Commentary on Re-presenting (and) Cognitive Polyphasia

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INTRODUCTION

The special issue on cognitive polyphasia published in Papers on Social Representations stemmed from the observation that "a closer look at the literature suggests that there exist several slightly different interpretations of the concept" (Provencher, Arthi & Wagner, 2012, Editorial) and aimed at discussing those. While reading some of the papers included in this special issue, namely, the one by Carla Mouro and Paula Castro and the one by Gail Moloney and colleagues, I found it interesting how these seem to offer some of those different interpretations of cognitive polyphasia and thought that it would be interesting to discuss them. In this commentary I intend to discuss how those differing interpretations might provide distinct accounts of people's agency in cognitive polyphasia or of the consequential nature of social re-presentation, that is, what social re-presenting does (Howarth, 2006b). Namely, while Moloney and colleagues seem to endorse a conception of cognitive polyphasia as a product of the context in which a given context

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'switches on' one representation (or dimension of a representation/certain aspects of the representational field) instead of another, Mouro and Castro seem to emphasize a conception of cognitive polyphasia as the expression of the agency of people when dealing with contexts where competing representations are available (see also Jovchelovitch, 1996).

In my view, the differing interpretations of cognitive polyphasia proposed by each of those two papers might be seen as related with their positioning vis-à-vis two different aspects. The first is the extent to which they reject proposals that have been developed in relation to more individualistic socio-psychological perspectives, such as those studying attitudes (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and the associated idea that individuals may act – as isolated individuals - in a reasoned and strategic way. The second concerns their conception of cognitive polyphasia as a mechanism merely to adapt to social change as opposed to a mechanism to support or resist change. In the next section, I will discuss these two dimensions in greater detail and how they are present in those differing interpretations of cognitive polyphasia.

"WHAT WE HAVE TO DO IS TO ANALYSE SPECIFIC RATIONALITIES RATHER THAN ALWAYS INVOKE THE PROGRESS OF RATIONALISATION IN GENERAL"[1]

Social representations theorists have often been critical of the a-social, a-historical, a-political, positivist, individualist and rationalist approaches to knowledge construction, embedded in most other theories within Social Psychology. These other approaches conceive of an individual subject, one "fully endowed with consciousness; an autonomous and stable entity, the 'core' of the self, and the independent, authentic source of action and meaning" (Hall, 1997, p.55), and are

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[1] Foucault, 1982, p. 779/780

thus unable to give accounts of how social, institutional and historical contexts shape knowledge and the very idea of the subject (Hall, 1997; Howarth 2006a; Jovchelovitch, 1996; Moscovici, 1988; see also Farr, 1998 and Foucault, 1982).

Many of those approaches have been developed around the concept of attitude (Howarth, 2006a), such as the Theory of Reasoned Action/Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The history of the theory of social representations is also closely knit with the history of attitude theories because the very definition of social representation – made up of attitudes, beliefs and practices (Moscovici, 1961/76) – was inevitably, as a new epistemological approach, arrived at in relation to the concept of attitude and attitude theories (see Moscovici, 1988; Howarth 2006a). Still currently, the relevance of this discussion for Social Representations Theory is clear – for instance, in their paper in this special issue, Moloney and colleagues (2012, p. 5) state that "we questioned the implicit assumption of a linear relationship between a positive response expressed towards blood donation (I think blood donation is a worthwhile and altruistic act) and the act of donating blood […] Research into blood donation behaviour has typically been within the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which is primarily a predictive model". This assumption of the linear and predictive relationship between attitude and behaviour[2], based on the conception of both attitudes and behaviours as individual-only endeavors and of purely rational and a-social individuals, has then been often criticized, and rightly so, by research on social representation (see also Howarth, 2006a).

Moloney and colleagues (2012) conceptualize then "blood donation as more than an individual's attitude, decision or behavior; rather as a system of values, beliefs and practices" (p. 5), but in their right attempt to reject and overcome the conception of blood donation as an

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[2] Or even the very distinction between attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Wagner, 1994).

individual, rational and logical endeavor as embedded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, the authors seem, at the same time, to dismiss the role of social re-presenting and people's agency within cognitive polyphasia. In fact, Moloney and colleagues' (2012) interpretation of cognitive polyphasia suggests that the "aspects of the heterogeneous representational field of conflicting ideas, values and beliefs about blood donation are differentially accessed depending on the salience of the context at the time" or, in other words, that people will use some or other ideas about blood donation depending on whether context x or y is salient, and therefore that when context x is salient people will not use ideas or discourses they would use if context y was salient. This seems to suggest then that with cognitive polyphasia it is a matter of different ideas or rationalities being "switched on" at different times (see Howarth, 2001) – or, as Moloney and colleagues put it, "that it is the contextual salience, at any one time, which elicits aspects of the representational fields" (2012, p. 4) – and not that actually those different ideas and related inter-subjectivities "intertwine and define each other" (Howarth, 2001, p. 152). In other words, this conception of cognitive polyphasia seems to close the space for the possibility of social agents to – through their relationship and dialogue with others - strategically draw on and construct the contradictory rationalities or discourses available in a given context, for accomplishing particular social actions or pursuing specific political projects, instead of others (Billig, 1987).

However, in the last years, some authors and lines of research discussing attitude theories – namely, applying them to the study of environmental issues – have been highlighting and criticizing precisely the fact that attitudes rarely have a direct relation with behaviour (e.g., Stern, 2000; Owens & Driffill, 2008). Associated with that, the possibility for people to hold different (socially constructed) beliefs and attitudes towards a given object, that is, to be ambivalent and

aware of it (Castro et al., 2009)[3] started to be recognized and examined, and the idea that ambivalence can entail a more deliberate process about how to act regarding an object has been proposed (Castro et al., 2009).

More importantly though, acknowledging that social agents can actively and strategically draw on some beliefs or discourses instead of others in a given situation does not imply considering agency as an expression of individuals defined as "a rational transparent entity able to convey a homogeneous meaning on the total field of her conduct by being the source of her actions" (Mouffe, 2000, p.146) - as Chantal Mouffe puts it in her definition and criticism of the dominant and neo-liberal conception of the (individual) subject. Instead, and within a social representations approach, it highlights precisely how "re-presentation, and therefore resistance, can only occur in dialogue with others, even if these are 'generalized' others, in contexts and communities where there are competing narratives and competing interests at stake" (Howarth, 2004, p. 371) – or, in other words, how re-presentation is argumentative, that is, while putting forward a certain version of objects or events, people are at the same time undermining plausible alternatives (Billig, 1987).

What interests me here then are the possibilities given, within Moloney and colleagues' interpretation of the concept of cognitive polyphasia, to social agents arguing (Moscovici, 1988; Billig, 1987), in their relation with the Other, about their beliefs and actions[4] and to their ability, in contexts where "there are competing narratives and competing interests at stake" (Howarth, 2004, p.371), to draw on a given representation (or dimension of a representation), instead of another. If we assume that people can be aware of the different rationalities, representations or

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[3] Part of this research has precisely been informed by proposals from Social Representations Theory (see Castro, 2006; also Bechtel, Verdugo & Pinheiro, 1999).
[4] This is not to say that people's practices are not guided as well by emotions and the unconscious (Mouffe, 2000).

dimensions of a representation that are available in a given situation, then we must consider that they might draw on some instead of others depending on their political and inter-subjective projects in a given context – even if obviously the possibilities for that to happen will be shaped by that context and how it constraints the possibilities for different 'rationalities' to be used by specific groups, as it will be further discussed in the next section.

In fact, if we now have a look at other definitions of cognitive polyphasia, we see that there seems to exist other rather different interpretations of it. For instance, Claudine Provencher (2011), while describing cognitive polyphasia, states that "individuals are viewed as having (…) agency over the ideas, types of knowledge and beliefs they want to use to make sense of their world" (p. 379; see also Renedo & Jovchelovitch, 2007). Obviously, in my view, these types of knowledge and beliefs individuals 'want' to use will depend on the contexts individuals are embedded in and, namely, the social groups and institutions constraining those spatio-temporal contexts (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). However, I also think that we need to be clearer when we talk about this relation, because the context here is (at least…) double-edged – it is what is there beforehand and it is what social agents (can) make out of it - depending on the power relations defining that context. In fact, it is the explicit acknowledgment of this latter appraisal of context, allowing the possibility for people to be agentic and strategic in the representations they use in certain situations, that highlights the importance of social representations as an epistemology (Marková, 1996). In other words, it highlights the active role of individuals and groups in knowledge construction, as well as the consequential nature of social re-presentations – or that social re-presenting has consequences. As Howarth (2006b, p. 77) puts it "knowledge is never disinterested: it is always actively constructed by social agents who speak from different positions and who have different 'social stakes' in maintaining and/or challenging the hegemonic

representations that invade their realities". And these are precisely some of the crucial points where SRT distinguishes itself from attitude theories and reveals their fallacies – by not taking the context as a given and thus exploring the fact that individuals in/and groups, through communication and discourse, may influence the nature of the context and vice versa (Howarth, 2006a).

In my view then, focusing on cognitive polyphasia as conflicting dimensions of representations that are "differentially accessed depending on the salience of the context at the time" (Moloney et al., 2012, this issue) seems to endorse a perspective of cognitive polyphasia only as a product and a process of the context, something which happens to happen to individuals/groups. Next, I will discuss how other alternative interpretations of cognitive polyphasia contest that perspective of it.

THE AGENCY OF INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS IN ADAPTING TO CHANGE, AND IN RESISTING OR SUPPORTING IT

According to Moloney and colleagues (2012), cognitive polyphasia is defined as "the differential use of [distinct] modes of knowledge to make sense of an issue" (p. 2). This presentation of cognitive polyphasia, entangled in the common definition of what is a social representation and what is the main function it serves, presents it as a process which allows individuals to cope with and adapt to change. This, in turn, is related with the very context of the development of the theory of social representations which views social representations as the process and the result of individuals' and groups' symbolic coping with change (Wagner, 1994; Wagner et al., 2002) and, particularly, as common sense's way of actively and strategically appropriate new scientific

knowledge to "feel at home, secure from any risk of friction or strife" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 24) in their everyday lives.

Some of the studies that have discussed cognitive polyphasia have also shown that polyphasia could be observed in contexts of cultural change, as a way for individuals and groups to actively adapt to change, by combining old and new practices (e.g., Gervais & Jovchelovitch, 1998; Wagner et al., 1999). These studies thus reinforce the adaptive character of cognitive polyphasia and, in this vein, also highlight the agency of groups and individuals in dealing with change. In other words, they highlight how social representations respond to the spatio-temporal contexts where we find ourselves and how the way in which they do so is informed by the groups to which we belong to and the social context in which we are embedded.

However, we must not forget that individuals and groups can also be agentic in actively resisting (or supporting) change (e.g., Castro & Batel, 2008; Mouro & Castro, 2012), and not only in adapting to it. In other words, the hybridization of representational fields which characterizes cognitive polyphasia may not only be instrumental for assimilating in practices old and new ways of doing, and to perform those depending on the context (Gervais & Jovchelovitch, 1998; Wagner et al., 1999) – it can also be instrumental for actively resisting change while, for instance, functioning for maintaining ideas and practices un-coordinated (see Castro & Batel, 2008; see also Moloney & Walker, 2002). In other words, it can also be instrumental for 'choosing' between different ideas and practices to promote or resist change, to promote or resist given inter-subjective and political projects.

This becomes very clear in the research I have conducted with Paula Castro regarding experts' resistance to the changes proposed by new public engagement laws (Castro & Batel, 2008; Batel & Castro, 2009). We have analysed a specific controversy regarding an urban
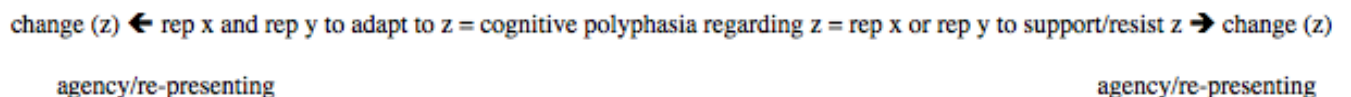
rehabilitation decision-making process, in which the responsible experts did not actively involve the affected citizens. The analyses of interviews conducted with those experts showed that, on one side, and when talking about public participation in general, they would agree with it as citizens who will also eventually need to make use of those laws. But, on the other side, when talking about the specific controversy under discussion, they would instead defend and use their professional identity to argue that in that specific decision-making process there should be no participation, because they were the ones to know what the best decision was, and not community members. In other words, when it comes to concrete decision-making processes that involve them as professionals of urban rehabilitation, these experts are still able to protect the existing power positions and exclude community members from the decision-making processes affecting them, while reifying their position as experts in their relation with community members (Batel & Castro, 2009). In turn, the reification-like communication used by the experts, at the same time as their 'identity shifting' and representational hybridity, are clearly used and performed in a strategic way (Batel & Castro, 2009), which simultaneously allows them to maintain their old practices and associated power relations with the community but without blatantly doing it, due to the normative proposals regarding public participation laws (e.g., Aarhus Convention, 1998).

In other words, representation – and/or their dimensions (Moloney et al., 2012) – is action, capable of 'doing' things in the world, that is, of performing certain functions (Howarth, 2006b). And, in my view, the very work of Moloney and colleagues (e.g., 2002) gives an account precisely of how people do resist change regarding blood donation and are agentic and strategic in that. Acknowledging this is even more important if we consider that it allows us to, on one hand, uncover how agency and subversion, or the capability to use different rationalities or representations, can be limited or enhanced by specific power relations, institutional

arrangements or other normative practices and discourses and, through that, contribute to slow down or accelerate change. And, on the other hand, to also consider that, nevertheless, unequal social relations and dominant representations can be challenged and contested by social agents, collectively (see Howarth, 2004; 2006b).

In sum, and as put forward by Mouro & Castro in their paper in this special issue (and suggested before by other authors - see Gervais & Jovchelovitch, 1998; Provencher, 2011), there is an alternative interpretation of cognitive polyphasia which conceives it as "clearly more an issue of social re-presenting than of social representations" (Mouro & Castro, 2012, p. 2), and which assumes that different *knowledges* can be "used by individuals and groups for choosing among available practices, making sense of their relationships or justifying their everyday options in contexts of innovation and change" (Ibid, p. 4), that is, either for supporting or for resisting it (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Relation between people's agency and cognitive polyphasia

change (z) ⬅ rep x and rep y to adapt to z = cognitive polyphasia regarding z = rep x or rep y to support/resist z ➡ change (z)

agency/re-presenting   agency/re-presenting

DISCUSSION

In my view, the value and potentialities of the notion of cognitive polyphasia as proposed within the Theory of Social Representations lie precisely in the fact that it is a main example of people's agency in re-presenting, and how their versions of the world are constrained, potentiated or resisted by the various social contexts in which they are embedded, at several levels (Renedo &

Jovchelovitch, 2007). In other words, and while highlighting the importance to examine subjectivities and representational projects for understanding the relation between change and stability in contemporary societies, the notion of cognitive polyphasia allows Social Representations Theory to distinguish itself from other theories that would conceive of these processes as cognitive, individual, rational, and universal ones.

It might be then useful in the future, and as suggested by Mouro & Castro (2012), to focus further on the role played by emancipated representations in social representation, as these are the ones that "sustain the negotiation of meaning by the everyday, subtle, battle of interpretations" (p. 18) and might therefore help us to better understand the role of cognitive polyphasia in social re-presenting. Also, it might be worth to think about discursive polyphasia (Wagner, 2007; see also Provencher, 2011) instead of cognitive polyphasia, if we are to consider that "representations are inextricably bound to the social context of their elaboration (cit. Wagner et al 2000)" but that they are also bound to the social context of their use.

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