

Social Representations and Social Identity in Swedish Folk High Schools: an application of Duveen and Lloyd

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This article extends Duveen's work on social representations and social gender identity by discussing how it can be applied to the context of Swedish folk high school participants' social representations of folk high school and university, then examines the influence of these representations on participants' desires and ambitions to progress to university. Adopting Duveen's framework to analyze several previous data regarding folk high schools (i.e., a document study of folk high school teachers' magazines, an association study on folk high school participants, and interviews with folk high school participants), I seek to illustrate in this article how most premises concerning the formation of children's social identity (as described by Duveen) also hold for adults entering a new social context.

Duveen is best known for his research on social representations and social (gender) identity among children. Gender identity, according to Duveen and Lloyd (1986), is one of the first social identities acquired by the child and involves an extremely complex development process that begins at a very early stage in life. The premises or preconditions concerning the formation of children's social identity may also hold for adults entering a new social milieu and, thus, developing a new social identity. The context of adult education is one in which social identities and social representations can change: for example, when a student progresses, or does not progress, from one educational institution, such as a Swedish folk high school, to another, such as university. According to Lundgren (2005), Lumsen Wass (2006) and Paldanius (2000; 2002; 2003), among others, folk high school participants may be perceived as 'second-rate' students or as being incapable of pursuing further studies, both within their own group as well as by others, because folk high school is usually regarded as an option for those who have failed at their studies in upper secondary school or civic adult education. It may sometimes be difficult for folk high school participants to find the

motivation to continue on to university and subsequently regard themselves as university students, as they may lack successful role models with whom they can identify.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how Duveen's research on social representations and social (gender) identity can be applied to other contexts, specifically to Swedish folk high school participants' social representations of university and folk high school. I will also discuss other aspects of the formation of social identities, such as the consequences of associating with a certain group and its influence upon social action. This article focuses on how participants identify themselves in an educational context and, more specifically, on the process(es) of change that take place in participants'/students' social representations of educational institutions and in their (self)-identities (i.e., of being a participant or a student in adult education). Social representations are not static but subject to change. It is not the case that folk high school participants express a single representation, or even a single set of representations, but rather, they have a variety of different representations that are sometimes contradictory to one another. That an individual or group simultaneously has different and sometimes contradictory representations is called, within social representations theory, *cognitive polyphasia* (see for example; Jovchelovitch 2007; 2008; Moscovici, 2008; Moscovici & Marková 2000; Renedo & Jovchelovitch 2007; Wagner, Duveen, Verma & Themel, 2000). Which social representations are expressed at a given time depends upon the social context.

For the purposes of this article, I refer to data from a larger ongoing research project that examines representations of folk high schools and universities among folk high school participants with the goal of facilitating the promotion of wider university participation. As part of the ongoing project, I have gathered several sources of empirical data, both published¹ and unpublished. In 2004 I interviewed 50 folk high school students regarding their views on university studies (Andersén, 2004); two years later I conducted ten interviews with folk high school students who had progressed to university (Andersén, 2006). New empirical data consists of an association study with folk high school participants conducted in 2004, an analysis of how teachers in folk high schools perceive folk high schools in relation to university (ongoing project), and an association study with university students conducted in 2009. In the association studies, 100 folk high school participants and ten university students were asked to write down their associations of folk high school and university. The association study was designed according to recommendations for association studies as outlined by Abric (1995). Association studies have been used successfully in several studies on social representations (see, e.g., Wagner, Valencia & Elejabarrieta, 1996). Using a multi-method research design – in the present case, an association study, a document analysis and

¹ The reuse of data is not without controversy (see, for example, Moore, 2007, for a discussion of the issue). Andrews (2008) argues in favour of the reuse of data, stating that previous data can result in new conclusions and insights given the provisional nature of the researcher's interpretations. The principle argument for the reuse of data in this article is that it is here analyzed from a new theoretical perspective (i.e., Duveen's) and is also combined with new empirical findings. I hold, with Andrews, that reinterpretation from a different point in time and in light of new findings can lead to original insights.

interviews – enables a more complete picture of the phenomenon examined. (See Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, for several arguments in favor of the mixed method approach). The rationale for analyzing the associations of university students is that if they were to have the same associations of folk high schools as folk high school participants, this could indicate that folk high school identity does *not* influence folk high school participants' social representations of folk high school, contrary to the thesis of this paper. The study on folk high school teachers' perceptions was conducted by document analysis of the folk high school teachers' magazines '*Tidskrift för svenska folkhögskolan*' and '*Folkhögskolan*' from 1920 to the present. Through this analysis I have been able to form a picture of how folk high school teachers represent themselves and their schools, identifying their representations of folk high schools and how these representations have changed over time.

DUVEEN'S THEORY ON THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AS APPLIED TO THE IDENTITY OF FOLK HIGH SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS

Social representations and social identity are interrelated phenomena, and this duality has been discussed in several previous studies (see for example Breakwell, 1993; 2001; Duveen 1993; 2001; Duveen & Lloyd 1986; 1990; Howarth, 2002; 2006). Different theories define the concept of identity in different ways, and there are also differences within the theory of social representations in how this concept is applied. This article is based on the concept of identity as defined by Duveen (2001): that identity entails not only one's identifying oneself, but is equally about being given an identity by others, i.e., identities are constructed both internally and externally. According to Howarth (2002), identity does not necessarily involve a physical likeness or the sharing of identical feelings, ideas and concepts. A person may be identified with several social identities at the same time, such as being a woman, black, middle aged, and a student. Social representations function as building blocks for social identities, which in turn create other social representations. How social identities are formed and the role of social representations in this process is the focus of Duveen's research. According to Duveen (1993), and Duveen and Lloyd (1990), sociogenesis is the process in which social representations are formed. Sociogenesis can be further subdivided into the processes of ontogenesis and microgenesis. Ontogenesis, according to Duveen, occurs as a child is born into a world of prevailing social representations that structure interactions with the child: baby boys are treated differently than baby girls. Microgenesis occurs in the interaction of individuals as they meet and communicate with one another. Through these processes, individuals construct an understanding of the prevailing situation, positioning themselves and their partners-in-conversation as social subjects. As part of their communication, they acknowledge and accept the group's representations. Infants are initially dependent upon others in acquiring and accepting their social identities. Others attribute to them a social identity and then maintain and reinforce this identity, i.e., it is externalised.

An explanation of identity should begin with the inherent dynamism of how we are represented and how we are able to maintain this representation of ourselves. For example, when someone enters an existing social group (such as at folk high school or university) this

person may absorb, in the course of time, and through a complex process of resistance and remaking of representations (see Howarth, 2004; 2006, for a detailed discussion of this issue), some of the group's prevailing representations. This line of argument is also supported by Duveen (see, for example, Duveen and Lloyd 1986; 1990; Duveen, 2001): in the formation of their identities, children accept the prevailing social representations, assuming positions in relation to collective systems of meaning defined by such representations; that is, their identities are internalised. Following the internalisation of the child's understanding, a social identity emerges which allows the child to subsequently function as an independent social actor. Duveen and Lloyd (1986, p. 219) further state that individuality cannot be apprehended independently of social relations.

I believe a similar process to the one described above is likely to occur when adults enter new social situations and contexts. In the same way that children are born into a world of prevailing gender representations of what is considered typically girl-like or boy-like, male or female, and thus acquire and accept the prevailing gender identity, I maintain that new folk high school participants acquire the prevailing folk high school identity, as well as its implied representations when they begin their studies. The formation and development of this identity then continues as part of an ongoing process. Children's gender identity is reinforced as they grow up and further developed based on their interactions with other individuals, and they learn to share these representations in the process. Thus, being a girl is about acquiring and accepting a social identity, based on social representations of what is considered to be girlish and what is not (i.e., what is boyish). In the same way, folk high school participants seem to assume already prevailing representations characteristic of the identity of folk high schools and themselves as folk high school participants, i.e., as something different from students at upper secondary schools or students in civic adult education. Based on these social representations, new folk high school participants attempt to identify themselves with the existing identity of their folk high school. As formulated by Duveen and Lloyd (1986) and Duveen (2001), this identity, based on social representations, will also lead to other social representations. In this respect, my own research results are in accordance with previous findings showing that the collective identity of folk high schools and the social representations which support this identity contribute to participants' acquiring certain social representations with regard to higher education and with regard to their prospects for successfully undertaking a university education.

FOLK HIGH SCHOOL AS A UNIQUE FORM OF EDUCATION – THE FORMATION OF A HIGH SCHOOL IDENTITY

Folk high schools, first introduced in Sweden in the late 1800s, are found mainly in the Nordic countries. Since their inception, these schools have provided an alternate form of education. Folk high schools were initially organised to provide education in agriculture, and the courses were mainly attended by farmers' sons. These courses were soon extended to meet a growing demand for new initiatives as labour organisations began organising their own schools to satisfy other educational needs within the working classes. Over time, the educational levels and standards of folk high schools have developed in accordance with and

reflected the increase in the general level of education in Sweden. Today, all folk high schools offer a general course: a preparatory course leading to the possibility of higher education, available to participants who, for whatever reason, have not been able to complete their upper secondary studies. Folk high schools participants comprise a highly heterogenic group, with diverse backgrounds and experiences, but with the common interest of participating in the general course in folk high school.

Throughout their history, folk high schools have been considered to provide a unique form of education and have been attributed a very strong identity, contributing to and reflecting their spirit, or particular nature. Opinions differ as to what exactly characterises this spirit, and whether or not it is of any essential importance (see, among others, Andersén, Lundin & Sundgren, 2003; Bergstedt & Larsson, 1995; Berntsson, 2000; Paldanius, 2007; Paldanius & Alm, 2009; Sundgren, 2000); however, it is clear that the folk high school identity is founded on certain views and ideas which, in accordance with Jodelet (1991), Jovchelovitch (2007), Moscovici (2008), and Purkhart (1993), among others, I choose to call social representations of 'something' unique. In order for folk high schools to be represented as 'something special'; their uniqueness must be considered in relation to 'something other'. A spirit of 'us' requires representations of one or more 'others', i.e., those who are not (like) us. Folk high schools are different and are difficult to compare with upper secondary school, civic adult education or university. This is demonstrated by the fact that folk high school students are referred to as 'participants', reflecting the basic philosophy of the folk high school. Participants who choose the preparatory general course do so because they have been unable to gain a complete leaving certificate from upper secondary school (or complete their civic adult education), which means that they feel that their previous education has been a failure (Andersén, 2006).

Through my studies of the folk high school teachers' magazines, in which I analyzed the folk high school teachers' representations of folk high school and university, I have been able to identify that the core of these representations is that folk high school is a special and unique educational phenomenon, different from other educational institutions. The representations do, however, differ concerning how folk high school is considered to be unique and which institutions can be regarded as the opposite poles, i.e., concerning what folk high school *does not* represent. Here folk high school teachers may give expression to multiple co-existing representations. The formation of an awareness and understanding of one's own belonging, as discussed above, constitutes one of two parts of social identity formation as described by Duveen and Lloyd (1986), among others. The other part is dependent upon how the group is regarded and considered by others outside the group. As Howarth (2002) maintains, identity formation involves the building of a barrier between self and others. While a group has its own social representations about what it is and what it is not, it is aware of and acknowledges others' representations of the group. Folk high school participants re-make the social identity of the folk high school as it is introduced to them, relating it to their previous experience and understanding; they then form their own representations of folk high schools based on this information. On a more general level, this process involves being able to see oneself in relation to others and others in relation to oneself, to absorb, re-make or resist other people's social representations. In the autumn of

2004, I carried out a survey, based on a questionnaire, of one hundred participants taking the folk high school general course concerning their associations in relation to the concepts of 'folk high school' and 'university'. I found that some particular words and groups of words were more frequently used than others; for example, the participants associated folk high schools in terms which describe them as an alternative to other forms of education, offering supplementary courses allowing adult participants to complete their upper secondary education. Others described folk high schools as being very similar to upper secondary education and civic adult education, but taking place at an easier and more acceptable pace. Other associations described folk high schools as giving 'less study over a longer period of time' and as offering subjects which can be studied together and in parallel, while time is always allowed for personal development and growth, as well as spending time together with other participants. The study level at folk high schools was considered to be easier and more suitable for people with learning difficulties. The survey participants also described folk high school as a form of education that is not as difficult as others for those who have study difficulties and have thus obtained low marks during their compulsory school period:

A school for those who have not been able to 'complete' their education. A school for those who did not finish compulsory and/or upper secondary school and want to do so later. You are allowed to study at your own pace, which is as much as you can do. (Comment from a participant during the last year of the general course, 2004.)

It should be noted, however, that a smaller group of about 15 survey participants also associated folk high school with the opportunity to improve their marks in order to be accepted at university.

As mentioned earlier if university students were to have the same associations of folk high schools as folk high school participants, this could mean that the folk high school identity does not influence the social representations in question. I therefore asked ten advanced-level education students at Jönköping University about their associations regarding the terms 'folk high school' and 'university'. Their answers concerning folk high school were different from those given by the folk high school participants; the answers also differed within the group. The university students, similarly to the main survey participants, associated 'folk high school' with aspects of community and togetherness and an all-round general education. They also regarded folk high school as an easier paced alternative to civic adult education. They had ideas that each school is based on a particular philosophy of life, that folk high schools offer 'non-compulsory' courses that are not part of any credit point system, and that folk high schools are often located in the countryside. In addition to these, there were several individual or occasional associations (see for example, Linell, 1998), involving, among others, courses such as music, drama and journalist courses, as well as comments and associations concerning the prevalence of a somewhat informal 'corduroy dress code'.

FOLK HIGH SCHOOL IDENTITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR (SOCIAL) ACTIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, a certain social identity may have consequences for social actions, i.e., it may influence how individuals manage their choices and decision-making processes. This involves an individual's acting in a certain way because that is how the others within the group act, and the expectation is that every member of the group should act in the same way (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity is based upon social representations, and leads to other social representations. Social representations constitute the building blocks of social identity, allowing individuals to re-make social representations of themselves, as well as of others.

Folk High School Identity as an Obstacle to Further Studies?

As discussed and described above, folk high school identity may be an obstacle to university studies, as those who have chosen to study at folk high school because of previous school fatigue or unsatisfactory study experiences regard university as the opposite pole to folk high school, regard themselves as incapable of studying at university, and think that a university education is not intended for them. According to an official report of the Swedish Government (SOU 1997:158), one of the most common reasons for not progressing to higher education is a lack of self-confidence.

Folk high school participants' self-perception and their perception of university students depend on the participants' images and experiences of folk high school and university. If participants perceive folk high school as being different from their previous experience of other forms of education, they are probably more likely to regard both folk high school and themselves as different, and therefore regard themselves as not good enough or unsuited to study at university.

The following quotations from a folk high school participant provide an illustration of how participants at folk high schools can feel that their studies have finally led to a positive result and that it is now possible for them to extend their learning boundaries. There are many similar statements from other folk high school participants who had previously experienced an inability to cope with their upper secondary or civic adult education, both forms of education outside the folk high school that are generally considered to be the customary routes to university entrance:

Our lessons were totally unlike what I was used to having. We didn't just stuff our heads with facts, but were sitting talking and discussing with each other. At first I thought, like, shouldn't we be trying to learn something here, but then I realised that this was exactly what we were doing – at least what was I was doing - finally! (Andersén, 2006, page 20.)

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, folk high school participants may risk being regarded as second-class students, or as individuals who are incapable of pursuing any studies. Interviews with participants in their last year at folk high school describe university as being 'different', 'difficult' and 'something that I'll never be able to do'. Concerning her further plans upon having completed her folk high school education, one participant comments (Andersén, 2004):

No, I'm not going to apply for university. It's no use for someone like me. I'm at folk high school for a reason, obviously as I hardly got any marks at all in upper secondary school. I couldn't cope with it and I don't have a good head for studying. But folk high school is different. The teachers are good and they know how to explain things so you can understand. If you don't, you can always ask them. They really make an effort for us to learn. (Page 17.)

Another interviewed participant (Andersén, 2006) completed his folk high school course and is currently studying at Lund University's medical school. He comments as follows on his perception of the folk high school before he began studying there:

I thought the folk high school was a place for people who couldn't find enough energy to read or study, who saw the folk high school as a last resort in order to get some marks; to have something to do, and that the teachers were not able to contribute much, either. (Page 19.)

Just as an individual or group may harbour various representations, some of which may conflict with one another, representations themselves can change, i.e., they are not static (see, for example, Jovchelovitch, 2007; 2008; Moscovici, 2008; Moscovici & Marková, 2000; Purkhart, 1993; Renedo & Jovchelovitch, 2007; Wagner, Duveen, Verma & Themel, 2000). My study concerning the associations of one hundred participants taking the folk high school general course during the autumn of 2004 showed that most of them did not regard themselves as future university students. University was associated with terms such as 'difficult', or even 'extremely difficult', 'demanding a lot of studying', 'difficult textbooks', a fast tempo and too many theoretical studies. University was also associated with a place for 'the elite', as 'scary', 'impossible', and 'not anything for me'. However, these negative perceptions, in most cases, changed after the participants had entered university and realised that it was not at all as difficult as they had imagined.

My picture then was totally different to the one I have now. I mean, I thought you had to be really, really clever... That you needed certain grades and... that it was all about studying and cramming all the time, and that you couldn't manage without [working hard, my comment] at least, this was how I thought it would be... .To be honest I thought that it would be much more difficult and demanding, but, as a matter of fact, it isn't. (Andersén, 2006, page 23.)

I feel that it is easier to study at university level than I expected, you always try to imagine how it is going to be, but it has been a positive surprise. (Andersén, 2006, page 25.)

You had to learn what university studies involve, but it turned out not to be as difficult as I had imagined, like you would be required to make lots of notes, and read five books a week. It wasn't so difficult, after all. (Andersén, 2006, page 27.)

The respondents quoted above are all former folk high school participants who, at the time of the interviews, had commenced their university studies. All of them had their social representations of university challenged as they began to experience university (as quite different from the perceptions they had while at folk high school). They no longer identified themselves as folk high school participants, but as university students.

Folk High School Identity as Promoting A Positive Idea of University

My research (see Andersén, 2004) illustrates that it can, in fact, be a positive experience to enter university from a folk high school as compared to entry from upper secondary education or civic adult education because the teaching methods of folk high school are similar to those of the university. Folk high school participants who have had the opportunity to meeting people who have attended folk high school and then gone on to university should have more positive representations about the transition from folk high school to university. One participant commented as follows after her first visit to a university:

I talked with another girl at the university in Eskilstuna [Mälardalen University, my note] and she said that she thought it was not all that demanding. I then remembered that she came from the same small town where I grew up. Then I also remembered who she married and understood that they are ordinary people, just like me. If she can do this, so can I, I suppose. So, well, I think I almost decided there and then, that I'll give it a try. (Marianne, Algström 2004, page 27.)

Among the participants included in the above mentioned association study is a small group whose goal is to qualify for university. These associate 'university' with 'further education', 'good education', and 'my future'. One of them writes that university 'offers me the opportunity to gain my place in life and pursue the career I want'. Another participant writes that 'when I have completed my university course, I will have reached my goal'. In some times these associations co-exist with associations about university as something difficult.

Another participant, a dyslexic woman, felt that university studies were not open to her because of her reading disability; however, following a one-year project as part of which she was given the opportunity to study a university course parallel with her folk high school studies, she commented: 'I always thought that university was out of the question for me, but, in fact, I get more help there than I do here' (Andersén 2004, page 20). Reflecting on how the same project had changed her view of university studies, as related to her experience of her

transition from year nine of the compulsory school to upper secondary school, another participant commented:

Everyone said that you would have to study a lot in upper secondary school, but this was not how it turned out. Then people talked about all the hard work you had to do at university, but this picture's changed, it doesn't seem to be like this anymore; of course, you must be prepared to put in some work... but (Andersén, 2004, page 20.)

The fact that these individuals acquired a different picture of university studies based on their own experience shows that social representations of university can change over time, together with identity. In contrast to the way representations can change due to the influence of new experiences, as above, another type of “change” in social representations may actually be due to the fact that the social context has changed, thereby giving expression to different, already existing representations. As opposed to gender identity, which is generally constant throughout a lifetime (very few individuals change their sex, but it is possible that an individual, as a result of migrating to a completely different culture, may experience major changes in his or her gender identity), the folk high school identity is only the object of association during a very short period in a person's life, which means that a change of education also leads to a rapid change of identities, i.e., what was previously referred to as ‘them’, becomes ‘us’.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have examined and highlighted what I refer to as ‘folk high school identity’, which is based on folk high school teachers’ and participants’ social representations of folk high schools and individuals who study there. I have also attempted to show what further social representations of university may be the result of this identity. Our social representations are based upon our previous experience; if we do not have our own experience, we must depend on the experience of others. When we belong to a certain social group and identify ourselves as members of this group, it is very likely that we accept and assume the social representations of this group. My study shows that the more acquainted folk high school participants become with university, the more positive they are toward starting a university course. The perception of ‘us’ as folk high school participants is instrumental in the formation and acceptance of ‘them’, involving, among others, university students, whose own social representations may not necessarily - or not at all - match these.

Folk high school participants’ social representations of university are often formed by second-hand and reproduced experiences, as participants themselves have not yet studied at university. Most of them have neither visited a university nor do they know any current or former university students. These representations change, however, as they gain their own experiences of studying at university. Alternatively, the new experiences cause different, already existing representations to come to the fore (see among others, Renedo and Jovchelovitch (2007), for a detailed discussion about polyphasic representational fields). This is illustrated by the responses given by ten university students who were asked to respond to

the same questionnaire as the folk high school participants about their associations of the terms 'folk high school' and 'university'. The responses show that the representations regarding folk high schools among university students, most of whom had no personal experience of folk high school, differed considerably from those of the folk high school participants. The university students' associations can be classified as occasional responses to a greater extent than can those of the participants. The university students' associations of university, however, corresponded very well to those of folk high school participants having had their own university experiences.

Duveen and Lloyd (1986) maintain that even if people are referred to as individual actors, their actorship is in many respects governed by social identities with which individuals associate themselves, as well as by the social representations associated with such identities. Individuals become involved in different social relations; this is why I find, in agreement with Duveen and Lloyd, that any attempt to distinguish individuals without regard to a social setting is, from a theoretical point of view, impossible, as well as inadequate. If the folk high school identity involves representations that university is not an option for those who have undertaken studies at folk high schools, and that participants are generally to be classified as 'failed students', this will hardly encourage those who accept this identity to go to university. In accordance with the mainstream social representation research viewpoint (see Moscovici, 2008), my opinion is that social representations can be challenged by new experiences, such as when an individual leaves his or her group and starts to identify with another social group, as in the case of one leaving folk high school to pursue a university education. New experiences may also be added when, for example, the group that the individual identifies with obtains new experiences, such as visits to and/or visitors from university, or when individuals having their own university experience join the group, sharing their experiences. It is true that individuals choose folk high school because they are in some way attracted to this form of education. The choice is still dependent, however, on the individual's social representations. Social representations of folk high school re-made by the individual consist of something that the individual is able to identify with, such as a calm and comfortable pace of study, which is seen as positive by those who have been unable to cope with their earlier studies in upper secondary education. It may also be the case that the individual has previously been informed that folk high schools offer a good study path for those who want to go to university. In any case, an individual's choosing to enrol in folk high school is about that individual's finding a social group with which he or she can identify.

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