

The Externalization-Internalization Deadlock in Social Representation Theory and Experimental Social Psychology: A Comment on Jaan Valsiner (2003)

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Many European social psychologists consider *theoretical fragmentation and reductionism* to be serious problems in experimental social psychology: too many unrelated theories based on laboratory outcomes for explaining too many phenomena and behaviors. In a sense, Social Representation Theory might be considered as one of the new approaches to social behavior set up to overcome both reductionism and explanatory fragmentation in social psychology. After describing what could be the core of the dilemma causing theoretical fragmentation in experimental social psychology, I argue that Social Representation Theory also suffers from an analogous problem, i.e., a fragmented universe of social representations. Subsequently, the static and dynamic facets of Social Representations are considered in relation to their respective heuristic limits. Next, I attempt to stress some difficulties due to extending the macro-genetic or cultural level of Social Representations to the micro-genetic or psychological level. Finally, I outline two possible solutions for conciliating Social Representation Theory with experimental social psychology

Introduction

In a recent article entitled “Beyond social representations: A theory of enablement”, Jaan Valsiner (2003) attempts to extend Social Representation Theory (SRT) to personal thinking. In all probability, Valsiner’s scientific effort derives from the Vygotsky’s views on the cultural origin of human mental functioning (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). Indeed, Valsiner

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considers social representations (SRs) as meaning complexes that engender macro-level cultural constraints on human conduct, which in turn “lead to the generation of the micro-level constraints that guide particular thought, feeling, and acting processes” (Valsiner, 2003). Although the importance of the culture in shaping and affecting human mental functioning is not addressed here, Valsiner’s account may resemble the idea that social and cultural processes (i.e., SRs) almost mechanistically determine individual processes (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). However, Valsiner’s (2003) contribution is a valuable one in that it represents a grand effort to address Vigotsky’s opinion that mind extends beyond the skin, thus entailing human interactions and culture. Nevertheless, Valsiner considers SRT to be a good theoretical stance to address Vigotsky’s hypothesis. It is this confidence in SRT that is put into question here along with further epistemological dilemma in psychological research.

Social Representation at Stake

In replying to Jahoda’s criticisms (1988) toward the state of affairs of SRT, Moscovici (1988) insisted on considering social psychology as a social science, along with anthropology, history and sociology, with experimentalism playing only a marginal contribution in improving the field of knowledge. Moreover, he reaffirmed his stance against the attitude of most social psychologists who strive for a discipline where rigorous concept definitions and experimentalism prevail. He considered meaningfulness to be a better criterion for judging a theory than theoretical precision.

Even though Moscovici’s remarks are undoubtedly fitting in some aspects (e.g., the complexity of the research field and the theoretical fragmentation in Experimental Social Psychology), it does not mean that SRT stands for a way out of the limits that Moscovici imputes to experimental social psychology. In my opinion, SRT as well as experimental social psychology suffer from an unavoidable epistemological dilemma in their research areas. In the present paper, I will attempt to show the limitations of SRT and experimental social psychology in their respective contributions. Afterward, I will focus my argumentation more extensively on the SRT’s macro-genetic and micro-genetic perspectives and its reluctance to allow theoretical predictions. I will conclude by outlining two possible routes to improving SRT’s scientific contribution.

Which Scientific Domain Are We Talking About?

Far from disciplines that can rely on mathematically-based theorizing and measurement, social psychology must be content to use mathematics for gathering significant data (e.g., statistics), which then are used to build up theories based on reliable linguistic statements (i.e., hypotheses). Contrary to what happens in physics or in biology, mathematics is hardly usable to describe social psychological laws. But what is the main advantage of using mathematics? It is sensible to consider mathematics as a very special tool for describing both spatial relationships and quantities, which are two important properties of our tangible world. Hence, mathematics is a powerful way to bolster linguistic descriptions of the tangible world. Some four hundred years ago, Galileo defined himself as a “geometrical philosopher”, since he made use of geometry to sustain his reasoning. Galileo’s thinking (1632) was based on empirical observations coupled with their geometrical representations: It was the latter aspect that gave Galileo his fame, since those raw representations allowed him either to make predictions or to argue his stance by mathematics. Galileo is a good case in exemplifying how geometry, i.e. a spatial discipline by definition, comes to be important in the investigation of our tangible world. In summary, (1) the world of objects is, first of all, a physical one (esp.

spatial), and (2) disciplines that investigate phenomena occurring among tangible objects take advantage of mathematics because they stand for a reliable language for describing spatial relationships. An object here, so to say, can be mathematically proved to affect an object there.

The state of affairs in disciplines such as human psychology is completely different because of the lack of spatial dimensionality. The *psychological world* is a non-spatial one in which mathematics cannot help to describe the phenomena. On the one hand, we assume a phenomenological domain (human subjective experiences) to exist and want to investigate it scientifically (to discover salient relationships among its objects or components). On the other hand, the way we define that domain and its objects is almost completely based on language (i.e., scientific statements), and to some extent philosophical consensus (i.e., the agreement on what is or is not salient) among scientists. This is not the whole story because ESP is said to look for *significant empirical support*. As far as psychologists can agree on some “human experience” such as altruism, violence, or empathy, they can profit from making that experience “objectified” at a behavioral level (i.e., operationalization). Once an experience is based on well-defined behaviors, psychologists can investigate it experimentally in order to get significant empirical support.

The general idea is that empirical support (i.e., the way we make the experience to be a spatial one or externalized) stands for a psychological law or fact, which, in turn, underlines our experience. Whether the experience is defined by social consensus (e.g., altruism, persuasion, and aggression) or a phenomenological approach (e.g., becoming aware of what is going on in the stream of consciousness), it does not really make a difference. In both cases psychologists face the scientific deadlock of externalizing that experience. It is this externalization phase that causes the scientific fragmentation in social psychology, i.e. the difficulty of relating together the theories and psychological facts developed. For instance, to track down the relationship among altruism, aggression, and self-awareness or persuasion becomes a very difficult issue. Someone could even say that these are incomparable phenomena. Yet, I do not think other scientific disciplines reason in this way because, for instance, it is theoretically very salient for a physicist to shed light on the relationship between general relativity and the gravity. When psychologists connect some behaviors to psychological processes, reasoning in an externalized way, then it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to use the same “spatial approach” for understanding the relationship among the psychological laws or facts. For example, how can we determine the relationship among theories about the self (self-awareness, self-enhancement, self-persuasion, self-verification, self-preoccupation, and so on), attitudes, prejudice, cooperation, and depression? Likely this is also the reason why basic psychology has finally adopted something similar to a geographical map of the mind (e.g., memory, attention, perception, and language) that could potentially rely on some anatomical evidence. In this case, any behavioral pattern (it does not really matter how meaningless it is) must eventually be proved at a physical level.²

To my knowledge, Lewin (1936) was the first who explicitly raised the spatial issue in psychology. With his *topological approach*, he tried to work out a psychology where spatial relationships and mathematics were used to describe and explain the psychological happenings. Currently Lewin’s monumental work is almost completely forgotten apart from

² Even though this approach seems to be much more science-oriented, I have some doubts: The more a phenomenon is physical, the less its theory is psychological.

the classical formula B (behavior) = P (person) x S (situation), which is a minuscule part of Lewin's theoretical universe. I am far from knowing whether Lewin's attempt was the right one to solve the externalization problem in psychology, but it is striking that he guessed the relevance of the question.

Insofar as we think that psychology is a discipline where spatial descriptions are useful, we cannot solve the fragmentation issue. Of course if people want to know how to persuade others or change attitudes toward something, theories developed into the experimental social psychology framework can give some clues, and the problem about how to interrelate these facts in a well-ordered manner becomes secondary. On the contrary, authors who think that social psychology must be a theoretically-coherent field will keep on considering explanatory fragmentation to be a serious problem.

How SRT Deals with the Fragmentation Issue

The SRs approach is said to offer a theoretical perspective that enables social psychology to solve the fragmentation problem by deriving most of the human behaviors from a single meaningful theory, i.e. SRT. From this perspective, the way that socio-cultural knowledge is organized and transferred into human mind is the theoretical cornerstone to understanding social behavior. People communicate among themselves so as to construct and represent their worlds which is considered to be a social one. Despite the objectivity of the factual environment, a major role in describing human behavior is associated with the way in which we humans give meaning to things (both factual and social). Although this long-existing idea looks very "psychological" (i.e., *humans deal with meanings*), the SRT authors reason that the way meaning is attributed to things depends almost completely on SRs, which are considered to be either an outcome (the static facet) or a process (the dynamic or developmental facet) operating among people who live in a particular socio-cultural setting. Hence, SRT deals above all with the interpersonal aspects of human communication. In other words, in order to understand what is the psychological area of human behavior, social psychologists should better take a higher perspective on the problem: The way a culture represents the world to itself is the most important determinant in constraining and leading human behavior.

When Socio-Cultural Knowledge Becomes a Network of Social Objects. At first glance, SRT stands for an anti-fragmentation approach for studying social behavior. Indeed, just one theory, Social Representation Theory, is used in the literature to which I refer for describing most of human behaviors. Social Representations "concern the contents of everyday thinking and stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe... they are a network of interacting concepts and images whose contents evolve continuously over time and space" (Moscovici, 1988). SRs are conceivable as theories-in-progress that lead human behavior at the individual, group, and societal level. Therefore, we are led to think that we can learn about human behavior by describing this *super-network* of cultural knowledge. For instance, knowing the SR about *the Internet* or about *shotgun* in a particular culture should be important in our understanding of how people behave in the Internet or when dealing with guns. However, there is a "spatial problem" here as well. Let's consider the shotgun example. How can we be sure of which SR lies beneath the investigated social behavior? Which should be the ultimate SR guiding or causing the behavioral pattern of shooting something or someone? Is it the SR of murder, human justice, guilt, human rights, or something else? At one end of the dimension, we may find an SR that is very close to the social-behavior (e.g., shooting someone), while we may find a super category (e.g., love, peace, and fraternity) or, even worse, a super dichotomy (e.g., good-bad) at the other end. In any case, and independent

of which level we choose, there are deep epistemological problems. In its lowest form, SR risks being a tautological explanation (e.g., people shoot because they represent shooting as “X” or “Y”), whereas at the dichotomy level, SR looks like the Heraclitus’s opposites theory: an old-fashioned reductionism for representing the phenomenological flow of the universe. The question is that the number of possible SRs leading one social behavior is potentially endless.

Even if we grant, for the sake of the argument, that is possible to find an actual SR for describing a distinct social behavior, how can this SR be related with others in order to describe our super-cultural-network of meanings? Here the spatial issue pops out again, stronger than ever, since only an arbitrary socio-philosophical standpoint seems to be applicable. One could say that someday very powerful software will be employed in organizing the already studied SRs among themselves. But, I do not think that this software will be objective. Someone must prearrange the way that weights are distributed on the network links and eventually we will find some arbitrary choice, maybe politically oriented. Finally, SRT necessarily results in a non-theoretical fragmentation due to a limitless universe of SRs vaguely and arbitrarily related.

For those who believe that human behavior could be well described (or explained) by SRT, there is an ultimate, but very insidious aspect, i.e. the categorization issue. As Wicklund (1990) has pointed out, psychologists whose explanations are set on some personality trait dimension (e.g., big-five) are using a categorical approach to behavior (Lewin, 1930). Such conceptualizations are theoretically limited and, frequently, tautological because they are based on static factors (i.e., traits) that parallel, and are practically identical with, the predicted behavior (e.g., “you are extroverted because of your extroverted personality”). For Wicklund, one aspect of this perspective is that it often ends up rooting behavioral patterns in genetic bases - an explanation that simplifies the psychological facets of human functioning. Likewise, the static facet of SRT can be viewed as a categorical instrument for describing human behavior, with the difference that SRs are not exactly representing psychological dimensions. Indeed, SRT starts from a cultural perspective, measuring a distinct SR, then inferring the individual psychology. “People shoot others down because of that SR” could be theoretically limited, tautological, and non-psychological (i.e., there is no interest in mental processes here). The approach seems to root the behavioral explanation in cultural and linguistic categories.³

When SRs Turn to the Psychological Level: The Internalization Problem. SRs can also be conceived as dynamic processes (developmental facet) for describing human behavior. By this point of view, SRs are somehow reflected in the human flow of experience as semiotic mediating devices that allow humans to deal with the inescapable uncertainty of the imminent future (Valsiner, 2003). Hence, SRs correspond to a process that enables people belonging to a given culture to create a stable and predictable world despite their diversities. If we consider this idea at a micro-genetic level, it looks like the *perception-action cycle* (Gibson, 1979; Neisser, 1976), which allows human beings to act and react in their on-line

³ For those who consider SRs to be the best approach to Social Psychology, the distinction between the psychological or behavioral level does not make sense. Yet, one might argue that the word “psychology” could be omitted, because SRT does not make much effort for describing psychological laws or facts: “Psychology” is just an interchangeable word for “behavior”. For this reason, I think SRT is a non-psychological discipline that investigates human behavior (or social behavior).

physical environments, giving them a perception of temporal continuity. Similarly, one could extend the idea to SRT by proposing a *meaning-action cycle* (Action → SR → Action) working at a micro-genetic level too. Although this theoretical stance holds some intuitive validity, there are several problems to emphasize.

First of all, one should define better at which level SR's dynamism is supposed to work: Is it working on the inter-personal level, the intra-personal level, or both? Indeed, it is not so clear how can we extend some processes, such as anchoring, and objectifying to the micro-genetic and intra-personal level of the SRs. There are some similarities between inter-personal (macro level) and intra-personal (micro level) communications. For instance, inner speech *sometimes* takes the form of a dialogue (Mead, 1934; Bakhtin, 1981). However, these levels are moved by intrinsically different forces (e.g., mass media communication vs. individual motivation and personality). This, in turn, makes for a different conceptualization of the relationship among the past, the present, and the future and the corresponding individual experiencing.⁴

What happens if we consider SRs as a process working also at the intra-personal level, i.e. the micro-genetic level? Here there is one possible scheme of the issue (from the macro to the micro level):

1. The cultural representation of a social object (which could be described analyzing media communication, natural conversations, and focus groups)
2. The "individual" representation (which is strongly shaped by the cultural representation)
3. The individual experiencing what is going on in the actual context (which is determined by matching one's own representations and the actual context)
4. The intra-personal re-negotiation (which can be based on an inner dialogical activation)
5. The re-negotiation of the representation at the interpersonal level (which consists in the social negotiation processes).

Contrary to the experimental social psychology externalization problem, SRT faces the reverse drawback: The internalization of the static and dynamic aspects of SRs. From an empirical perspective, whoever wishes to describe processes occurring at steps 3 and 4 must specify what occurs in the previous ones, since nobody can rely on just SRT as the fundamental explanation for personal experience. In such a scientific effort, SRT has to consider the previous research conducted on social psychology instead of disregarding it. By not reasoning along the mainstream's data and theories in social psychology, SRT faces the risk of formulating new (only in appearance) psychological descriptions with an empirical support much weaker than those of the former approach.

Moreover, by a systemic perspective (Bertalanffy, 1968), extending the anchoring and objectification processes in the individual level in an isomorphic way (e.g., accommodation and assimilation) is hardly defensible. Processes working at one systemic level cannot be viewed as working in the same manner at a lower systemic level. More precisely, even if Bartlett (1932) gave strong evidence about the use of personal stored cultural knowledge to memorize abstract or new objects, such psychological phenomenon could be better explained by processes other than the ones working at the socio-cultural level.

⁴ Let's consider Moscovici's (1976) work on the SR of psychoanalysis in France. In this instance, I have some difficulties to understand what an individual's *imminent* threat for the unknown future looks like.

Since SRT deals mainly with human linguistic communication and social negotiation, it is almost impossible that it can account for all the psychology of human behavior. Let's consider, for instance, the similarity between humans and other species. It is well known that chimpanzees can handle tools in order to reach otherwise unreachable goals and that they can fall into depression during mourning (Goodall, 1987). How might a full linguistic approach to psychology account for these human-like behaviors? It is clear that there are further aspects constraining and leading behavior than just linguistic communication. Let's consider cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), which has managed to explain many human behaviors. This seems to be a good example of psychological theory that can be translated into an inner flow of communication, i.e. once a person makes a commitment to do something instead of something else, this person will try to justify him/herself by arguing/negotiating (externally or internally) that commitment. At first glance, one might consider this psychological experience to be a dialogical one, where SRs play the role of offering the proper cultural belief to sustain the commitment. But Festinger (1961) found evidence that this theory works even with rats. Maybe someone could argue that dissonance theory is not the best example in point. But there are further instances, as social psychology abounds in human behaviors (e.g., decision making) explained well by means of automatic processes (Cialdini, 1985). Of course, SRs can be said to shape this automaticity, but to prove this is another task.

Two Possible Methodological Solutions to Relate SRT to Experimental Social Psychology

Although the place of SRT in scientific disciplines is precarious, it is too simple to raise theoretical shortcomings without any constructive effort. In the following, I will attempt to outline briefly some points that might imply improvements in SRT's scientific contribution.

From the Macro to the Micro⁵

Although SRT pretends to be a qualitative approach to human behavior, its contribution to human sciences must be weighted in terms of behavioral predictions. Otherwise, we will end up with a good picture of a super-cultural network of knowledge (or meaning blocks) to which social behaviors are arbitrarily related. In other words, scientists must somehow prove the relationship between SRs and both group and individual behaviors. Given the SRT limits I have raised all along, how can we improve the situation? In my opinion, the only starting solution would be to show empirically the link between SRs and behavior by means of predictions. To exemplify the point, let's consider the shooting instance that I have already mentioned. First of all, one should investigate qualitatively the SR of shooting inside a particular culture (e.g., U.S.A or Estonia) by methodology already used in SRT (i.e., focus groups, newspapers analysis, etc). Second, the SR obtained would enable researchers to gather important explanatory categories that people use with respect to shooting (e.g., shooting is not a good thing at all, shooting animals or deviants could be right, etc.). Third, we could put some U.S. Americans, representing more or less the investigated population,

⁵ Here the reader could profit from taking a look at the Valsiner's article quoted in the introduction of the present paper.

into a decision making task (e.g., participants have to decide whether shooting at animals' pictures or not). If the SR of shooting leads the corresponding behavior, we could predict that (1) people would tend to arrive at a decision by using the explanatory categories we found on our SR picture, and (2), given a multiplicity of solutions (i.e., multi-choice task), we could also predict that, on average, people would behave in accordance with explanations closely associated to the SR under question. Concerning the last point, it is important to give participants more than two behavioral solutions (i.e., dual-choice task) such as "to shoot the target" and "not to shoot" (e.g., we could also add "to shoot close to the target"). If the decision-making task had only two alternatives, it would be very likely that it would constrain participants into dichotomic argumentations/negotiations.

A Macro Level Representation Could Affect a Macro Level Behavior

In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1979), there are societal incidents that could provide interesting opportunities to investigate psychological issues. Given an exact historical upheaval or improvement inside a particular culture, SRT could take advantage of the related changes in the society to study (1) how some SRs affect and (2) are modified by the new socio-cultural situation. Here the main problem is that these societal accidents (e.g., September 11, 2001, or the Great Depression) are often unpredictable beforehand. Yet, there are also predictable changes in our societies. For instance, the arrival of the Euro currency, and the last political election in Italy. SRT seems to be a theory that represents better these phenomena occurring at a macro systemic level. Thus it might be a scientific tool more appropriate for investigating behavioral patterns at the socio-cultural level.

Conclusion

Contrary to physics, which deals with the factual dimensional world, psychological disciplines handle mainly empirical data that are spatially reconstructed by both consensus and theoretical operationalizations. I call this the *externalization problem*. In this paper I have suggested that externalization causes both the theoretical fragmentation in experimental social psychology and the endless number of possible SRs in SRT.

On the opposite side, there is the *internalization problem*. When researchers want to describe or explain psychological facts by using theories formulated, so to say, outside the mind, then the internalization problem occurs. Although this second problem can be found even in experimental social psychology, it is especially present in the SRT effort to describe and explain psychological processes from the much higher perspective of cultural communication.

The central idea underlining SRT is a valuable one (i.e., the way humans communicate and negotiate to represent the world is a very important aspect for human behavior). Nevertheless, the static facet of SRT comes to be a theoretically limited approach when based on a categorical way of describing human behavior. Furthermore, in framing human behavior at the socio-cultural communicative level, SRT results in a non-psychological discipline where individuality is reduced to the collectivity by philosophical shortcuts. Stating that individuality is not valuable because we humans are socio-cultural animals is just skipping the problem. Indeed, the debate on the individual and social facets of human psychology must continue.

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