What can be said? Identity as a constraint on knowledge production

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Social representations are produced and reproduced through social interactions. Gerard Duveen made an important contribution by revealing the subtle processes through which the microgenetic production of knowledge is constrained by the identity relations between the participants in an interaction. Relations of symmetry and asymmetry constrain what can be said and heard. In this paper, we show how these ideas yield fruitful analyses in the context of two research projects. First, in a project concerning professional advice-giving by Health Visitors to parents, we elucidate the identity stakes involved in offering, receiving and resisting advice. Giving advice is not simply presenting new knowledge, it re-positions the advice-giver and advice-receiver with complex consequences for each person's knowledge and action. Second, in an experimental study of communication conflict we show how hierarchical identity positions constrain what can be both said and heard. Across both studies, we draw attention to the processes allowing speaking and listening on the one hand, or self-silencing and dismissing on the other. To take this line of inquiry further, we conclude by suggesting directions for future research, calling for investigations of how specific identity content and identity relations mediate knowledge construction, and for studies of the kinds of social contexts that might make transformative dialogical engagement more likely.

Although Gerard Duveen died in late 2008, we have continued a dialogue with him throughout much of 2009. During his life, he was, for us, an exemplar of scholarly rigor and open-minded enquiry. Unsurprisingly, while we were with him at the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology in Cambridge, he influenced our thinking in numerous ways. Perhaps more surprising is that since his untimely death this influence has not only continued, but developed. It is the sign of a great contribution when that contribution grows and finds new relevancies when confronted with new problems. In the following discussion we articulate what it is that we have recently discovered in Gerard's work, illustrate how it has influenced recent analyses that we have each been doing, and conclude by raising research questions which carry forward Gerard's legacy.

MICROGENESIS: THE MOTOR OF TRANSFORMATION

Fundamental to our recent appreciation of Gerard's work is a paradigmatic conceptualization of the intertwining of microgenetic, ontogenetic and sociogenetic processes (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Duveen & De Rosa, 1992). These processes are more than mere 'levels' of analysis in the social world, for they are conceptualized as genetic (i.e., processes of change which are constrained by the past) and intertwined. Specifically, Gerard taught us that microgenetic processes (actual interactions) are the engine driving change at ontogenetic levels (i.e., individual, psychological and identity change) and sociogenetic levels (i.e., changes in social representations and culture). "Microgenesis constitutes a motor," he wrote with De Rosa, "for the genetic transformations of social representations" (Duveen & De Rosa, 1993, p. 96).

Gerard's own patient and subtle empirical work demonstrates the phenomenon of microgenesis (Duveen, 2001). Boys and girls draw upon trans-situational representations of gender as resources in their interactions. In this process, ontogenetic development of their knowledge and identities can occur (Psaltis & Duveen, 2007). Equally, interactions are often conservative, and established knowledge and identities may be reinforced rather than changed. Moreover, enactments of representations within a microgenetic context can feed into trans-situational changes in the social representation of gender. However, although all sociogenetic change necessarily occurs through the motor of microgenesis, it does not follow that all microgenetic interaction leads to sociogenetic transformation. Representations and institutions can and do change, but they also tend towards stability and hegemony. In sum, the

"motor" of microgenesis draws into play sociogenetic and ontogenetic levels, reproducing them in more or less creative ways.

In his eagerness to separate sociology from psychology, Durkheim (1898) created a gulf between psychological and sociological levels of analysis (Farr, 1996). The theory of social representations sought to bind together the psychological and the sociological (Moscovici, 1974/2008). But this is a difficult task, given that the majority of literature in sociology and psychology serves to reinforce this dualism. It is overly simplistic to try to explain the genesis and transformation of representations entirely at the sociological level (Durkheim, 1898). Equally, it is overly simplistic to try to explain collective representations entirely in terms of psychological processes (e.g., Sperber, 1996). Framing social representations in terms of microgenetic, sociogenetic and ontogenetic processes fulfils the ambition of binding together the psychological and sociological in creative, yet constrained, mutual transformation.

IDENTITY: LINKING SOCIOGENESIS, ONTOGENESIS AND MICROGENESIS

Gerard's orientation to social processes was part of a paradigmatic re-conceptualization of the individual-social relation, with fellow travelers including Moscovici (1972), Farr (1996), Bauer and Gaskell (1999), Marková (2003), Howarth (2006) and Jovchelovitch (2007). Within this paradigmatic agenda, Gerard made his main contribution through his conceptualization of identity (Duveen & Lloyd, 1986). Identities are both personal and social, they are mediators of microgenetic processes and thus also both sociogenetic and ontogenetic processes.

Gerard conceptualized identity as imperative in the sense that it is as much about being identified as making self-identifications (Duveen, 2001). He showed how identity is situated and relational. For example, in interactions between boys and girls, whether identity becomes salient or not depends on the gender marking of the task, which is one of the ways that widely-held representations mediate the situated microgenetic process (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Cultural marking associates certain objects and tasks with certain identities, and as such enables some people to act in relation to those objects and tasks while disabling others. Gerard also made the insightful point that to change one's beliefs within a situated interaction is also to change one's identity positioning within that interaction (Leman & Duveen, 1999; Psaltis & Duveen, 2006). In conservation tasks, young girls will often conform to the

incorrect views of young boys and young boys will often dismiss the correct views of young girls because of pervasive representations of gender which bind the task to the boys' identities (Psaltis & Duveen, 2007). In this way, identity becomes a constraint not only upon what can be said and done within a relationship, but also upon the responses to what is said and done.

Recently, we have been particularly inspired by Gerard's conception of identity as "the force or power that attaches a person or a group to an attitude or a belief" (2001, p. 268). Identity is thus the basis of resistance. "Resistance," Gerard (2001, p. 269) wrote, "is the point where an identity refuses to accept what is proposed by a communicative act, that is, it refuses to accept an attempt at influence." This conception of identity is particularly important when trying to understand processes of transformation at any level, because identity becomes a constraint upon what can be said on the one hand and accepted on the other. To quote Gerard again: "We can then consider identity as an asymmetry in a relationship that constrains what can be communicated through it – both in the sense of what it becomes possible to communicate and in the sense of what becomes incommunicable (and potentially a point of resistance), or communicable only on condition of a reworking of that identity" (2001, p.269). In the following two sections we articulate how this conceptualization of identity has recently helped us in two research projects, which, sadly, we never had a chance to discuss with Gerard himself.

GIVING, RECEIVING AND RESISTING ADVICE

The first research project concerns a case of professional advice-giving, as it occurs in conversations between Heath Visitors and their clients (McIntosh, Bryans, Cornish & Wallis, 2008). Health Visitors are health professionals whose responsibilities include promoting the health and wellbeing of families with young children. They visit families at home, to engage them in discussions about the physical and psychosocial health of the children and parents. They deal with issues such as infant feeding and sleeping, child development, parents' mental health, or smoking.

Our research concerns the 'engagement' of each participant (the Health Visitor and the client) in the knowledge being presented by the other. For changes in health-related beliefs or actions to be taken up by the client, we presume, requires an engagement with the communication of the Health Visitor. For the Health Visitor to give 'patient-centered care', responding to the client's particular world view, requires engagement with the client's

knowledge. We wanted to observe, in the interaction, either or both parties being influenced by the words of the other, and then to theorize how this might happen. In order to explore this issue we obtained audio-recordings of the conversations between Health Visitors and clients during nine home visits, with follow-up interviews with both parties after each visit.

At a basic level, we distinguish two kinds of interactions: a 'non-conflictual' interaction, where no differences surface and both parties appear to be in agreement, and a 'conflictual' type of interaction, in which differences between the parties become evident (McIntosh *et al*., 2008). In one 'non-conflictual' interaction, for example, a Health Visitor shows a client a booklet about the recommended process for weaning an infant on to solid foods. The Health Visitor talks the client through the steps, showing the booklet, and the client responds in a positive, but vague way, 'yes, yes, uh-huh, OK'.

In 'conflictual' interactions, opposing views are voiced and stuck to. For example, in the course of one visit, in response to the father's racking cough, a Health Visitor initiated the topic of the parents' smoking and whether they would consider quitting. A long conversation ensued in which the parents used several tactics to resist the Health Visitor's suggestions. They first explained that they protect the child's health by only smoking out of the kitchen window with the door shut, but the Health Visitor was not satisfied, and pressed them further. The father explained that he had tried to quit but it was difficult, and the mother said she had tried nicotine patches, but was allergic to them – and that in any case, she does not smoke much. After trying several different tacks, the Health Visitor apparently gave up, and changed the topic to the less conflictual ground of the baby's teething. Neither side outwardly gave any sign of giving ground or adapting to the other's point of view. In other examples, we have also observed Health Visitors changing topics when a discussion appears not to progress, and clients re-defining their practices so that they sound more in line with the authorized advice. In other words, a variety of communicative processes are used to limit discussion of contentious issues. Drawing on Gerard's ideas we argue that the identity relation is limiting what can be communicated in two ways.

Firstly, comparing the content of conflictual and non-conflictual discussions reveals that discussions are more conflictual when advice is being given that contradicts the client's existing practice. Advice given 'preemptively' (e.g., before weaning has started) seems relatively unproblematic. From an identity frame of reference, we can interpret this to mean that to challenge a parent's current practices is to challenge their identity (including their identity as a 'good parent', and their identity as a competent adult of equal status to the Health

Visitor). For the Health Visitor to change her views would challenge her identity as a professional equipped with authorized expert knowledge. So, the interaction is not only an interaction over knowledge, but also an interaction over identities. Challenges to identities are likely to be resisted (Duveen, 2001).

Secondly, both Health Visitor and client try to minimize conflicts, presumably because of the normative demand for a courteous discussion among adults. If there is a demand to avoid conflict, how can a conflict between authorized health professional advice and the client's current practice be resolved? Psaltis and Duveen's (2006; 2007) extension of Moscovici's (1980) theorization of social influence in terms of the dual processes of conversion and compliance may be useful here. As Psaltis and Duveen (2006, 2007) articulate, such a conflict can be resolved in two ways. Either it can be resolved on the cognitive plane, i.e. by one person changing their views so that both views match (conversion), or on the social plane, in a process of compliance, where one party publicly agrees with the other, but privately does not change. The changes of topic initiated by the Health Visitor, and the clients' re-description of their practices are ways of minimizing the conflict without either side having to engage with the other's views.

Unlike in Gerard's and his colleagues' experiments with children, and the experiment reported below, where participants are forced to arrive at a single outcome, there is no such constraint compelling the Health Visitors to persist with a particular topic until an agreed conclusion is reached. Arguably the experimental convention produces more conformity than might occur in natural settings, where, as our research shows, even the hint of a stalemate can be enough to move the conversation on, to avoid conflict.

Our research can only speculate about the longer-term impact of non-conflictual or conflictual interactions. While the non-conflictual interaction at face value seems to suggest alignment between the Health Visitor and client views, attending to social psychological processes of identity and influence (e.g. Duveen & Psaltis, 2008), we can see that, saying 'yes' can have various significances. Rather than indicating shared views, it may mean that the client knows how to participate appropriately in the 'receiving professional advice' communicative genre. In terms of influence, rather than being 'converted', saying 'yes' may indicate 'compliance'. It may be in the more 'conflictual' interactions that change is triggered. Even if change is not evident within the interaction itself, the client's engagement with the suggested changes, or the Health Visitor's engagement with the client's demands may take place between interactions. In theorizing the connection between identities and

representations, Duveen (2001) emphasized that to change one's beliefs (or actions) is also to change one's identity. This insight explains influence processes in our empirical setting. To capitulate visibly to the influence of another is to undermine one's current identity and position oneself as being 'corrected' by the input of the other – often an uncomfortable position to occupy. Perhaps a new communicative context would allow the parent discussed above to be the initiators of a discussion of potentially stopping smoking, 'owning' this topic as part of their own identity, and thus occupying an identity position in relation to the knowledge which allows more commitment to change.

"NO, NO, NO, JUST SHUT UP AND LISTEN"

The second research project we want to discuss is a series of experiments designed to test neo-Meadian ideas about perspective-taking (Gillespie, 2005; Martin, 2006). In contrast to cognitive approaches to perspective taking, we have argued that movement between social positions is an important social and interactional precursor to perspective-taking. Thus, for example, perspective-taking within routine activities such as giving a present are built upon people moving between the social positions of giving and receiving. Sometimes we give gifts and sometimes we receive them, and it is this institutionalized position exchange which provides the social basis for intersubjectivity within the activity of gift-giving. Similar examples could be provided for innumerable social routines, such as, talking/listening, winning/losing, ordering/obeying, buying/selling, etc. Thus, in short, we argue that before taking the perspective of the other in a cognitive sense, people usually have some experience of taking the social position of the other in an interactional sense.

In order to challenge the cognitive interpretation of perspective taking, we (Gillespie & Richardson, under review) have run a series of experiments to test whether exchanging social positions within a joint task improves intersubjective coordination. The joint task we used is the Communication Conflict Situation (Blakar, 1973). In the task participants are given the social position of either Director or Follower. Directors are given a map with a route marked on it, and Followers are given a blank map. The Directors must verbally guide the Follower through the marked route. The participants are not allowed to look at each other's maps. Usually dyads solve these map tasks quite efficiently. A conflict situation is introduced after a few basic trials. To create conflict the Director and Follower are given slightly discrepant maps (which they assume to be identical). Accordingly, the Director's instructions

to the Follower fail. Solution to the conflict trial is defined as both participants agreeing that the maps are discrepant and presenting this fact to the experimenter. In other words the dyad needs to create perspective-transcending knowledge about the task.

The experiment has two conditions. In the control condition participants are assigned the positions of Director and Follower at the outset, and they remain the same for all five trials. In the intervention condition social positions are also assigned at the outset, but are then exchanged after each trial. Thus in the second trial the former Director has the role of Follower, and in the third trial they exchange again, etc. The question was, would those dyads exchanging social position be better able to coordinate their perspectives and resolve the conflict task?

The results of several experiments all indicate that exchanging social positions leads to a dramatic increase in solving the conflict trial. In our most recent experiment only 1/20 dyads in the control condition solved the task while 17/20 dyads who exchanged positions solved the task. Ostensibly these findings provide very convincing evidence for a social basis to perspective taking. However, a fine grained analysis of the conversations between the dyads reveals additional complexity which has made Gerard's ideas on identity central to our interpretation.

Analysis of the microgenetic conversations between Directors and Followers shows that no great feat of silently imagining the perspective of the other is necessary: each participant is telling the other clearly and repeatedly about their perspective. All that is needed to solve the task is that the participants listen to each other and accept at face value what the other is saying (e.g., "I don't have a right turn there"). We need to understand why participants do not listen to each other and specifically how participants are able to dismiss what the other is saying.

The task we have used constitutes two identities: Director and Follower. Although these identities are transient experimental identities, they do appear to be built upon representations of 'directing' and 'following' which in turn imbue these transient identities with socially prescribed and status-laden meanings. Directors speak more, issue more commands, ask fewer questions, are more likely to ignore utterances, and less likely to be ignored. In short, the Directors are in an identity position of communicative power *vis-à-vis* the Followers. This identity relation is a function of the way the participants construe the respective roles of "Director" and "Follower" by drawing upon representations of a leader/subordinate relationship. Understanding this relational identity is critical to

understanding how the dyads deal with the discrepant maps. All the dyads encounter the discrepancy, but they differ in how they deal with it. Three patterns of interaction are evident.

First, there is a discrepancy avoidance pattern. The discrepancy invariably manifests first for the Follower (because they receive the impossible direction). In this pattern, the Follower chooses to gloss over the discrepancy, ignoring it, and taking a similar or arbitrary path through the map. The outcome is that the discrepancy is (temporarily) concealed. This course of action by the Follower prevents open conflict and avoids any manifestation of failure on the part of the Follower. However, it does not lead to a solution to the task. Accordingly, success in the task is subordinated to maintaining an amicable identity relation and avoiding possible blame.

Second, there is what we call a blame pattern. This occurs when the Follower voices the discrepancy, saying that the Director's direction is impossible (e.g., "but I don't have a right turn there"). Voicing the discrepancy is usually followed by the Director either dismissing what the Follower has said (e.g., "no, there is a turning on your right") or claiming that the Follower has made an error (e.g., "I can't believe it, you have gone wrong again!") or both (e.g., "no, no, no, just shut up and listen"). This pattern of blame sometimes escalates leading the Follower to blame the Director.

Third, there is a pattern of engagement. This often follows a degree of communication conflict and blaming, and can be initiated by either party. In essence it entails each party trying to understand the point of view of the other. For example, the Director might say "OK, what else do you see on the right hand side?" or the Follower might offer to give directions to the Director to show the Director where they have gone. In each case this pattern is characterized by openness to the point of view of the other. The vast majority of this pattern of interaction occurs in the position exchange condition.

Gerard's work on identity can help us explain these results. In a manner akin to the young girls conforming to incorrect solutions and young boys dismissing correct solutions (Psaltis & Duveen, 2007), we have found that Followers often try to conform to impossible directions and Directors are very likely to dismiss correct observations which, if accepted, would enable solution of the task. Psaltis and Duveen (2007) explain their finding in terms of the social representations of gender and the gender marking of the task, and in a parallel manner, we can explain our finding in terms of the Director/Follower identity relation. Specifically, the social and cultural expectation is that information should flow from Director to Follower, but the solution of the task depends upon information flowing in the opposite

direction, and accordingly, the identity relation becomes an obstacle to the solution of the task.

In the control condition the Director/Follower identity relation becomes entrenched by being repeated over five trials. When entrenched, it is easier for the Director to blame than to listen, and easier for the Follower to ignore the discrepancy than to engage in open conflict. Exchanging social positions, on the other hand, prevents the Director/Follower identity relation from becoming entrenched. In the position exchange condition, the Director was previously the Follower, and the Follower was previously the Director, and thus each has expertise in both social positions. Indeed, after alternating positions five times, the identity positions are both blurred and temporary.

Analyzing the communicative dynamics within both conditions provided support for the role of identity in constraining what can be said and accepted. Using the procedure of Initiative-Response Analysis (Linell, Gustavsson & Juvonen, 1988), we found that in the position exchange condition, Followers were significantly more likely to be persistent in presenting their point of view and Directors were significantly more likely to ask questions and less likely to dismiss the Follower's point of view. That is to say that the representations of the Director/Follower relation (i.e., the Director directing and the Follower following) were less entrenched in the position exchange condition. Thus our research is re-interpreted by taking on board Gerard's (2001, p. 269) insight that: "We can then consider identity as an asymmetry in a relationship that constrains what can be communicated through it." By manipulating social positions we were manipulating identity, and thus our strong results show the massive power of identity as a constraint. The entrenched and asymmetrical Director/Follower relation, produced in the control condition, constrained what not only what the subordinate identity (i.e., Followers) could say but also what the dominant identity (i.e., Directors) could hear and accept. The results was that the microgenetic dynamics of identity constrained the production of perspective-transcending knowledge about the task.

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

If, as Gerard showed and we have also found, identity hierarchies constrain what can be said and heard, there are important consequences for the prospects for transformative and engaged dialogue between individuals or groups with different statuses. In our highly differentiated society, multiple hierarchies allow some speakers greater legitimacy to assert their views than others. It is of utmost importance to understand the ways in which asymmetries of identity status, often having an institutional and material basis, permit speaking and listening on the one hand, and self-silencing or dismissing on the other. In order to continue the dialogue with Gerard's work, we want to raise two questions for future research.

The first question is: what identities, in terms of content and representation, permit speaking out on the one hand and accepting or dismissing on the other hand? Are some individuals or groups bound into structurally weak identity positions, such that they are more likely to be ignored, blamed or dismissed? And if so, then what historical, cultural, social and institutional processes hold that asymmetry in place? In an extreme case one can think of people diagnosed with mental illness who have been compelled to undergo treatment without their consent. The representational field of mental illness represents people labeled with mental illness as not having a valid opinion, or point of view, and as such, their perspective is often dismissed before it is even engaged. The question to ask is what is peculiar to this identity content which enables this dismissing and silencing, and, where else do we find similar identity content at work? Alternatively, how do people labeled with mental illness construct identities which authorize them to speak out and insist on being heard?

The second question is: what contexts of interaction encourage listening and speaking versus dismissing and conforming? On the 20th November 1989 Nicolae Ceauşescu, President of Romania, gave a six-hour speech and received sixty-seven standing ovations. He had created a relational identity between him and the government which consisted of speaking without listening. Clearly he had created a context, backed up by force, in which dialogue was impossible. One month later his regime was overthrown and he was executed. We need to understand and produce relational contexts, and the associated identity positions, which enable transformative dialogue – by which we mean interaction in which both parties are open to the perspective of the other and not resistant to being changed by that perspective.

Gerard, through his research, revealed that hierarchical identity relations, or, in his Piagetian terminology, 'relations of constraint,' can make the gap between speaking and being

heard almost unbridgeable. This insight, however, was not confined to his scholarly contributions. Through his inter-personal interactions he revealed how the large identity gap between the student and the Cambridge academic could be overcome. He respected other people's points of view, questioned them on their ideas and sought to engage with the particularities of alterity. He always heard what was being said. Visiting him in his room at Corpus Christi college invariably involved a double espresso, a comfortable environment, and an unrushed feeling. In short, he succeeded in creating an identity relation within which open debate and discussion was not only possible but expected.

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