

Social Signification And Social Representations

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This commentary briefly explores the importance of discussing the concept of social signification with a semiotic approach and discusses the interesting contribution of Valsiner contained in this special issue. In particular, the issues of personal semiosis, hierarchical structures among signs and the time-dependent nature of signification are very promising. Future directions of theoretical interest are also sketched.

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With its emphasis on symbols and signification, social representations theory has a natural ‘elective affinities’ with semiotics, the study of signs and semiosis, more than any other area of cultural and social psychology. They both share a focus on human sense-making process via signs and symbols. There is, however, a hidden trail in social sciences about the role of signification that reveals it as an important part of theories in psychology, sociology and other social sciences. Concepts like symbol and sign have been part of psychology as a discipline since its emergence, and they still play a crucial role in several social psychological theories. The social nature of signs and symbols and processes of social signification has been an object of reflection

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in early sociology and social psychology, for example in the analysis of shared cultural symbols of Emile Durkheim (1915/1965) or more recently Anne Swidler (1986) of culture as a toolkit for constructing strategies of action. Theorists of language since Cassirer (1953) have recognized the unusual properties of symbolic language in relation to ordinary signification (Boulding, 1956; Burke, 1966; Duncan, 1968; McGee, 1980). Equally important is social signification in semiotics, in particular in the work of Barthes, Greimas (1990), Lotman (1990) and Eco (2000). Psychologist F.C. Bartlett (1925) highlighted the need to distinguish between signs and symbols, stressing multiple significations that characterize the latter as one of the most important social function of the symbols. Other traditions in psychology as well have valued the concept of signification and the role of signs and symbols. Several psychologists in rather different contexts have developed the notion of asymmetrical signification. According to Salvatore & Venuleo (2008), the asymmetrical and symmetrical aspects of signification play a crucial role in Freud's (1923) structural model of the unconscious structure of the mind.

And yet, the role and the process of social signification is referred to very often in SRT, in particular in the context of the process of anchoring and objectification; however, these processes require greater clarification and further theoretical refinement. The main achievement of this special issue is the tackling of such conceptual 'black boxes' and, at the same time, enriching the notion of 'representing' in social representations theory. As proposed by Valsiner's contribution a distinction is needed between social representations of X and social representing through X, a necessary distinction between the outcome and process (or one could argue two different processes). While much has been said about the former, less advanced is the debate about the second. A strong ecological approach to social representations is also necessary as it highlights their dynamic nature and semiosis' goal-orienting function.

Particularly interesting is Valsiner's discussion about the future-oriented nature of social representations and their creation of 'path-dependency' for human conduct but also of the semiosis. From a semiotic perspective, this discussion entails the notion of a semiosis with a temporal (and irreversible) dimension with an interesting differentiation between inhibitor and demolisher signs. The emphasis on the temporal dimension of semiosis is a welcome contribution in a much under-discussed part of the processes of representing and signification. It echoes the work of Van Orden and Holden (2002) on the nested-time scales that characterize human

cognition. They argue that these nested time-scales (i.e., brain, body, and world) interact in a continuously coupled, synergistic fashion. According to this view, mental work cannot be localized at an isolated level because of the extreme degree of interaction and interdependence between levels. Instead, mental work emerges in a generative fashion, over time, out of the continuous interactive couplings among processes that function at different time-scales. Perhaps, also signification should be considered as heterochronic giving the different paces that personal and social semiosis can have.

Personal semiosis is the embodied context of the signification process. Valsiner describes it in terms of an interpretative semiotic approach. Two key elements resonate here with the work of others (in semiotics e.g. Bonfantini) with a similar semiotic approach: the role of the context and the dynamic nature of the process of semiosis. For example, within this dynamic approach connotative meanings should be seen within the communicative act of individuals rather than the simple outcome of a connotative code excluded from the communication flow. The second point is that communicative acts are characterized by 'communicative games'. Communicative games are constituted by the co-presence of several factors: the socio-cultural position in society; the participants in the communication process; the time, the place and 'perceptual situation'; the uttered texts; the relevant texts in the communicative game; the non-linguistic actions. These points give an idea of complexity of a communicative game from a pragmatic point of view. From the perspective of communicative game, signs are constantly in-between the actors involved.

Another interesting theoretical issue discussed in this volume by Valsiner is that communicative games might take place not only in dialogical and social terms (e.g. between social groups) but also at the personal level. The value of introducing hierarchical (also intended as dynamic hierarchies) signs, especially the distinction between inhibitors and demolishers, provides a theoretical understanding to how the potential infinite semiosis occasionally stops and reaches a temporary equilibrium. The hierarchical regulation is another angle on the process of social semiosis that has as outcome social representations that shape inhibitors and demolisher signs and reshuffles them in time.

This special issue constitutes as much-needed discussion about the contribution that semiotics and the notion of semiosis at personal and social levels can provide to social representations theory.

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