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Researching the Offbeat: a Metaphor

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In this essay I liken social representation research to listening to syncopated rhythms. Just like the offbeat makes music captivating, the verbal raw material in qualitative research is discourse in action and everyday life. Through this tune, researchers need to feel and extract the 'beat', which, when done properly, may be called the underlying representation. Dialectically returning to the 'offbeat' with the representation in mind, then allows to identify the particular signature of the respondents' standpoint in life, their motivation and social positioning.

It was a day or so after the torrential rain that surprised participants and us, the organizers, at the first International Conference on Social Representations in Ravello 1992 that I came to liken social representation research's to certain musical features, that is syncopated rhythms. What I meant at that time was the position of Social Representation Theory within the wider field of Social Psychology, where it played the role of challenging and thwarting the limitations of a purely experimental methodology. My later research experience added yet another interpretation to the musical metaphor that may not have been clear to me twenty years ago.

Who ever listened to Cuban music has heard the driving rhythm called *clave* played with two hard-wood sticks also called claves. The name of the rhythm means key in this context. This particular rhythm and its variants guide much of Latin music. The pattern looks like this (Figure 1).

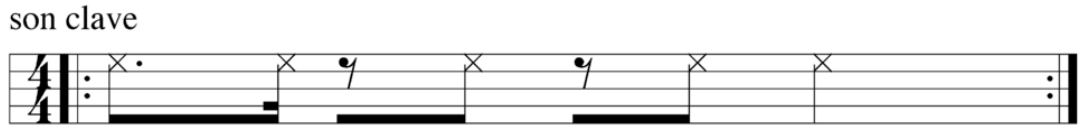

FIGURE 1. Notation of the Cuban son-clave. (extract of the image uploaded by Graeme Bartlett, released into the Public Domain. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Son_and_rumba_clave.png, November 16th 2011)

The 4/4th measure depicted in figure 1 shows the clave to consist of five tones of which only two fall on a beat. The beat is on 1 and 4. We call 'beat' the point in time where you would usually foot-tap when listening to music, that is: 1, 2, 3, 4, in this case. Two tones are offbeat by 1/8th (in the middle between 2 and 3, and between 3 and 4) and one tone is 1/16th before the placeholder of beat 2. What is hard to describe by words is easy to hear. Listen to the acoustic example (Clip 1).

CLIP 1. Sound of the Cuban Son-Clave. (Synthesised by Joscha Wondraschek, 2011)
Note: The clave is superimposed on the sound of a tom-tom marking the beats. The 30 seconds clip's first half is played slow, the second half faster.

A bit more 'offbeat' is the so-called Bossa Nova clave that Antonio Carlos Jobim introduced to Brazilian music less than onehundred years ago (Figure 2).

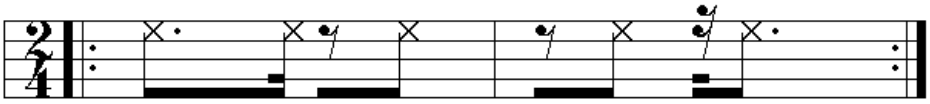

FIGURE 2. Notation of the bossa nova-clave. (by Dr Clave, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bossa_nova_pattern.png, November 16, 2011)

When listening to the following clip of the Bossa Nova clave, try to follow the beat of the lower pitched tom-tom with your feet and feel what happens; okay, just relax and feel (Clip 2).

CLIP 2. Sound of the bossanova-clave. (Synthesised by Joscha Wondraschek, 2011)
Note: The clave is superimposed on the sound of a tom-tom marking the beats. The 30 seconds clip's first half is played slow, the second half faster.

The latter example with beat and clave coinciding only on the first note of the measure illustrates the effect of syncopated rhythms even better, particularly when

walking or dancing to the rhythm. The beat creates the feeling of lightness that seems to ‘counteract’ gravity’s pull towards the main beat, that is your footfall on 1, 2, 1, and 2.

Research on social life has nothing to do with music, or has it? Well, this essay is not about representing music and the role music may play in society (e.g. Billig, 2000). It is rather using musical feelings to illustrate certain features of social representation research. You can take my allusion to syncopation as metaphorically capturing two aspects of social representation research: As a hint of what a social representation may be with regard to the ‚raw data’ in everyday life and as an image of qualitative methodology that is often the method of choice in social representation research.

So, what is qualitative research about? The qualitative researcher attempts to discover and/or feel the elements and clues in a series of interviews that the interviewee does not necessarily express explicitly in his or her statements. By proceeding in such a way across the transcripts, the investigator searches for the shared ground among a set of respondents who are the source of his or her material (e.g. Flick, 2000). Naturally, everyday persons rarely answer in a straightforward way; either because topics may be socially charged, because people simply are not used to give a well-organized account of the topic under investigation, or because they just don’t know where their beliefs are coming from. Hence, they produce bits and pieces, refer to this and that anecdote, and at the end play a slightly different tune than their compatriots. In this way no single interview on a topic equals the other; and where the same vocabulary is used, this vocabulary often reproduces catch phrases that are the least interesting for an inquiry.

In a book we likened the divergence of individual statements to the concept of polythetic categories where a set of items show only partial, but never complete overlap

in their characteristics, even though they may be grouped together. There is not a single characteristic that all items share. Items on opposite sides of the variety are concatenated by the partial overlap of intermediate items that are partially connected among each other (Wagner & Hayes, 2005, p. 201f).

In terms of my musical metaphor, the bulk of respondents play a syncopated tune, they converse in the offbeat, and each one ever so slightly offset from the other. Their common base is the beat that only a few of them may come to hit on and off during an interview; for the majority, the beat may only be virtually present. Above all, respondents may even ‚sing and dance' in different measures, for example by superposing a 'triplet rhythm' (playing three equidistant beats within a measure of 4; a very nice variation actually). This would be the case if they used different rhetorical devices to convey their beliefs. The researcher's task, hence, is to listen to each respondent's tune or rhythm, get a feeling for the pattern and compare this pattern with the patterns of other respondents. Taken together and given that we have sampled a large enough number, the joined patterns of all interviewees result in a tune that suddenly reveals the underlying structure: The joint tune allows to infer the beat that every single respondent had in his or her mind when asked about some specific topic.

Metaphorically, the beat resembles the basic structure of the representation. The beat tells us the underlying measure and accentuation, be it 2/4th, 4/4th, 6/8th, etc., and the speed; and, knowing the ‚beat' of a discourse as enacted in a series of interviews or focus-groups, we gain a lot of information that gives us a first impression of the way people think about an issue.

In her classic on 'madness', Denise Jodelet (Jodelet, 1991) inferred the 'beat' of how madness was understood by her respondents by following this procedure. The

divergent, polythetic or ‘syncopated’ responses ‚condensed’ to the ‚beat’ of the vernacular idea that madness might be somehow contagious. Even though respondents may have implied this in a merely symbolic way. It made the hosts materially avoid getting in too close contact with their mentally challenged guests and their belongings and utensils.

I vividly remember the days when I was studying the interview transcripts on biotechnology at a time, when this technology gained recognition in the Austrian media 1996. Reading one after the other transcript I could not but feel the subtext that none of the interviewees articulated but which implicitly floated everywhere ‘underneath’ the texts. Our respondents talked about genetic engineering as if genes were something foreign to a natural organism, reflecting a deep seated ‘idiosyncratic’ understanding of genes and their workings; I felt, this was the ‚beat’ hidden in the responses. This led us to include an item to that effect—‘Ordinary tomatoes do not contain genes, while genetically modified tomatoes do’—in a series of European surveys that about 30 percent of Europeans found plausible (Gaskell & Bauer, 2001; Gaskell, Allum, Bauer, Durant, Allansdottir, Bonfadelli *et al.*, 2000).

In a recent study on the use of the female veil in Muslim communities, we departed from the observation that host societies to Muslim immigrants show a tendency to reject female veiling, legislators in some countries even considering legal action against it (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, in press). Hence we were interested in the motivations and reasons Muslim women may have for or against wearing the veil. The inquiry revealed a number of reasons that are far from being due to ‚patriarchal oppression’, to use a feminist ‚standard’ argument. For some women the veil clearly signifies adherence to religious rules. Others, however, use the veil to

communicate their cultural identity, thereby resisting pressures of a non-Muslim majority towards assimilation, that is, to shed the veil. The ‘beat’ in the tune of the respondents, hence, is identity and self-worth related.

This begs the crucial question of how to be sure that the extracted representation is the ‘right’ one; that we are not tapping our feet to a wrong ‘rhythm’ as it can be observed all too often in concerts (c.f. Bergman, 1999). Well, there is no easy answer to this problem. The best one can bet on is to schedule independent tests using a different method, which may or may not bolster the researcher’s hunch. One way could be to present the basic idea behind the representation to a sample of respondents by questionnaire as we did in the biotechnology studies. Another way might be to dialectically confront the raw material with the hunch in mind and to see if it makes enough sense in the life space of the people. In any case one can never be certain.

Social Representations are not only static and abstract structures that stand in the background of a group’s discourse. Of equal importance is how people realise and enact this structure in conversation and other actions. Even though a musical piece is ordered in time according to the shared rhythmic measure, the basic pattern becomes a musical piece through the different instruments playing around and between the beat. Equally, a social representation becomes a ‚living’ and dynamic discourse when people add their personal motivations, interests, former experiences, and lived situations to their contributions. In other words, the researcher is well advised to attempt understanding the offbeats, syncopations, and melodies as these have to do with situated speech (for an example see Howarth, 2004).

In our veil study, for example, we also looked at subgroups of women whose account of their preferring the veil reflected their different life worlds, work situations

and family structures. This part of the research revealed the particular necessities women have to cope with in their daily life. Such necessities, of course, are far from being idiosyncratic, but cluster around socio-economic conditions. Knowing the underlying identity pattern enabled us to better understand the respondents' situated enactment of identity. In a similar vein, Serge Moscovici (1961) traced the images of psychoanalysis back to the societal positioning of his French respondents.

On and off you come across a manuscript where the final result of an inquiry on social representations are bare lists of words that experimental subjects have freely associated on an issue or object. Such a ‚finding' does not only fall far short of characterizing a social representation by using an artificial ‚quasi-experimental' context for evoking the associative responses; it also ignores the personal accounts and social contexts within which particular words come to bear. Word lists, if they are not amended by alternative methods and semantic analysis, do not convey the ‚beat' of public discourse not to mention the ‚playful' discursive tune of a group of people. Examples of this kind of papers and others that merely assess attitudes, beget the question whether a paper is about a social representation by virtue of the author's declaration or whether it is the methodological ingredients that ‚make' it a social representation inquiry. The official position clearly points to the review process by expert members of the scientific community as the crucial criterion, and rightly so. For me, a valid piece of research in our field should be able to create a feeling of the basic ‚beat' of the representation *and* of the syncopated life discourse within a community. A beat without a tune is sterile and the tune without a structuring beat leaves the reader clueless.

At the end, aesthetically inclined readers may consider social representation research a kind of art as Serge Moscovici commented after my intervention in Ravello. However, the ‚art' goes much further than the metaphor I am promoting here, which is only half of the story in social representation research. Nevertheless I consider the circular movement from conversational jumble to the basic pattern and back to the situated utterances that—now knowing the rhythm—all of a sudden gain a situated meaning crucial; and it is the latter that makes researching social life such an exciting task.

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