

A Theory of Structural Constraints on the Individual's Social Representing? A comment on Jaan Valsiner's (2003) "Theory of Enablement"

Tina Maria Nebe

European University Institute
Florence
E-mail: tina.nebe@iue.it

In this comment, I will argue that while constituting a long called for contribution to understanding how social representations (as phenomena) are employed by individuals to make sense of the world around them, Valsiner's 'Theory of Enablement' fails to account for the social and relational nature of social representing. By instrumentalising the concept of social representation as a 'constraining' semiotic mediation device, the genesis of such devices and their alleged nature as 'enabling' remain unexplained. If, I argue, the 'Theory of Enablement' is nothing more than a theory of structural constraints on individual action, the dynamic and dialogical assumptions of this nascent approach are lost.

Jaan Valsiner's paper "Beyond Social Representations: A Theory of Enablement" can be read in the light of recent efforts to characterise social representations as dynamic and conflictual rather than stable ways of knowing in common sense (cf. Moscovici & Marková, 1998; Marková, 2000). More concretely, Valsiner is interested in the intra-psychological processes at work while a person is using social representations to anticipate future experiences. As such, his work contributes to at least two aspects of social representations research; namely to understanding, on the one hand, the *processes of 'social re-presentation'* (anchoring, objectivation, social positioning, etc.), and on the other, the *functions of social representations as 'orientation devices'* ("to enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it"; Moscovici, 1976, p. xiii).

To demarcate his approach to process and functions of social representations characterised by *dynamics and tensions*, Valsiner introduces a new vocabulary - drawn from cultural developmental psychology - that is somewhat unusual and hard to master at first. According to the author, social representing as an *individual-level process* is the previewing of 'to-be-lived-through-experiences' "where different suggestions are in opposition with one another" (p.7.3). Social representing (anchoring and objectivation) is dynamic in that the forward movement of representing can be constrained by powerful normative meaning complexes (semiotic regulation; cf. the experiment described in the latter part of the paper). On the

socio-cultural level, the term ‘social representation’ denotes two phenomena: On the one hand, the products of social representing and, on the other, precisely those tools used for representing that constrain the forward representational process. Paradoxically, the former (products) are described as “relatively stable” (p.7.4) constituents of the psychomorphic universe, while the latter (tools) are “inherently heterogeneous, including opposite meanings and signals for their own contextualization” (point 6, p.7.13). Here, Valsiner seems to implicitly draw on the concept of ‘thémâta’ (Holton, 1978; Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994; Marková, 2000) and the tension created by opposed nuclei, inherent in any idea complex or social representation (see Figure 1 on p.7.5 and point 6 on p.7.13). However, Valsiner insists that rather than studying the “structure of the social tools (representations) that is available within a social context or encounter” (p.7.6) – be they ‘themâta’, centre-periphery constellations or other I assume – we should focus our attention on the process of social representing.

In what follows, I will argue that while constituting a long called for contribution to understanding how social representations (as phenomena) are employed by individuals to make sense of the world around them, Valsiner’s framework fails to account for the social and relational nature of social representing. By instrumentalising the concept of social representation as a ‘constraining’ semiotic mediation device, the genesis of such devices and their alleged nature as ‘enabling’ remain unexplained. If, once put into practice, the ‘Theory of Enablement’ is nothing more than a theory of structural constraints on individual action, the dynamic and dialogical assumptions of this nascent approach will be sadly lost. In order to shed some light on this question, let us take a look at a number of key concepts and dimensions underpinning Valsiner’s paper.

The Nature of Social Representations: Constraining or Enabling?

As noted above, one characteristic element of Jaan Valsiner’s ‘Theory of Enablement’ is – strangely enough – its insisting on the ‘*constraining*’ *function* of existing social representations understood as cultural tools or semiotic mediating devices. According to the author, the process of social representing is constrained by both the stable tools available to perform it and by the dynamic products it brings about. Both tools and products bear the label of social representations or “meaning complexes that play the role of macro-level cultural constraints of human conduct in its PRESENT→FUTURE transition” (p.7.6). They are “pre-adaptational means – semiotic mediating devices – for regulating human conduct” (p.7.2) that ensure the stability and predictability of the social world and are prone to instrumentalisation by institutions for the purpose of social control. The relationship between the two concepts (or is it just one?) is unclear to say the least. The logic Valsiner (like other scholars, cf. Duveen, 2000) employs is circular, i.e. through the processes of social representing we create social representations, social representations (‘old’ social representations according to Farr and Moscovici, 1984) are the tools available to help perform representational work. The aspect in need of clarification is the status of such social representation as stable (tools) and dynamic (products) as well as their constraining function. Do the social representations I have individually constructed using existing representations as instruments constrain my own future social representing? If I share my individual social representations (derived socially through sign use) with someone else (Point 5 on p.7.13), do they run the risk of becoming means of social regulation, of becoming appropriated by social institutions? Last but not least, is there any possibility for individuals or groups to *reject* the “socially suggested generic social representations which are promoted by some social institution” (p.7.3)? It seems to me that this latter point would be of particular relevance were one to develop (much akin to

Billig's, 1985, use of 'particularisation' to counterbalance 'categorisation') a theory of enablement out of what resembles, in its present state, a somewhat passive and oppressing theory of constraints - be the constraints part of a thema involving enablement or not.

The Individual's Social Representations and the Role of the Social

Throughout his paper, Valsiner advocates the level of individual processes, the "*intra-psychological flow of experiences*" (p.7.2), as the adequate locus of analysis for studying the genesis, transformation and functioning of social representations. This conception clearly clashes with the 'societal' social psychology (Doise & Staerklé, 2002) aiming to "bring the social back into social psychology" (Tajfel, 1972) social representations scholars have, in their vast majority, ascribed to. While he repeats throughout the text that social representations "are social in both their origin and in the process of communication" (p.7.5; see also points 4 and 5 on p.7.12f), I would argue that Valsiner's work is 'social' only in that he believes that the systemic organisation of human psychological functions such as objectivation and anchoring differs according to the *socio-cultural signs* used in different contexts. As such, Valsiner's understanding of social representations and social representing differs significantly from that of Moscovici and, most notably, Marková (2000) who defines social representations as "*relational and dynamic organizations of common(-sense) knowledge and language*" (p.430; my emphasis). According to point 5 of Valsiner's 'Theory of Enablement', an inter-individual sharing of social representations can only take place *after* individuals have established their individual social representations. The genesis of social representations itself is not a relational (inter-individual, inter-group) process but one that involves the use of socially and culturally derived signs by individuals. We might therefore say that Valsiner's framework is centred around the question 'how does the social get into the individual's mind?' - advocating a bipolar relationship (Ego-Object or Ego-Culture).

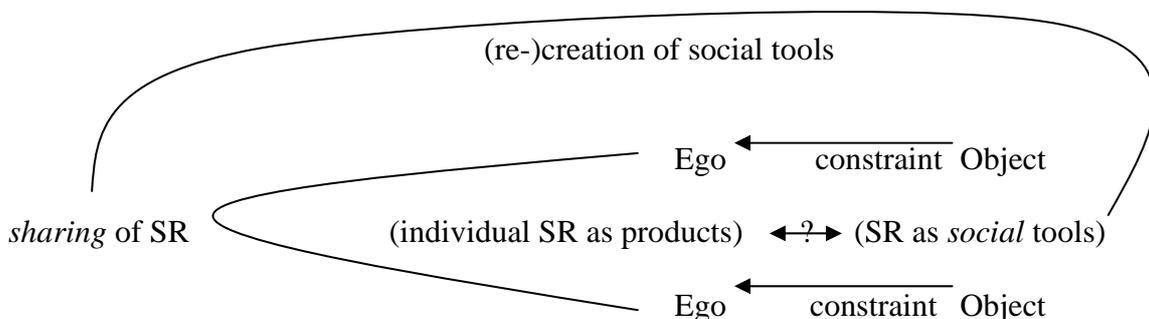


Figure 1

My Understanding of What is Social in Valsiner's 'Theory of Enablement'

In contrast, Moscovici's often-cited 'Semiotic Triangle' is a system where Ego and Alter work jointly towards the (trans-)formation of social representations (see figure 2).

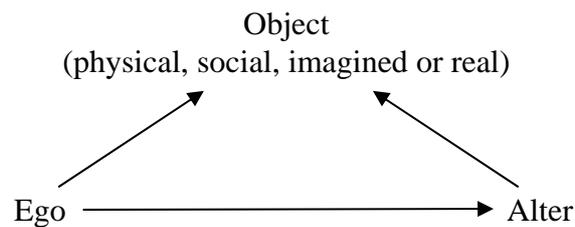


Figure 2
Moscovici's Semiotic Triangle (1984, p.9)

The Present-Future Transition and Dialogical Epistemology

According to Valsiner, social representing takes place at the Present-Future Transition and involves both remembering previous experience and anticipating future developments. As a consequence, social representations can be viewed as pre-adaptation devices that help us delimit the uncertainty of the future. Although bearing some resemblance, this notion clearly goes beyond the 'orientation' function of social representations mentioned in the introduction. By insisting on the existence of opposite and incommensurable poles in a continuum as primordial as time – and the need for humans to make sense of it - Valsiner introduces into social representations research an element of *dialogical epistemology* (Bakhtin, 1981) in its purest form.

However, the precise wording of this idea – rather than emphasising polyphony and tension, heterogeneity and the impossibility of consensus in the context of irreversibility of time - seems sometimes blurred with an automising 'categorisation' vocabulary. Not only for the sake of clarity and *coherence* but also in order to enhance acceptance within the community of social representation scholars it might be useful to reformulate some of the ideas regarding the processes involved in coping with the present-future-transition. For example, references to the social cognition paradigm such as "on-line" processing (p.7.10) or the very notion of "constraining" as "delimiting domains of phenomena from other domains" (p.7.13) might benefit from a clearer embedding in the overall socio-cultural context of dialogism. Similarly, in the discussion of social representing processes, it might be more coherent with dialogical assumptions to go beyond concretisation (objectivation) and allocation of meaning (anchoring) by incorporating Marková's (2000) distinction of objectivation as change-orientated and anchoring as stability-orientated.

In short, Jaan Valsiner's 'Theory of Enablement' – as unfinished as it may be - is an important benchmark in understanding both the varying uses individuals make of social representations as tools at the present-future transition and the varying ways in which certain parts in a field of meaning become enabled to the expense of those constrained. By introducing a temporal dimension into social representing and emphasising the dynamic and polyphonic nature of social representing and its outcome, social representations, the author provides for a promising new impetus towards the development of a theory of change within the social representations paradigm. His treatment of the thematic processes that happen on the intra-individual level of representing (coping with different suggestions when anticipating the future) and on the social level of sign use (a 2-nuclei idea complex can be used as an instrument only when certain aspects are disabled to the expense of others) are very convincing if looked at in isolation.

However, trying to reconnect the concepts Valsiner employs at the social end is far more challenging: How do we get from the individual process and its product, the psychomorphic social representation, to the social tool, the semiotic mediating device or social representation that is used as a tool for social control in future representing? Could Moscovici's 'Alter', involved in the relational genesis and transformation of social representations, constitute the missing link? Could a clarification and redefinition of individualistic-cognitive remnants such as 'objectivation' and 'constraint' break with the present orientation of the 'Theory of Enablement', geared towards preserving the status quo by anticipating its continuation in the future, and work towards a theory of change?

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