

Comment on Augoustinos and Penny's Paper "Reconciliation in Australia"

Agustín Echebarria Echabe

Department of Social Psychology
The University of the Basque Country
San Sebastian
Spain

The present paper represents an interesting example of the strengths and shortcomings of some approaches within the social representation domain.

Firstly, it informs readers about a real situations in which opposing versions of history are being negotiated in an asymmetric context (a version held by members of a dominated group and a version held by members of the dominant group) and where group identities and interests are involved. The paper acquires special relevance after the increasing support found by the racist One Nation party in the recent Queensland elections. In contrast to the "anodyne" nature of many papers published in the mainstream journals, this paper reflects the social and political compromise that characterises most of the researche carried out in the social representation tradition.

Secondly, the paper exemplifies a serious approach to the role of language in the genesis and change of social representations and common-sense knowledge.

However, it also exemplifies some of the dangers associated with the constructionist approach. The first is the risk of converting the social representation framework in a collection of cases, in a micro-theory of single cases. The second risk is to conceal the historical, material and socio-structural factors underlying discourses. It is largely accepted that discourses and ideologies are constructed either to justify the status-quo and the interests (economic, social and political) of dominant groups or contest the dominant views and urge to change the status-quo (dominated groups). In the study of racism there is a large tradition that routes the origins of modern conceptions of race in the justification of the exploitation carried out by the European countries since de XVII century. Thus, in all the struggles between opposing discourses or versions of "reality", there underlies a conflict of interests, and these interests are "real": economic and social power, status, prestige, etc. A way to escape from the risk of converting social representation approach in a collection of "single cases" is to include history, power and social structural dimensions in the discourse analysis. This inclusion would help us to find regular patterns of discourse and, even, to anticipate forms that discourses could attain depending of the characteristics of the social context in which these

discourses are constructed (i.e. the nature of groups involved in the debate). In the present case, although the need of apologies appears as a conflictive issue, it seems to me that the “land” ownership problem is a constant in the “aborigin problem”. Authors anticipate that they are carrying out additional studies about the social representations of reconciliation” among ordinary people. They also state that there is not a hegemonic representation of reconciliation but conflicting versions. It could be interesting to anticipate that contents (the type of metaphor, linguistic strategies, etc.) of diverse representations and also the probable future of the struggle, if some representations are expected to become hegemonic, etc. Echebarria-Echabe, Guede and Gonzalez (1994) illustrated how the inclusion of intergroup theories in the social representation approach allows to anticipate the structure of social representations.

The latter criticism does not exclude the discourse analysis as a major trend within the social representation tradition. Some researchers have criticised this theory because of its ambiguity and fuzzy nature (it does not look like more traditional theories). Some authors have tried to structure the theory in a more closed way or control the “social representation” label. I think that the strength of the social representation tradition is its open and fuzzy character. It groups a number of researchers around some general principles: the opposition to the over-cognitive emphasis of social psychology mainstream, the hegemony of experiment as the only valid method of research, and the emphasis in the “social” nature of our discipline. These features have attracted social psychologists all around the world. Any attempt of exclusion of any approach within this tradition or appropriation of the social representation “label” would debilitate this strength.

References

- Echebarría-Echabe,A.; Fdez. Guede, E. & Gonzalez,J.L. (1994). Social representations and intergroup conflicts: Who’s smoking here?. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 24, 339-356.