

People in Action and Social Representation: A Comment on Jaan Valsiner's (2003) "Theory of Enablement"

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This comment on Valsiner's (2003) theory of enablement appreciates the theory's contribution to fill the lacuna of social representation theory in dealing with individual reasoning and behaviour through a mechanism of semiotic mediation. It is shown, however, that the experimental illustration of the theory falls slightly short of providing evidence for the claims. In re-interpreting the experiment it is argued that action justification and social representation is one and the same, that social representations in the public sphere appear as holistic in comprising mental content as well as behaviour and that representational change comes about through collective controversy instead of semiotic mediation through internal dialogue as suggested by the author.

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Goal-directed action in everyday life is primarily about social and not about physical survival. If physical survival depends on the correctness of decisions directing action, then there is no trying. Actions which are meant to safeguard social survival are different. In many cases, such actions are repeatable, changeable, indeed retractable to a degree (by apology, for example). When people practice their everyday life, their situation is fundamentally different from contemplation where erroneous thoughts can be corrected without consequence, that is, social action is not cognitive sports and puzzle solving; each and every action affects people positively or negatively. In the course of everyday life there is also a constant necessity of taking verbal or overt action; social life entails an action imperative (Wagner, 1994a). In fact, people want to succeed and not to fail in their actions and they are well-advised to be confident in doing the right thing, that is, to attain an unequivocal behaviour orientation (Jones and Gerard, 1967). To attain this orientation there is a manifold of heuristics ranging

from selectively consulting confirmatory information to searching consensus or projecting it onto a reference community (cf. Marks & Miller, 1987; Wagner & Gerard, 1983). In the majority of regularly occurring situations people act within a complex of social representation, which do not require much further reflection because they are vehicles carrying knowledge as well as consensus and therefore they play a role in people's ability to master social action.

In his paper "Beyond social representations: A theory of enablement" Valsiner (2003) addresses these issues. He argues that cultural tools such as signs, representations, knowledge, etc. serve as instruments for coping with the uncertainty of the immediate future. In using these tools, people bridge the past and the future, in the sense of putting social and cultural knowledge to use *for* the future, which enables them to act. Acting on this basis is, of course, constrained because the constructions of the past may have limited value under new conditions. As a consequence, cultural tools undergo change.

As an illustration of his theses, the author presents a study where subjects were asked to "shoot" at images with a video-game gun. The images were either "socially neutral" like a bull's eye target or not-so-neutral, that is, showing faces of regular people or a Ku-Klux-Klan member or Adolf Hitler. These latter images were meant to impose a "meaning block" to the action sequence where the subjects were required to tell or record what comes to their mind. What the subjects told in this situation were a host of representations relating to the images as well as reasoning drawing on the representations that justified either "shooting" or not.

Valsiner's (2003) "theory of enablement" is a stimulating thought and delves into the subjective micro-management of new situations. In drawing on social representation theory he suggests an extension to the dynamics and change of representations. His theoretical presentation is a step towards understanding how the collective level of social representations articulates with individual acting and reasoning. The message of Valsiner's empirical study, however, is ambiguous with regard to the theory and I will restrict my comment to the experiment's implications. I will bear on two aspects that differ slightly from Valsiner's (2003) interpretation: First, I want to argue that social representations are holistic in the sense of comprising thoughts, feelings, action *and* their justification instead of being a purely mental entity, and, second, that the engine of change is not internal dialogue resulting from the tension between opposite representations, but from social controversy.

Action and justification

I agree elsewhere (Wagner, 1997) with Valsiner (2003) on the issue that in social practice individuals rarely believe and act without implicitly or explicitly consulting the available social and cultural wisdom, that is, the shared knowledge and belief systems of the group they belong to. This pool of explicit knowledge, i.e. cultural models, social representations and other cultural tools, delimit a kind of rationality which is defined by the consensus of a respective group. It embraces all collective everyday knowledge about real or imaginary things, which can be the object of social discourse in a social unit. Group members would consider any action or belief as irrational in their common understanding if it deviated from the system of properly interpretable beliefs; that is, if a person, in order to make him or herself understood by other people of the same group, fails in his or her appeal to the collectively shared knowledge system, he or she probably will be declared irrational or dumb. In the case of failure the person very likely used arguments which were not part of the locally valid rational system.

Besides providing knowledge *about* the world these shared folk-beliefs first and foremost are knowledge *for* the world by admitting certain kinds of action and excluding others. Social

action also has the inescapable consequence that it nearly always requires justification. Imagine asking your friend why she bought a sweater the other day. If she answered "*I have no idea why I bought it*" or "*Well, it just happened that I bought this sweater, it doesn't mean anything*", you probably will doubt the mental state of your friend. Saying that she bought the sweater because of *thinking something* or *wanting it* is quite a different thing. It is an everyday-political statement reaffirming that she is a sensible and proper person in control of herself, or, in other words, a rational person. In every group one needs to give good reasons to account properly for behaviour (Dray, 1985).

However, not any justification suffices to convince you of your friend's sensibleness. It clearly would not suffice if she said that she bought the sweater because she has dreamed that "*Yemanja*" (an Afro-Brazilian Goddess) told her to do so. The representation of *Yemanja* appearing in dreams is certainly not part of the social rationality in local worlds except in Brazil and Africa. A good reason would be to say that she bought the sweater because yesterday she learned from the magazine "*Cosmopolitan*" that this sweater is exactly the right fashion for the next winter season. The desire and the need to conform to the latest trends in fashion is accepted wisdom in a consumerist society. Her appeal to the shared representation of clothing and fashion is likely to make a lot of sense to you and to see your friend as proper and sensible. Your friend succeeded in her appeal to your shared knowledge. She presented herself as a sensible person and not as a lunatic, and succeeds in the social game of justifying her actions and interactions in a way that appeals to, and therefore is accepted by her fellow group members. It goes without saying that the "games" of taking or rejecting responsibilities, i.e. stating "*I did Y because I thought or intended X*", have been objectified in the institutions and ritual procedures of politics, justice, psychiatry and everyday life.

The social pressures towards accounting for one's actions make it necessary that the system of socially rational beliefs be supplemented by a system of conceptual instruments allowing action justification. That is, we need concepts relating our doings to our beliefs in order to succeed in inter-personal politics. This conceptual system is basically a system of folk-psychological terms. An important folk-psychological term for presenting oneself as a sensible person is "intention". One needs to give good reasons when asked why one did *X* in a given situation and above all one needs to maintain that *X* was intended and not accidental if one wishes to be taken seriously as a person. The family of folk-psychological concepts subsumed under the headings of "motivation", "desire" and "emotion" play this role in everyday discourse and practice. "Motive-words are rhetorical devices inserted into our discourse to show ourselves in a good light as rational beings in control of ourselves and our destiny" (Harré, 1990, p. 116). Folk-psychological thinking used in everyday folk-politics is culturally constituted and therefore relatively stable socially rational knowledge. This means that the idea of motivation and emotion as an internal conscious or subconscious agency is culturally constituted and rarely negotiable.

The subjects in Valsiner's experiment are in a similar situation as our fictive person justifying her shopping. They are required to act ("shooting" vs. not "shooting") and to describe their thoughts to the experimenter either directly or via a recording device. What the subjects tell in describing their thoughts about "shooting" at meaning-laden targets—instead of at a bull's eye, for example—is two things at the same time: On one hand they mention some socially significant meaning evoked by the target, that is the representational content—by "consulting past memory" (p. 7.6)—and on the other hand they report an internal dialogue, as the author calls it, where auxiliary meanings are derived and elaborated, which, at the end, constitute the subject's justification of doing one or the other thing. The author implies that in the process of pondering their "shooting" or not—that is, in the internal dialogue between any "shooting" impulse and the subjects' consciousness as peaceful citizens—the subjects

construct a semiotic mediator as a tool for pre-adaptation to the immediate future (i.e. “shooting” or not).

Reading the experiment’s transcripts I suspect that this is not what is happening. The reason for my suspicion is that in the experimental situation there are actually two action components: One obvious action, i.e. “shooting” or not, and an action implied by the design but not part of the analysis. This latter action is the fact that subjects are required to *make their thoughts public* to the experimenter. Making one’s thoughts public in telling to a stranger is a challenging action by itself that is part of quite another representational system than the shooting issue; it is about *public statements and social affordance*.

The subjects faced a situation where their most private thoughts—and thoughts about shooting are very private—were to be made public, which in fact meant to confront a stranger who might question the moral integrity of the subject. I strongly suspect that Valsiner’s subjects, if not required to make their thoughts public, would hesitate little in “shooting” because the laboratory and video-game situation exempted them from any responsibility. Hence, any utterance made in this situation bears the mark of debating their moral standing and not the mark of internal dialogue. This is precisely as in the aforementioned fictive shopping example where any justification the shopper gives to her friends is not an exteriorisation of internal dialogue, but the simple act of *giving good reasons for her doing* to other people. In my reading and analysis of the experimental design, hence, I see the experimental situation impregnated with the effects of publicity and social affordance and few traces of internality where the “tension between two sub-fields” (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.5, Figure 1) creates meaning through (internal) dialogue.

My comment so far refers to the experimental material, which, in my opinion, does not provide evidence for Valsiner’s thesis. This does not mean, however, that private negotiations or dialogues do not occur in similar situations and where people are not required to go public. Although I am not aware of any methodology that would allow tapping private thoughts without simultaneously interfering with them, personal experience is a weak, but at least anecdotal evidence.¹ Therefore I embrace Valsiner’s account of how actors are enabled to act through semiotic mediators as long as it is not a routine situation. I doubt, however, that these experiences regularly lead to signs with a more than momentary lifespan. Change in cultural tools such as social representations, I maintain, is not driven by internal dialogue but by collective controversy.

Social representations emerge and change through controversy

Several studies provide evidence that social representations with a clearly defined structure can only be observed in situations of debate, a point that Moscovici repeatedly makes (e.g. Moscovici, 1988). We showed, for example, that in countries living in peace, <peace> and <war> are *not* two complementary representations with a tension between them (as one might logically expect), but that only <war> can be considered a social representation because this topic is controversial and regularly populates the headlines of mass-media. Where the desirable condition of peace exists and where it is not a social problem, the ideas of what peace is are *derivatives* from the representation of war. Only in countries with virulent conflict and unrest, where both, war and peace, constitute a frequent topic of debate and

¹ Exactly while writing this comment I experienced such a process of internal dialogue where the regular course of acting suddenly did not appear to be opportune under the given (non-regular) condition. After a few seconds of “talking to myself” I changed the plan to fit my secondary concerns. This experience followed exactly Valsiner’s account.

media reporting, both representations exist in a well-structured and socially shared form (Wagner, Valencia & Elejabarrieta, 1996). Based on this evidence I suspect that representations about logically complementary issues exist only as an exception and not as a rule. If this is the case, Valsiner's (2003) example of health and illness (un-health) as a "unity of opposites within a dialogical whole" (p. 7.4) does not hold. We would not want to see internal dialogue as a response to the heterogeneity in social representations or between logical opposites (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.13, theses 6 and 7), but as the process whereby a subject, by drawing on social representations, *privately* negotiates his or her adaptation to an immediate future in a micro-variable social environment, as Valsiner states in thesis three. Perhaps I am missing Valsiner's point, but dialogicality and subjective semiotic mediators as a psychic process, in my opinion, plays a *temporary* role in personal adaptation and only in very rare cases may "become organized in complexes that may communicable across persons and generations" (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.13, thesis 5) as social representations.

Let me draw on our analysis of the enactment of witchcraft in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" (Wagner & Mecha, 2003) to show how divergent private interests co-construct collective events. There we show that the construction of social facts, that is representations called "witchcraft", proceeds relatively independent of the participating individuals' primary motivations. The entire fabric of collective events in the village of Salem drives the story irrespective of individuals who may reject or embrace the idea of witchcraft in accordance with their subjectively derived personal interests and motivations such as greed, jealousy, hatred or self-righteousness. It is remarkable that, even if some villagers doubted the existence of witchcraft and rejected the very idea at the beginning of the play, their conversations carried the mark of the representation. Both, affirming and negating the existence of an issue, presupposes a shared understanding of it. Through their talk the villagers unwittingly carried the story to its second, institutionalised, stage which condensed the idea of witchcraft to its reified institutional representation and its brute entailments. The resulting fear and terror of prosecution and execution was certainly not part of the villagers' thinking about witchcraft before the court had been set up. This study shows how subjects and their diverse interests, or semiotic mediators, motivate them to divergent behaviours, which nevertheless co-construct the witch hunt. The dynamics of the collective events turns out to be relatively independent of their particular motivations.

Representations appear as *mens cum actio*

The cultural practice of accounting for action is an appeal to the particular shared representation that is being enacted in a particular situation, precisely because it is the representation and its shared understanding that makes action intelligible within a group. By its very existence, any representation comprises the a-priori reason and the a-posteriori rationalisation of behaviour, making behaviour reasoned action. In other words, action and accounting is the social representations going public in words and deeds. In Valsiner's experiment both, the auxiliary meanings and the representation, are so tightly linked to the ensuing action that it is impossible to disentangle reason from rationalisation. This is not a methodological shortcoming but an intrinsic characteristic of social representations, which allows to conclude that meaning and knowledge structures such as social representations are only conceivable as holistic units encompassing mental content *and* overt behaviour. Just as representations render "things" intelligible to members of groups, so they render actions intelligible to group members. "Representations, as Moscovici emphasises, are always the representations of someone or some group, and the practices which form part of such representations are also always the meaningful actions of someone or some group." (Duveen,

1994, p. 4) There is little analytic and practical sense in separating one from the other and it is certainly not justified to consider representational knowledge as a “cause” of action; doing so, provokes the “fallacy of misplaced intentionality” (Wagner, 1994b).

In being a social construct from the past, representations *cum* actions have attained and proven validity *for* the future and it is a good reason for people to project consensus when facing an immediate action, as mentioned in the introductory paragraph. Precisely because they have been elaborated in controversial discourse, because they are being shared in a group and because they are part and parcel of ongoing communication, social representations are a bridge from the past to the future, which in most everyday cases repeats the past with slight variations. Therefore they constrain the variety of actions and at the same time liberate the actor from the effort of always pondering new solutions. This is the representations’ built-in (conservative) time dimension so vividly illustrated by Duveen’s (2001) analysis of gender development and by Moghaddam’s (2002, cit. in Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.13) anecdote on girls’ dressing codes.

Conclusion

My comments primarily refer to the empirical part of his paper that, in my opinion, is not, in fact, an illustration of the theory. However, articulating individual behaviour and social representations on the theoretical level is a challenging task where Valsiner’s theory of enablement makes a timely contribution, and it has many layers of argument that cannot be appreciated in detail here. The creation of signs as semiotic mediators between the cultural-collective level of social representing and the individual level of subjectivity is a promising step and should be investigated in future research, despite the inherent problems in translating the theory into empirical procedures. For a long time social representation theory has tacitly been used to explain individual performance without detailing the process, a lacuna that Valsiner promises to cover.

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