom of choice'. Our prediction is that the increase of individual choice will further increase the need for psychometric comparisons *because all concepts that are brought to school tend to become differential concepts*. Paradoxically, then, yearning for greater freedom is apt to result in the opposite, greater standardization." (p. 7 in ms., emphases added)

There is little paradoxical in this unity of "freedom" and "standardization", if we were to consider it from the standpoint of bounded indeterminacy of human development (Valsiner, 1987). The question that would clarify this non-paradoxicality is the issue of who is "we" in the above quote. Importation of general semiotic mediating devices-- terms like "freedom of choice"-- is itself an act of institutional goal-directedness. That "freedom of choice" -- if the "we" is a parent-- carries a different communicative function than if the "we" were to be located in the speech of school administrators. The latter organize the activities in the school, and the "freedom of choice" given to individuals in any institution is always limited, given the purpose of guidance of development. For parents --who are not immediately involved in running a school, and therefore can engage themselves in a wide variety of largely inconsequential personal opinions about what schools "should be like"-- the talk about "freedom of choice" in education may carry the sweet charms of positive changes in society.

This difference in perspectives has a general form: the social positions of the consumer and producer in the social texture. The goal orientations of these two role carriers are interdependent and opposite. The producer needs to capture the interest of the consumer, while maintaining the privileged access to the production "secrets" themselves. The consumer needs to be guided through the myriad of products available, and may rely upon either one's own direct knowledge about the products, or somebody's "expert

advice" about it (see Del Rio, 1996). Some of the latter may be of generic kind-- guiding the consumer to trust the producer, product, and *the consumer's own* role in making the suggested preference. It may be the latter function for which the talk about "freedom of choice" may be directed. Thus, the producer-- in effect-- says to the consumer-- "now you have the possibility to make your own choice, and I (the producer) can help you by making sure that you make the right choice." The producer, of course, is not interested in the consumer's having the possibility to make any other choice but the "right " one (i.e., the one that fits the producer).

In other terms-- "freedom of choice" is a story of purposefully limited unequal choices. The field of possible choices is given by the producers, and the boundaries of that field are maintained by their managerial activities. The real-life context where this is quintessentially visible is that of supermarkets: the consumer is indeed given "one's own choice" between N different brands of the same kind of a product, and the information about each of those brands can be used for many possible ways to compare any one within the N with any other. However, the possibility of extending the field (e.g., get the supermarket to order N+1st brand of the product, just because it is *this particular* consumer's "own choice") may prove to be a difficult task. The consumer may find the N+1st item in another supermarket as part of its pre-given set of choices, but that success only proves the point.

Returning to the educational settings-- the talk about parents' (often presented as children's) "freedom of choice" in educational settings necessarily leads to the issue of differential questions by the educational administrators position. This continues the tendency present in the history of proliferation of psychometrics (see description of it in American case in Danziger, 1990). It is from the perspective of school administrators that any question asked becomes translated into one of inter-individual differences between pupils, and the mapping of those differences onto different educational contexts. The widening of the set of different educational "tracks" within the school -- which may be presented to parents and children as increase in the "freedom of choice"-- actually entails the widening of a set of standardized conditions. Hence the consumers go happy with the "new choices" available to them, while for the educators all of those are well-controlled in the actual context of the educational institution. There is no paradoxical relation here between "freedom" and "standardization"-- the former is taken over and made into another form of controlled process by the institution, while proliferating the belief that the institution has become reorganized by the "freedom".

Maybe there is some valuable direction for a theory of social representations emerging from this story? If we -- here meant to cover psychologists who rely on the concept--talk about social representations, we might also need to think about purposeful social representers. The latter are agents who make use of those representations in accordance with their goal orientations. Some of those uses may entail construction of convenient semiotic illusions (e.g., cases of propaganda), others-- creation of semiotic fields of active concern by persons who are simultaneously distanced from possibilities of direct action.

Finally, a theory of social representations may need to *include a focus on the control relations between different social representations* within a hierarchical relationship. Presence of such hierarchical systems of social representations in school contexts becomes clear from Rätty and Snellman's paper. "Good achievement" is expected to result

not from "intelligence" per se, but from its "real" version. "Genuine giftedness" emerges as the superior form of "giftedness", and so on. All intelligent children are equal, but the "really intelligent" ones clearly more so. The secret charm of social institutions is to guarantee social inequality under the cover of talk about equality. Maybe it is through the goal-oriented use of social representations that institutions capture the souls of laypersons. Maybe education does not produce experts in stealing horses, but rather experts that maintain the stigmatized status of such (and other) socially undesirable agents. If so, the power of social representations is immense, and understanding the social processes of their use a necessary goal for psychology of social representations.

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