

Defining the Social Context: Reply to Echebarría Echabe

Martha Augoustinos
Sharyn Lee Penny

Department of Psychology
University of Adelaide
South Australia, 5005

Email: martha@psychology.adelaide.edu.au

Echebarría Echabe's reflections on our paper concerning the varied ways in which the concept of 'reconciliation' is being constructed in Australian public life raises important issues in the ongoing study of social representations. In his response, two 'risks' associated with social representations research are identified: (1) the risk of converting the social representations approach to a series of single-case studies; and (2) in utilizing discursive methodologies to study the generation and proliferation of social representations, the risk of ignoring the social and political context within which representations are shaped and formed. We will deal with the second of these concerns first as it is quite central to the issues that we are exploring in our work to date on representations of reconciliation and, more generally, contemporary racist discourse in Australia.

While Echebarría Echabe is sympathetic to our discursive approach, like other critics of discursive psychology he expresses concerns with a social psychological analysis that is restricted to examining language or discourse alone. As such, he urges us to look for underlying mechanisms associated with competing representations and discourses such as group interests, power relationships, and social and political structures. As Margaret Wetherell (1999) has argued, such criticisms usually rest on traditional intellectual binaries that have been constructed between the 'expressive' and 'material' realms of human activity, or the 'discursive' and 'extra-discursive' orders. However, once language and discourse is acknowledged to be constitutive of the social world in which we live (the social context), and as central in everyday reasoning and sense-making, discourse then becomes a social and *material practice*. It is no longer merely reflective of social reality, it is the process and practice through which individuals and groups negotiate this social reality. A more *inclusive* definition of discourse that embraces all signifying practices associated with everyday sense-making, and not just the written or spoken word, avoids such artificial binaries such as the 'discursive' and 'extra-discursive' (Wetherell, 1999).

In this short reply we do not want to be distracted unduly by the on-going debate on ‘realism versus relativism’ that has engaged critical social psychologists (eg., Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997), though ‘where we stand’ in relation to this debate is clearly implied in Echebarría Echabe’s concerns. While we do not subscribe to the view that language is all there is, what has become analytically clear to us in our studies of ‘race’ and reconciliation in Australia is how the social context - reality itself - is a constant object of debate, struggle and conflict between competing and contradictory versions. Thus specifying the precise nature of the historical, social and political context of Australian ‘race’, or intergroup relations can never be a straightforward and ‘disinterested’ account that is independent of our own political position and ideological persuasions. Unlike our positivist colleagues, we acknowledge that our own political commitments and values inform our discursive work. In focusing on discourse then, we are *not* denying the material and worldly aspects of race and intergroup relations, but rather arguing that text and talk around these issues are no more and no less material than other practices.

Despite our reservations in providing a social context that is definitive, impartial and unambiguously ‘true’, we nevertheless recognize the importance of providing *some* context and background to the events surrounding the debates on reconciliation in Australia. For example, Australia’s colonial history is an important historical context within which we have attempted to make sense of our work on the language and discourse of reconciliation. Indeed, we make repeated reference to this historical context in our paper – the Indigenous dispossession of land by the British during colonization, the recent political and legal conflicts over Indigenous entitlement to land, and the history of removal and separation of Indigenous children from their families and communities framed by the policies of racial assimilation. There is little doubt that this history of intergroup relations between a non-Indigenous dominant majority and an Indigenous dominated minority is central to understanding the debates over reconciliation that are occurring in Australia today. However, what our discursive analysis *does* demonstrate is the very problematic and contested nature of this ‘history’ and social context - the competing and conflicting ways in which it is being represented and negotiated. Moreover, we agree that these competing representations are associated with different group interests and subject positions: our analysis demonstrates that Indigenous representations of reconciliation for example, were markedly different from those articulated by the (non-Indigenous) Prime Minister, each served different functions and was associated with different political and social consequences. In so far as the access to power and social influence are markedly different between a federal government and a small Indigenous minority, our analysis enables us to examine how the power to define the social context - a nation’s history and collective identity – impacts differentially on these debates.

One of the strengths of discursive psychology and a social constructionist epistemology is that they allows us to analyse in fine detail, the ways in which these competing versions of ‘reality’ are ‘worked up’, or ‘put together’ through the use of culturally available linguistic resources; how they are mobilized and deployed to argue, explain, justify and persuade; how they are made to appear ‘factual’ or solid; how they are infused with symbolic and nationalist resonance; and what rhetorical and ideological functions they serve. From a discursive perspective these issues become the central analytic focus rather than hypothesized underlying psychological mechanisms or causes within persons and groups.

Returning to Echebarría Echabe’s first concern, that social representation theory is dangerously becoming a “micro-theory of single cases”, we must strongly disagree. Any theory, particularly a grand theory like social representations, must be able to demonstrate its utility through a rigorous *empirical* examination of a range of specific and particular problems

and issues. Borrowing from Margaret Wetherell again, “such an approach focuses attention on practices per se and moments of articulation. It contextualises sensuous activities”(1999, p. 402). This is not to deny the importance of comparative studies, looking for pervasive patterns of discourse across different social contexts and situations. Indeed, our work on racist discourse in Australia was inspired by the work of others such as van Dijk in the Netherlands (1987) and Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) work in New Zealand. Our own work in the Australian social context has demonstrated, for example, that there is a remarkable similarity in the discursive repertoires, rhetorical arguments, and justifications for inequalities between groups that are deployed in everyday talk and political rhetoric that have been found elsewhere around the world. The accumulation of such historically-specific empirical studies has now led to a greater understanding of contemporary racism in liberal democracies, in particular, the way in which it is shaped and articulated within the framework of liberal-egalitarian principles and rhetoric. Likewise, social representations theory has demonstrated its longevity and increasing utility *precisely* because of the empirically-grounded case work in this tradition such as Moscovici’s (1961) work on representations of psychoanalysis, Jodelet’s (1991) work on representations of madness, and Philogene’s work (1994) on representations of the social category, ‘African-American’. We feel that it is crucially important to the development of social representations theory that such empirically grounded, historically-specific research continue.

Like Echebarría Echabe, we share an enthusiasm for social representations research because of its openness to new and creative ways of doing social psychological research that is not stifled by the dogma of positivism, cognitivism and experimentation.

References

- Ibáñez, T. & Íñiguez, L. (1997). (eds). *Critical social psychology*. London: Sage.
- Jodelet, D. (1991). *Madness and social representations*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychoanalyse, son image et son public*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Philogene, G. (1994). ‘African American’ as a new social representation. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 24, 89-109.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1987). *Communicating racism: Ethnic prejudice in thought and talk*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wetherell, M. (1999). Beyond binaries. *Theory & Psychology*, 9, 399-406.
- Wetherell, M. & Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*. Hemel: Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf