Enabling a Theory of Enablement:
In Search for a Theory-Method Link

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The discussion about the beginnings of an "enablement theory" of social representing led to a number of basic new developments in our thinking. The general meta-scientific goal of any elaboration of a theory of social representing is to transcend the fragmentation of psychological theories (Bertacco's concern about social psychology), and advance a new look at empirical methods that is consistent with theoretical constructions (Wagner's concern). The latter is accomplished through making the study of individual cases (subjects) the epistemic norm for the social sciences. That is necessary due to the recent proof of non-isomorphism between inter-individual and intra-individual variation. In the case of open-systemic phenomena (organisms, persons, communities, societies) variability is the name of the game— especially in its intra-individual form. The resulting idiographic science is both social and individual at the same time (an answer to Nebe's critique) and becomes applicable to issues of politics as complex social phenomena that are possible only because of personal participation that takes place on different sides of barricades (Magioglou's focus). The theory of enablement is expected to facilitate further development of the theoretical rigor of any theory of social representing, as well as psychological theories as a whole.

The theory of enablement indeed is but a beginning. It is an effort to build a theoretical framework that links with new ways of doing empirical research with general assumptions about the nature of the phenomena. The latter need is chronic for all of psychology that has moved to rely upon social acceptance of methods, separating them from the basic methodology cycle (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; also Valsiner, 2000b, pp. 63-67). As a result, in psychology the use of methods into an orthodoxy; the "rightness" of methods seems to be emphasized ahead of their heuristic value.

Fortunately, the research domain of social representations - as a version of an European 'counter-culture' within psychology that has been dominated by North American cultural

history[1] - has largely escaped from becoming a target for such mainstreaming of research practices. Nevertheless, influences of such fads and fashions are visible in a number of ways: obedience to the authority of obligatory quantification, reliance upon large samples, etc. The result is heterogeneity of what kind of knowledge is generated by researchers of social representations. In amidst the "democracy of the literature" (Valsiner, 2000a) about social representations, Moscovici's and Jodelet's ways of capturing complex social phenomena seem to coincide with elementaristic uses of multi-dimensional scaling techniques and other theory-free procedures. The result of such laissez-faire state of affairs of "the literature" can only be a theoretical confusion the overcoming of which may be beyond anybody who pledges allegiance to the perspective of social representation.

Of course, such confusing state of affairs is nothing new in psychology. Psychology in general, and social psychology within it, is in an epistemological crisis[2] (Bertacco, 2003). That crisis cannot be overcome by the use of ultra-modern slogans calling for interdisciplinarity, the self-declared glory of cognitive science, fascinating pictures of the brain emerging from MRI machines as a new version of phrenological thought, or the heroic decoding of all of the human genome. Neither can it go away from inter-group warfare within the social structure of psychology. Instead, the discipline needs to re-connect theory and empirical research methods, with a focus on theory. How can that happen?

Overcoming fragmentation in psychology

Bertacco (2003) pointed to the fragmentation of contemporary social psychology in general—and expressed very legitimate concerns about the SR perspective being held hostage that fragmentation. Such fragmentation is the by-product of any science that replaces the search for answers to basic problems by adherence to "local knowledge" that is assumed to emerge by inductive accumulation of facts. Psychology has often taken rhetoric pride of claiming to be "empirical science", failing to notice the absurdity of such statements.[3] Behind such rhetoric, the real difficulty of relating data and theories exists and escalates. As Bertacco (2003, p. 9.3) points out, relating different theories about the self ("self-*awareness*, self-*enhancement,* self-*persuasion*, self-*verification*, self-*preoccupation*, etc.) has become impossible in contemporary social psychology.

It could be precisely here where SRT may become a meta-theory for these "local theories", which are merely social representations, rather than scientific theories. In other terms, the social representation *SELF* cannot be made into a kernel of a scientific theory, as it merely denotes a variety of phenomena in common language. "Self" cannot be explained to be "a theory of self" derived from the social representation of the self, similarly to the "salts" in chemistry need not be "explained" by their "essence of saltiness". The latter of course was

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[1] This is due to Moscovici's work having been situated within the efforts of developing an European kind social psychology, stemming from Continental philosophical and psychological traditions.

[2] In a somewhat ironical way, one can refer to psychology as a discipline in which scientists are in the habit of making public statements about their discipline being in crisis (e.g., Bühler, 1927; Vygotsky, 1926/1982)—and failing to follow up to get out of it.

[3] "Empirical science" makes precisely as little sense as "theoretical theory" or "scientific science"—the extra value given to the qualifier "empirical" replaces careful charting out of the relation of deductive, inductive, and abductive processes in knowledge construction (see Morgan, 2003).

the way alchemists dealt with that issue; maybe psychology at our time struggles with similar problems of transforming from a kind of psycho-alchemy to psychological science?

However, Bertacco's critique of the SRT in general fits only one part of it — that which is built upon non-developmental premises. There, indeed, tautologies are a real danger ("People do X because of representations Y and Z"). Heraclitus' focus on the eternal flow of the universe is not too far removed from our contemporary fascinations with indeterminacy, "chaos theory", or the like. It is another issue that psychology has been ill-prepared to deal with that flow. It is only now that the focus on intra-individual variability becomes emphasized in the move of psychology towards becoming an idiographic science (Molenaar, 2003). It is the maximum fluidity of the phenomena that needs to be explained by our — not at all fluid — theoretical schemes. Bertacco (2003, p. 9.5) points to the root problem that leads to such danger; SR (like most other psychological concepts) may be made to be homogeneous categories (which they are not), then projected as static causal entities into the generic individual minds. The result of such generalizing homogenization (see Valsiner, 1986 on how lay interpretations of correlations work) can only be a construction of essentialist, artifactual explanations.

However, the dynamic perspective on SRs may be free of such dangers, and it is precisely here where the "enablement theory" may have its role to play. By building SRT up on the notion of representing for the sake of anticipatory adaptation to possible future (Valsiner, 2003, paragraphs 6.6-6.9) the closed circle of tautological explanations is transformed into a helical model of irreversible construction of novelty that is enabled by an assembled SR of some kind. In a Heraclitan – or better Bergsonian – way, a flow of human experience leads to the emerging of a SR that guides the further flow of such experience in a new direction, which gives rise to yet new SR, which further guides the experience, and so on – as long as the living human being faces the new moment of the future-to-be-present. The enabling SR may be a node-like or field-like construct (see Valsiner, 2001a, chapter 8; 2003a), it may emerge for the moment in which it functions (and then disappear) or become fixed as a collective-cultural meaning complex (Valsiner, 2000b).

Bertacco asks the question, if the SR participates as a dynamic entity, where does it work, at the inter-personal *or* intra-personal level? A similar issue is raised by Nebe (2003, p. 10.3) who worries about the seemingly non-social (individualistic) locus that the "enablement theory" entails. A recognition of complete spatio-temporal uniqueness of any psychological phenomena leads to an answer: the SR works in-between the intra-individual and inter-individual levels, as part of the internalizing/externalizing process. The inter-individual level of functioning constrains the intra-individual one, and vice versa. The crucial issue for such theory building is to see *how* it functions.

Clarification of the key notion: constraining as enabling

The central mechanism of the "enablement theory" is *forward-orienting constraining*. That concept – ever since its original uses (Valsiner, 1987) – has been interpreted under the influence of its common language connotations as a negative, suppressive entity, limit "of the freedom" (see Valsiner, 1988). Similarly, Nebe (2003, p. 10.2) falls into the trap of seeing constraining as the exclusive opposite of enabling. That look would fit a non-developmental perspective on SRT indeed where "structural constraints on individual action" are limits inherent in the given setting (and thus cannot "enable" anything since the setting is given in its static state). Viewed from a non-constructionist perspective the notion of constraint cannot be enabling; it can only imprison the organism.

Not so if the setting is viewed as dynamic and the person-in-setting as its active re- and co-constructor. Here the notion of constraint entails the focus of not "freedom *from*" but of "freedom *for*" – for some future state that has not yet occurred, but can – or is desired – to occur. Nebe's questions have simple answers:

QUESTION 1: "Do the social representations I have individually constructed using existing representations as instruments constrain my own future social representing?

ANSWER: Of course; their function is to narrow down the set of possible ways of how to think and feel about the future. The person always constructs one's representations individually, in the course of one's unrepeatable flow of experiencing, in order to regulate such experiencing moving towards the future (Valsiner, 2000b). By narrowing down (limiting) the range of possible ways of constructing future social representations the ones presently emerging (based on the collective-culturally available SRs) becomes sufficiently determined for the person's further experiencing. "Freedom for" results from such limiting of possible further SRs.

QUESTION 2: "If I share my individual social representations (derived socially through sign use) with someone else… do they run the risk of becoming means of social regulation, of becoming appropriated by social institutions?"

ANSWER: All social representations – as semiotic mediating devices – are by their constraining function tools for social regulation. This is true of parents' social regulation of children's relations with environment (see Valsiner, 1985 on what "accident prevention" means). Similarly, in the inter-individual communication – dyadic or group – semiotic means are used to delimit the thinking, feeling, and acting of others. Social institutions do their utmost to use such means to guide individuals' intra-psychological dialogues into one or another socially desired monological state ("dialogical monologization", see Valsiner, 2000b, p. 185). Likewise, social institutions set up demands for inter-individual communication in ways that attempt to keep persons from certain ways of feeling, thinking or acting (see the functions of Semiotic Demand Settings, Valsiner, 2002a). The "social assistance" by social institutions to individuals is always inherently ambivalent, it entails demands and suggestions that violate the present self-constructed states of personal cultures.

QUESTION 3: "Is there any possibility to reject the socially suggested generic social representations?"

ANSWER: Yes, not only possibility, but such rejection operates in actuality, due to the lack of isomorphism between inter-individual and intra-individual levels of the semiotic mediation (SR functions), as emphasized by Bertacco (2003), and because of the bounded – yet potentially infinite – intra-individual variability (Molenaar, 2003). There are many forms of such rejection and resistance to the institutional uses of SRs, all of which use some other semiotic device to distance oneself from the social demands, to create one's own enclave of relative psychological autonomy even under strict institutional demands.

From here a (seeming) paradox – so-called "totalitarian societies" may be the *loci* for the emergence of more of individual psychological autonomies (of personal cultures) than the so-called "democratic societies". In the former, counter-action to the institutional demands is guided into higher variety of personal forms, while in the latter, the prescribed suggestion for "difference of viewpoints" may delimit the variety of individual forms of counter-action (see the range of forms of dialogical relations—Valsiner, 2002b). Implications for a psychology of political processes are rather fundamental here, social representations of democracy may delimit the very same democracy as a political practice (Magioglou, 2003).

Sharing—between microgenesis and macrogenesis

What is "sharing"? This problem is troublesome all through the history of different perspectives on the social nature of person (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). The difficulty is set up by the static contrast – if our personal worlds are unique they cannot be shared – other than through a common vehicle (SR) that is guiding our meaning-making (common constrainer) or that results from construction of similar meanings.

Consider the following two claims:

"*Yemanja* dictated I should buy this sweater"
and
"modern fashion dictates that I buy this sweater"
(based on Wagner, 2003, p. 8.3)

These two are functionally equivalent as collective-culturally established SRs that can be brought to bear upon personal cultures in many different ways. In fulfilling their functions at the corresponding moment of the meaning-making process each of those is "shared" by persons who adhere to one or the other – *Yemanja*-based or fashion-dictated – general ideology. Yet it is here that the "sharing" ends, in which ways the general explanation becomes situated in the immediate context results in a unique internal dialogue. It is within such dialogues where the specific active transformation of the SR by the person takes place. It is here where all different forms of handling of the incoming social suggestion – resistance, neutralization, acceptance, etc. – are played out in time. The present theory of enablement turns the notion of "sharing" into a necessarily dialogical event, yet one between the SR as it becomes functional in its role as a semiotic mediating device. Note that "sharing" here is primarily an intra-personal process: the person "shares" one's personal-cultural world with the demands of a new setting, or with other persons' personal-cultural worlds through externalization/internalization processes.

From this wide angle, "sharing" is a process of *making a SR functional*. The meaning-making person "takes" a generalized meaning complex (SR) from either one's own personal history, or from some collective-cultural setting. That complex is then "shared" with the given here-and-now setting towards which the person's immediate relationship is being built. As a result, the relatively stable meaning complexes become re-contextualized in a fluid transitory setting (Valsiner, 2001b, 2003b). What can be observed in a concrete setting is that process of "sharing" the general meaning complex and the particular setting.

Picking up on precisely that issue, Wagner (2003, p. 8.5) raised the issue of semiotic mediators playing a temporary role in personal adaptation. At the level of a meaning-making person it is indeed the case that all transformed SRs (into specific mediating devices) are of

transitory nature. This is the microgenetic process of meaning-making; yet Wagner's point about the need to complement it with a macrogenetic counterpart is important.

Wagner points out (2003, p. 8.5) that the dynamics of collective events turns out to be relatively independent of the particular ways in which persons transform their personal cultures. Thus the study of macroscopic phenomena requires different methods than that of the micro-level (microgenesis). Maybe a corresponding method of macrogenesis is fitting here? It is clear that macrogenesis cannot be mapped on microgenesis (Bertacco, 2003; Wagner, 2003). The process of "doing democracy" (Magioglou, 2003) could be a good example for a macrogenetic take. As she points out, the microgenetic experiments reported in the paper made use of public images in their personal-cultural transformation. A macrogenetic study would entail the establishment of personally constructed general meanings as the basis for collective action. A specific public symbol is being made by a person, it then enters into the public domain and acquires an autonomy of a kind. One can analyze the macro-developmental sequence of construction of new meaning complexes or rituals. That fits Magioglou's call for the time-based analysis of collective actions.

The macrogenetic analysis of human collective conduct patterns opens a number of new alleys for our understanding of society. First, it focuses on the construction of new forms rather than description of existing ones. It can entail the analysis of re-arrangement of existing forms. As is known in contemporary anthropology (Koepping, 1997), rituals are based on constructive play of the participants, rather than be enactments of "right" sequences of action. When for some technical reason existing ritual performance begins to fail, it is re-organized (Freeman, 1981). In a similar vein, rituals and generalized meaning systems are usually set into mutually supportive dynamic relation where:

$$\text{RITUAL X} \longleftarrow \begin{array}{c} \text{SUPPORTS} \\ \text{AND IS BEING SUPPORTED} \\ \text{BY} \end{array} \longrightarrow \text{GENERALIZED MEANING Y}$$

Such macroscopic "steady states" (e.g., adolescent initiation ritual involving genital operation supports girls' self-value, and the self-value supports the ritual, Valsiner, 2001a, pp. 148-150) may look tautological if viewed from a standpoint of formal logical relations (Bertacco, 2003; Nebe, 2003). However, when viewed as a macrogenetic system where two components of varied kinds (action system and generalized meaning) are set into a mutually equilibrating relationship, what looked tautological becomes functional. Socially static frames for human existence are set up by fixing – at least for some long time period – the specific ways in which social representations support concrete cultural rituals, and vice versa. *Both* the maximum speed of semiotic mediation (as in person's momentary meaningful actions) and its minimum – stable existence of meaningful social contexts over centuries – are set up by the same system of semiotic mediation.

The stability of macro-social phenomena is not essentialist, but dynamic. The self-maintenance of the system of relations between a collective-cultural ritual and the corresponding generalized meanings (SRs) takes place constantly. Only its cyclical form makes that "steady state" of a system visible in its seemingly static form. Thus, the question of the macrogenetic methodology is the same as that for microgenetic one (Valsiner, 2003c, Figure 4, paragraph 6.10): under what conditions would the "steady state" be altered, and in which possible directions? For example, under what conditions would a previously existing but not highlighted issue in a social order – such as "health risk" – become not only into the focus (supported by Semiotic Demand Settings, Valsiner, 2002a), but escalated to the point of

generating overwhelming concerns in a given society (Heyman, 2004). Wagner's (2003) example of Arthur Miller's presentation of Salem witchcraft trials is an example of the latter. All political changes – revolutions, making war and making peace, elections and successions to some throne – entail similar semiotically organized escalations and de-escalations.

Conclusion: Where social representation works?

Perhaps indeed the theory of enablement is centered on the dynamic side of the microgenesis of meaning-making. It makes use of social representations as tools for that meaning-making, both at the microgenetic and macrogenetic levels. The two levels are not isomorphic; if they were, the separation of levels would not be conceptually necessary.

The center of the discussion that was triggered by my target article (this issue) can be summarized as the contrast between systemic-constructionist and logical-mechanistic perspectives. What seemed tautological from the latter viewpoint turns out to be functional from the former. As a constructive by-product of the discussion the need for development of macrogenetic methodology emerged. Such methodology may change the focus of historical analyses from that of description (and superimposition of pet sociological theories on the descriptions) to a systemic explanation of the dynamics of social change. If that task prevails, the social representations theory fulfils its promise generated by Moscovici's analysis of the growth of psychoanalysis in France. It may also provide an alternative framework for making sense of politics or other hyper-complex social phenomena. Politics is too serious a game to be left to be studied in terms emanating from politics itself; instead, the SR theory may enable the understanding of our political worlds in terms that are not political in themselves.

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