Papers on Social Representations
Volume 19, pages 3.1-3.10 (2010)
Peer Reviewed Online Journal
ISSN 1021-5573

[http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/]

From Social Cognition to the Cognition of the Social: Remembering Gerard Duveen

SANDRA JOVCHELOVITCH
London School of Economics & Political Science

In his doctoral thesis Gerard Duveen discussed extensively the relations between the epistemic subject and social life (Duveen, 1983). How is the subject of knowledge at one and the same time the subject of society? This was a problem that he pursued unrelentingly in his writing, teaching and scholarly conversations and, as I recently discovered, can be found at the heart of his early work. In a detailed and highly theoretically driven empirical exploration of children's concepts of friendship Duveen demonstrates that in human development the separation between knowledge and everyday experience does not obtain. He writes:

> "…objects are encountered first of all outside the theoretical structures of psychology; they exist primarily as human reality, as aspects of being produced and maintained through human action. In this sense they are not concepts produced through the operation of psychological theories but rather are created within the context of the lived experience of everyday life; they are encountered first of all within the life space of individuals (the *lebenswelt* or what Sartre has termed *le vecu*). Indeed they are so closely interwoven into the texture of this context that in thinking about them it is difficult to detach them from this totality; they are implicated at every level the conceptual, the affective and the practical" (Duveen, 1983, p. 224)

Duveen shows that the development of cognition is inseparable from the emotional structures of psychological development and the material structures of social, economic and cultural worlds: the purely epistemic subject stands as a fiction. He understood the inter-relations between these different domains. His contribution was focused in demonstrating that as children develop and construct knowledge they also grow into competent social actors. Human development is social and psychological; take one at the expense of the other and you have only half of the story and an incomplete theory. And as the good Piagetian that he was, Gerard knew that this development is also articulated with the biological maturation of the child, which intersects in complex and absolutely necessary ways with the development and consolidation of cognition (Duveen, 1997).

In a collaboration with Psaltis and Perret-Clermont posthumously published (an apt legacy, in a paper written both with a former student and a long standing colleague who provided important intellectual references) Gerard Duveen again engages in this project. With his co-authors, he re-examines the Piagetian effort of integrating the psychological and social domains, assesses the research programme that followed in its wake and considers how Piaget and Vygotsky could be fruitfully articulated (Psaltis, Duveen, Perret-Clermont, 2009). Developed in this final paper is the idea of operativity-in-context, which condenses many years of experimental and ethnographic research in Geneva, Sussex and Cambridge on how the construction of the mental is not only permeated by social interaction but dependent on it. As they show, it is only in context, never without it or out of it, that the psychological emerges. The paper also provides a sobering statement about how misleading the usual portrait of Piaget's developmental theory as asocial is. As Nicolopoulou and Weintraub (2009) point out in their pertinent comments on this provoking paper, even a casual inspection of Piaget's essays and books is sufficient to demonstrate that the social was not only a preoccupation but also a fundamental component of Piagetian psychology, with the essays collected in *Sociological Studies* (1965/1995) offering the most clear formulation.

So from very early on in his academic writings to the very end of his life Duveen sustained a critical engagement with Piagetian psychology based on a dual commitment to think *with* and *against* Piaget (2000a; 2001b). Duveen never shed the inspiration and influence that Piaget exerted on him and never ceased to be critical of

Piaget. The problem was not that Piaget was asocial, but *how Piaget treated the social* and how the excessive rationalism of his universal sequence of development obfuscated the role of contextual determinants, not to mention the role of context on Piaget's own views. To address this problem Duveen turned to the possibility of integrating social and developmental psychology, something that he cherished throughout his career and that is fully expressed in his work on development (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990; Duveen, 1985, 1988, 1996; Lloyd and Duveen, 1992). As he wrote many times, children develop in a world of preceding social representations and deal with self-development amidst the tensions and the potentials of existing social identities. Both phenomena are part of the contextual matrix of development and need to be taken into account if we are to fully understand how a human infant becomes a person.

As an ambivalent Piagetian Duveen found in the social psychology of Serge Moscovici, himself an admirer and a critic of Piaget, the concepts that helped him to make the jump from social cognition to the cognition of the social. Social representations became central for answering the fracture between the epistemic and the social psychological subject identified in Piaget. Carefully retaining what was important to retain, he went beyond Piaget to show that to know an object involves knowing an object that is always-already known and signified by a socio-cultural context, made relevant or discarded by a community, invested with values and larger social representations that frame what is knowable and thinkable in a given time and place. Social influence and social representations, as concepts and as phenomena, allowed him to explain the ways in which children come to understand society and in this process understand themselves and the object-world. The studies on children's understanding of kinship and friendship, his later and widely recognised contribution with Barbara Lloyd on children's understanding of gender and our more recent project on how children in different social and cultural milieus construct public spheres, all tried to show that the construction of cognition by individual minds is always and at the same time a co-construction with other minds, which collectively, in social institutions, in political systems, in historical trajectories, in cultural communities, define at given times and contexts the boundaries of what is known.

His ambivalent relation to Piaget also transpires in the manner he understood agency. As a Piagetian, Duveen knew that the agency of the child is crucial, indeed

the child must see and believe herself an absolute innovator, a creator and constructor of all that is there waiting for her to remake. But in line with his teacher and early supervisor, Hans Furth, Duveen problematised this agency by introducing the dynamic of desire in the constitution of the epistemic subject. To know-my-object is also to want-my-object. This insight probed a long-term commitment to the deep psychology of Freud, which was never too far from Duveen's thinking and way of seeing the world. In writing about the development of representation and culture in the pretend-play of young children he goes back to the links between knowledge and desire to show how the drive that moves the child to create and construct the world as innovator is not far from libidinal organisation (Duveen, 2000b).

We discussed this problem extensively when I was formulating *Knowledge in Context* and it was from his insights on the ontogenesis of knowledge that I developed the idea of exploring what a system of knowledge *wants* to represent. It was awkward perhaps to pose this question to knowledge, but he helped me to pursue the idea of seeing epistemic constructions as ontological constructions, ways of reading and investing the world, permanently traversed by the deep psychology of self-other relations. Knowledge statements are never too far away from statements about *being*; our epistemic constructions are inseparable from the multitude of voices with which we engage as we develop a sense of self and knowledge of the object-world. To know the world is to be in the world for the world. This, we concurred, was the radical insight of Moscovici (2008), Jodelet (1991) and Marková (2003), in one way or another offered by most socio-cultural traditions in psychology: the psychology of cognitive development must deal with the fact that cognition is hot from the start and knowledge emerges and evolves intertwined with the deep psychology of self-other relations. What a delight and what a privilege it was to engage with such an interlocutor, benefit from his vast knowledge and erudition and listen to his examples flowing from fiction, music and developmental psychology alike.

Decentration is yet another concept in which Gerard's ambivalent engagement with Piaget becomes evident. His thesis sub-title was 'An essay in decentration'. The notion of decentration has not found too strong a space in the prevailing impetus of modern psychology. While the Vygotskian concept of mediation eventually found a firm position in the theoretical landscape of the discipline, decentration, which is not too far away from mediation, remained slightly marginal and to some extent unknown.

But Gerard knew that decentration is paramount to a societal psychology, indeed to all human psychology, for it refers back to what Rob Farr (1996) described as the inner core of all major psychological systems of a social kind: the relational and dialogical processes that allow the human self to know and understand itself by stepping out of itself and moving towards other people *in action and cognition*. Mead provided the classical demonstration of these processes in the genesis of selves and societies; Piaget called them a mini Copernican Revolution; Winnicott referred to them as transitional phenomena, Bartlett (1932) referred to this process as "turning around on one's own schema" and more recently the term intersubjectivity and decentration is to be found even in theory of mind. Gerard showed throughout his work that this basic ontogenetic process at the level of the developing self and the emerging epistemic capacities of the child went hand in hand with societal structures. Larger histories are always dialectically related to micro, singular stories. His long term thinking on human development, social identities and cultural representations helped us to see that, contrary to the illusions of much psychology, human beings are "off-centre", depending and relying on others, requiring connection and affiliation to produce themselves as social and psychological beings. In Gerard's account of decentration I found inspiration to understand the primacy of intersubjectivity and dialogical communication in the making of human life as a distinctive form of life. It is this process that accounts for the genesis of the human mind as well as for the genesis of societies and cultures.

Finally as a social psychologist Duveen knew that the social environment can be unforgiving. He understood the power of the social, the Durkheimian idea that the social is a fact for the psychic subject. As beginners we come into a social world that is already structured by social representations and through processes of social influence this social world is ready to structure *us*, to make us into what we are. This tension beautifully comes to light in Gerard's thesis and was a recurrent theme of his later work and his interest on how social influence shapes the knowing competences and the identity of the developing child (2001a, 2002, 2007). Piaget and Moscovici met again in the way Gerard theorised conformity and innovation in human development: while conformity to the mainstream collective is a powerful tendency of all human societies, transgression and minority influence are the counterpart, a battle which reminds us of the potentials embedded in the role of innovators and minorities,

of individuals who are able to step back and challenge the chains of culture and what they impose on our ways of seeing the world and ourselves. This, Gerard taught me, should not be "disregarded as banal individualism because underneath it there is a struggle and a desire to see things in a new light, to discover and to illuminate parts of the world that get hidden by the blindness produced by the assumptions we take for granted and the cultural traditions we inherit" (Jovchelovitch, 2007:44). His writings on the development of representations of gender captured this permanent tension between tradition and innovation, conformity and rebellion, acceptance and resistance.

****

In reading Gerard's thesis I was able to see again all that always inspired me and impressed me in his scholarship as well as many of the issues we discussed and reflected upon in our collaborative work during the years. There it is already clear that in all of his many dimensions Gerard Duveen was not a typical psychologist. His scholarship had a scope and sweep that an age of small specialisations can now only dream of recapturing; he thought and wrote about human development and social representations drawing on large vistas that came from psychology but also from his engagement with the continental social philosophy of the second half of the 20th century, in particular Sartre, Goldman and Wittgenstein. Gerard was a refined, outstanding thinker; a selective and profound writer - who always chose quality over quantity. Music was a great passion and he never completely gave up the idea that there is something superior in its language when it came to the hard task of understanding our human existence and the tribulations of our psychological lives.

Very few people will have known Piaget more than he did and in reading his thesis I understood better how far and how deep Gerard's relation to Piaget's psychology went. Out of this deep engagement came the insight that epistemic structures alone cannot account for the overall process of cognition: a full account also needs to consider the societal and psychic processes that are essential to its formation. But perhaps even more importantly than the insights are the lessons he left in the manner of his critical engagement. All theoretical traditions contain a certain accumulated level of wisdom and knowledge, but as with all human knowledge they are brittle and serve us best as platforms that allow us to see further and hopefully jump to a different level. They are not dogmas to be defended or rejected but ideas, clusters of

evidence, potential spaces from where we draw the conditions of our understanding today and perhaps more importantly, the conditions for understanding the limitations of our understandings. Think with and against the intellectual traditions you cherish is a lesson I learned from Gerard. In the engagement itself we find that very Gerardian skill of being able to produce a stance that mixed criticality and generosity, a human and professional talent that he showed as a friend, as a teacher and as a scholar.

All the above comes together in Gerard's position as a genetic social psychologist. When Gerard was made a Reader by the University of Cambridge, he decided to be a reader in Genetic Social Psychology, something that gave him an almost child-like satisfaction. I had written about this and suggested to him that the word 'genetic' in Anglo-Saxon psychology has long lost its connection with the Piagetian and Vygotskyan vision of understanding the making of psychological structures through their genesis and developmental history. In an age ironically dominated by fascination with all things biological he might have ended up seen as a psychologist of DNA! We laughed. But Gerard insisted in declaring himself a genetic social psychologist emphasising again and again the problem of genesis and development. Development for him went far beyond the development of the child. The development of the child was one particular case of a much larger process of structuration and transformation that needed to be apprehended and explained at multiple levels. He was never too far away from the Piagetian conception that structures are systems of transformation; to see it so you need the right lenses and his lenses were the genetic method. In this sense Gerard was a historian of human psychological development, and studied a variety of its empirical instantiations from the development of the child, to the development of cultural representations, the development of ideas, groups and social influence.

Soon after Gerard's death Marie-Claude Gervais and I sat to mourn our beloved friend and to write about his legacy. Perhaps out of an unconscious loyalty to Gerard we never wrote. But as we used to do while with him, we talked and talked. We talked about his being an inspiring and influential teacher who always had time for listening and for continuing a conversation, who had taught in the great tradition of Socrates' maieutics, a dialogical exercise between teacher and pupil for generating knowledge and understanding. We talked about his being one of the last of the *flaneurs*, always ready to perambulate and to walk around the city, with a book and a

newspaper under his arm, order a double espresso and without any hurry light up his *Gauloise* without filter. We talked about his passion for music and for the arts, his love of Berg and Caetano Veloso, of Bach and Maria Betânia, of the angels that were always with him.

Gerard had a self-effacing quality that stayed with him to the end of his life. And yet he was widely recognised by his friends and colleagues across the world as the genuine article. His early departure leaves us with a tremendous sense of loss, not only because his untimely death has deprived us of many more important scholarly contributions, but also because few people could radiate such warmth and humanity. He was a wonderful friend, the best and most generous of colleagues, an inspirational voice. It is perhaps not accidental that one of the last papers Gerard wrote explored the diversity of relational bonds and communicative genres that bring people together (Duveen, 2008). He started this paper just before he received his diagnosis and managed to conclude it shortly before his death. It is a brief paper that while clearly unfinished retains all the usual qualities of Gerard's scholarship. There he proposes solidarity, sympathy and communion as distinctive relational forms. Gerard had always known about human solidarity and sympathy, but it was in illness that he experienced communion. How moved and how surprised he was when he realised how much he was loved by the friends, family, colleagues, girlfriends and students who packed the hospital wards, who flew from all over Europe to attend the party held by his college in the summer of 2008, and who finally came to the chapel of Corpus Christi college where his funeral took place in November of the same year. His illness and eminent death made him ever so more aware of the relations that bound him to others and in his death, as so many times before in his life, Gerard was again a teacher to us all.

His lessons and his influence on us will continue.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Marie-Claude Gervais for providing inspiration for many elements of this paper, Brady Wagoner for reminding me of Bartlet's approach to decentration and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous version of this paper.

REFERENCES

Bartlet, F.C. (1932) *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duveen, G. (1983) *From Social Cognition to the Cognition of Social Life: an essay in decentration*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Sussex.

Duveen, G. (1985) A Developmental Study of the Influence of Situation and Actor on Children's Judgements about Friendship. *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive*, 5, 411.

Duveen, G. (1988) The Child's Reconstruction of Economic Life. In K. Ekberg and P. E. Mjaavatn (Eds) *Growing into a Modern World*, Centre for Child Research, University of Trondheim, Norway. (pp 177-199).

Duveen, G. (1996) The Development of Social Representations of Gender. *Japanese Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 256-62.

Duveen, G. (1997) Psychological Development as a Social Process. In L. Smith, J. Dockrell and P. Tomlinson (Eds) *Piaget, Vygotsky and beyond*. London. Routledge. pp 67-90.

Duveen, G. (2000a) Piaget Ethnographer. *Social Science Information*, 39, 79-97.

Duveen, G. (2000b) La culture dans les jeux imaginaires de jeunes enfants (Culture in the pretend play of young children]. In D. Saadi-Mokrane (Ed) *Sociétés et cultures enfantines*. Lille: Editions du Conseil Scientifique de l'Université Charles-de-Gaulle - Lille 3. (pp. 111-117).

Duveen, G. (2001a) Representations, identities, resistance. In K. Deaux and G. Philogène (Eds) *Representations of the Social*. Oxford: Blackwell. (pp. 257-270).

Duveen, G. (2001b) Genesis and structure: Piaget and Moscovici. In F. Buschini and N. Kalampalikis (Eds), *Penser la vie, le social, la nature: Mélange en l'honneur de Serge Moscovici*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. (pp. 163-173).

Duveen, G. (2002) Construction, Belief, Doubt. *Psychologie et Societé*, 3, 139-155.

Duveen, G. (2007) Culture and Social Representations. In J. Valsiner and A. Rosa (Eds) *Cambridge Handbook of Socio-Cultural Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp 543-559).

Duveen, G. (2008) Social Actors and Social Groups: A return to heterogeneity in social psychology. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38, 370-374.

Duveen, G. and Loyd, B. (1986) The Significance of Social Identities. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 25, 219-230.

Farr, R.M. (1996) *The Roots of Modern Social Psychology*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Jodelet, D. (1991) *Madness and Social Representations*. London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf.

Jovchelovitch, S. (2007) *Knowledge in Context: representations, community and culture*. London: Routledge.

Lloyd, B. and Duveen, G. (1992) *Gender Identities and Education*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Marková, I. (2003) *Dialogicality and Social Representations: The dynamics of mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moscovici, S. (2008) *Psychoanalysis, its image and its public*. Polity: Cambridge.

Nicolopoulou, A. and Weintraub, J. (2009) Why operativity-in-context is not quite a socio-cultural model. Commentary on Psaltis, Duveen and Perret-Clermont. *Social Development*, 52, 320-328.

Piaget, J. (1995) *Sociological Studies*. London: Routledge.

Psaltis, C., Duveen, G.+, and Perret-Clermont, A. (2009) The Social and the Psychological: Structure and context in intellectual development. *Human Development*, 52, 291-312.

SANDRA JOVCHELOVITCH is Reader in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she directs the MSc in Social and Cultural Psychology. Her current research explores the role of the arts and the imagination in the development and regeneration of Rio's favelas and how young children in different cultural contexts represent public spheres. Her new book 'How Communities Think' is coming out in 2011. ADDRESS: Department of Social Psychology, London School of Economics & Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE. Email: s.jovchelovitch@lse.ac.uk.