Papers on Social Representations
Volume 20, pages 12.1-12.12 (2011)
Peer Reviewed Online Journal
ISSN 1021-5573

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

Putting Experiments in their Place: Commentary on Robert Farr's 'Social Representations: their role in the design and execution of laboratory experiments' in R. M. Farr and S. Moscovici (Eds.), (1984), *Social Representations* (pp. 125-147). Cambridge: CUP.

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Central to Robert Farr's social psychology is to show that key psychological constructs are not 'located' in the individual mind but are instead dynamic phenomena originated by communicative acts between individuals. To pursue this aim he combined the social psychology of Mead, Heider and Moscovici into a historical approach that demonstrated that it is in and through society, not without it or out of it, that we become individual psychological beings. In his scholarship there is both an unsurpassable mastery of canonical work in psychology and a deep appreciation of the role social psychology plays in the challenging task of reversing the de-socialisation of the behavioural sciences.

Farr's contribution to the volume co-edited with Moscovici in 1984 remains in my view a paradigmatic example of his work and an essential contribution to our understanding of the theory of social representations. It explores the potential of social representations for re-socialising psychology, the importance of understanding history and how present concerns are related to traditions we may need to question and renew. It reinstates with great clarity the necessity of distinguishing the individual and the social levels of analysis without an excessive separation that destroys the vision of their vital inter-connection. And importantly,

it demonstrates that our manner of doing science and the tools and methodologies we deploy for doing it are permeated and heavily shaped by the social representations we hold about the social, the individual and the relations between the two. So rather than walking into a lab as neutral scientists seeking to reveal the truth of phenomena, we are – just as everyone else - cultural travellers, inhabitants of socio-cultural ecosystems whose frameworks define, constrain and enable what and how we think and act. We are produced and producers of systems of meaning that will always find their way into the research setting - with or without our awareness. One of the great merits of Farr's paper is to enhance our awareness, to show that between the institutional reified world of science and the consensual world of common sense there are fuzzy boundaries, whose porosity allows constant inter-penetration and mutual transformation. In psychology, due to specific historical circumstances, it has been the social representation of the individual in one form or another that conquered the lab and guided procedures. But, as Farr so elegantly demonstrates, it does not need to be so. As a cultural setting, the lab is a field of representations and in this sense it is open for alternative representational fields: as with all cultural artefacts experiments are subject to history and moving conceptualisations of what science is and how it is done.

On the Individual and the Social, or Cutting Up Psychology and the Social Sciences

Why has the dichotomy between individual and societal psychology been so persistent in psychology and beyond? Even social psychology, a discipline that should have no problems displaying its social credentials, has not escaped from it. Individual and societal forms of social psychology exist and to a large extent replicate the separation found in psychology as a whole. As Farr notes, Wundt had already chosen to deliberately separate his new science of psychology into an experimental science and a social science. It was quite clear to Wundt that as an experimental science psychology needed a complementary social science, which he nominated *Völkerpsychologie*. To understand mind and its development, it was also necessary to understand what human minds produce in society, outside the lab. The shared experience of community produces language, customs, myths, rituals, religions and other forms of collective phenomena. These, Wundt knew, cannot be explained at the individual level. No single individual creates a language or a ritual, only with others they do, and these phenomena needed studying if a comprehensive psychology was to develop.

From the very beginning Wundt understood the need for both individual and collective forms of psychology. But, as Farr points out, his decision to separate the two had

consequences of historical significance. Indeed the consideration of culture and society in psychology is largely dependent on the reading of Wundt's overall project and on how his first and second psychology relate (Danzinger, 1979). That the separation he proposed became too rigid was a development of tremendous significance in psychology and beyond. It put a social and cultural psychology and an experimental psychology in very different locations and prevented their cross-fertilisation and joint development. It contributed to the already ingrained Cartesian view of the individual as a monad closed in itself and the 'outside' as an unreliable and inefficient source of material for psychological constructs. Durkheim, who was influenced by Wundt and whose sociology is central to the theory of social representations, became himself a strong advocate of the sharp separation between psychology and sociology, maintaining that individual representations were an object-domain for psychology whereas collective representations should be studied by sociologists and kept away from psychologists (Durkheim, 1898/1996). To this day culture remains an uneasy traveller in the walled landscape of psychology (Valsiner, 2009).

Recovering Creative Tensions

One of the key points Farr advances in this paper relates to how the theory of social representations escaped from the over sharp separation between individual and society and engaged creatively with the tensions between the two. This it does by paying attention to the study of modes of knowledge and the role of symbolic processes in human action. Meaning becomes central to understand behaviour and knowledge, which are not seen as unimodal phenomena but polyphasic processes that transform in relation to contexts and historical time. By taking psychoanalysis as an object of cultural transformation, Moscovici's original study sought to identify how a novel scientific theory enters the public sphere and becomes part of its culture. In focusing on how ideas move and become accepted social representations theory illuminates processes of social innovation and societal change; in this it clearly repositions the role of individuals, even as a minority of one, to engage old established traditions and make them new. The tension between the individual and society is central to social representations and to this day continues to nurture research in this area.

Now it is precisely this creative tension between the individual and society that can be found in the equally creative tensions found between field and laboratory studies. Farr puts forward an analysis of how laboratory studies may sustain this creative tension, something that is rarely found in psychology. Even in the field of social representations, experimental

designs that try to capture social representations within a single experiment reveal significant conceptual problems, the most important of which being the failure to take into account the representational complexity experiments both invite and stage. The sharpness of Farr's argument in this paper consists precisely in grounding the lab and making it real as a social artefact while at the same time identifying the presuppositions and empirical similarities that underscore all methodological options, including of course experimental methods.

It may be thought that experiments, for being the privileged method of science, escape from the problems and considerations encountered by field researchers. Experiments try to create 'another world', controlled and isolated: they aim to become a world a-part, as Farr so aptly describes. This, however, is more desire than fact. For what constitutes a laboratory study and what are the contours of such studies? Although their utmost aim is to produce a 'neutral' and fully controlled environment for isolating psychological phenomena, Farr's sharp analysis devastatingly turns these aims upside down to show that *the lab is itself an environment open for analysis as a field of representations*. In the lab, as in society, representations circulate, clash, frame behaviour and organise procedures. Experimenters and their subjects walk into the lab environment as carriers of systems of meaning, as citizens of socio-cultural worlds that they cannot just shrug off, ignore and easily dispose. Socio-cultural worlds shape and circumscribe what is to be done, interfere with the design, set the task, underlie the questions asked, the interpretation of the answers obtained and the nature of the languages used.

At a first glance Farr's analysis may be mistakenly considered as an argument against the use of experiments in social representations research; this however overlooks precisely what is central to this paper. When reading Farr, hastiness is not a good strategy. His work is better savoured slowly as one would a good meal and an excellent glass of wine because the effects linger far beyond the moment of reading. Experiments for him are not the problem; indeed they are not a problem at all. His issue is the rigid separation that avoids the creative tension between a socio-cultural psychology and an experimental psychology, between the individual and the social. As soon as this creative tension is allowed to develop there emerge the central insights of an integrative framework that sustains the link between Wundt first and second psychology. These insights, as Farr showed elsewhere (Farr, 1996), lie in the intermediate level of analysis between the individual and the social, something that can be studied both through laboratory and field studies. Social representations theory can enrich our understanding of the laboratory as a field of representations; in doing so it actually sharpens and redefines the lab as an ecosystem and the experimental setting as a social encounter.

Social representations theory can bring society back to the lab and re-socialise experimentation, and that is why in Farr's view this is a contribution not only to social psychology but to psychology as a whole.

Bringing Society Back: The Laboratory as Social Representation

Social representations are created and transformed in society and to study them in the context of a laboratory poses the immediate problem of dislocating the phenomena from its context of production. Farr provides an illuminating exploration of how social representations re-enter the lab. His analysis re-introduces and carefully unpacks context by considering the multiple perspectives embedded in the representational field of the experimental setting. If the notion of social representations is to be successfully applied to the design and conduct of laboratory experiments, we need to understand the multiple worlds present in the laboratory, the representations that form them and the type of knowledge encounters they afford.

This model is paradigmatic for the study of social representations in society: it considers the laboratory as a public sphere of sorts and anticipates elements Bauer and Gaskell (1999, 2008) developed years later for the 'Toblerone Model' and I used when developing the idea of 'knowledge encounters' in contemporary public spheres (Jovchelovitch, 2007). It is in the encounter of perspectives between self and other, or between social groups and the various communicative patterns they develop that social representations are created and evolve. The nature of these encounters and the communicative game they engage is right at the genesis of representational forms and the moving force of their development and transformation.

One of the striking arguments that Farr presents in this paper is that in traditional experimentation the communicative act between researcher and subject of research is unidirectional. This frames the style of experimenting, as Farr has shown clearly in two earlier papers (1978, 1976). Embedded in this argument is a profound understanding of the radical insight of social representations theory: cognitive systems, even those used by scientists in a lab, are formed by systems of communication and interaction. This was already present in Moscovici's research on psychoanalysis, where he showed that different modes of communication, i.e., diffusion, propaganda and propagation, shape representational outcomes and can close or open cognitive systems. Brought to bear on the experimental setting, it reveals in full light what these procedures try to avoid but cannot when it comes to research with human subjects. There is communication between researcher and subject and this

communication is itself a variable that is likely to produce an effect. In Farr's words, "in describing 'the world as he observed it' the experimenter may fail adequately to take into account his own role as an observer and the effect he may have had on the work which he observed." (p. 137)

Ironically, this effect is not unknown for psychologists. It is amply discussed in clinical settings and in conducting clinical interviews. Clinicians recognise just too well what Freud described as transference and counter-transference (Freud, 1912). Indeed a dialogical epistemology is generally assumed in interviewing situations, for there is a clear co-construction of perspectives that is integral to both clinicians and qualitative researchers (Gonçalves and Salgado, 2001; Farr, 1990). This however, is a much larger issue that is part of the paradigm shift introduced by Einstein: the position of the observer has an effect on the world as observed.

Observing the Observer Observing: Perspective and interaction in the experimental setting

Laboratory experiments take place in a built environment that comprises manifold worlds. Laboratories have specific addresses and are located institutionally, they have atmospheres and embody in their material disposition and built arrangements the ethos, the vision and the strategy of researchers and institutions. Laboratories constitute in their sheer materiality an objectified system of representations about science, about psychology, about the subject of psychology and about the interaction between researcher and population researched. Even before we start thinking about the actual people who enter the lab, its objective set up is able to both refer to and construct a certain vision of the world. This basic fact was clearly and brilliantly demonstrated in Milgram's experiments on the banality of evil, where the laboratory itself proved a central element to command the implicit power of science and motivate the behaviour of ordinary people. Laboratories are objectifications of specific representations and the idea of a lab as a neutral territory is in itself a component of a very specific representation of the scientific enterprise.

It is in this socially laden environment that the social encounter between science/experimenter and lay/research subject takes place. The perspectives of both researcher and research subject meet, although it is revealing, as Farr notes, to reflect which is the world that dominates and the perspective that is taken into account. The lab contains the world of the observer and the world of the observed and yet in most cases it is the world

of the observer alone that seems to be relevant in the experimental situation. Indeed, when this changes, and mutually in perspectives (Markova, Graumann, & Foppa, 1995) is sought there is a notable change in the style of experimenting (Farr, 1976, 1978). A detailed consideration of the world of the observer shows first that he establishes a very sharp distinction between his world and the world he observes. This is a separation that became institutionalised in psychology with behaviourism, when the demise of introspection meant that the researcher was now observing someone else's behaviour. His own world as an observer had to disappear as he sought the neutral position of a detached observer of manifest behaviour. Not accidently Farr considers behaviourism to be the form positivism took in the history of psychology.

However, although the observer/experimenter tries to withdraw his world from the experimental situation and thinks of it as an a-social event, the event remains firmly social and his world does not disappear. There are the community of scholars to which he belongs, young researchers he is training, codes and procedures he is following, institutional determinants he is enacting. The world of the observer is peopled by specific representations that guide his actual style of experimenting, something Farr discussed in great detail in another illuminating paper I mentioned earlier (Farr, 1976). As a member of a community of observers which provides the background horizon guiding what he does and how he observes, the observer is also observed by his community. How experimenters behave in the lab may be a function of how they represent to themselves and others the nature of the scientific activity and the checks and controls of other observers.

In this analysis the relations between representation and action in the lab become clear: the theory and vision of experimenters shapes the conduct of the experiment. The conception of person, science and research actually determines how science is done and the person is studied. There is a clear difference depending on how researchers represent their science - as a natural or a social science for instance - or on how they conceive of the individual, his development and socio-cultural location. These factors take place in the lab but originate in society. They render the lab a micro-cosmos of society and make the idea of the lab as an a-social event utterly implausible. The lab is in fact a terrain and the experimenter is one of its social actors whether he acknowledges it or not.

Now what is left for the world as observed? Farr identifies this world as being usually what appears in the results section when observers report on how experimental subjects perform in laboratory tasks. Through a Meadian analysis of the encounter of perspectives between observer and observed, Farr shows that the world as observed by the observer retains

little of the experiential perspective of the people observed. Experimental subjects engage with the task set by observers and must take their perspective if the experiment is to succeed. Subjects are invited to understand instructions and do as they are told. The possible consequences of taking seriously subjects' repertoire of beliefs in the experimental situation have been discussed in detail by Farr on his analysis of the social significance of artefacts in experiments (Farr, 1978). However, what one finds in most experimental studies, including those within social representations, is that experimenters offer their own representations to subjects and observe how they react to them. Or, as Farr puts it: 'the experimenter, by means of his instructions, introduces the representations into the minds of the individuals whose behaviour he then observes" (p.143). In a conventional experimental design the actor whose perspective is actually present and thus amenable for being studied is that of the e*xperimenter*. If he takes other perspectives into account these are most likely to be those of another member of the scientific community.

This heavy wall between the world of the observer, the world as observed and the actual world of the observed is a crucial social artefact in manufacturing psychological data and yet it has been often ignored in mainstream psychological research. It has been forcefully brought to the fore by cultural and social psychologists, but old habits die hard. To this day the experimental setting continues to be a social world where it is difficult to take into account the perspective of the other - in this case the world of the observed, in all its experiential, social, historical and cultural complexity. As long as this is the case I see little point in calling experimental subjects 'participants' and that is why in this paper I have retained the usage of 'subject' to describe research participants in experimental designs.

Can there be Participants in Experimental Settings?

Throughout his paper Farr leaves no doubt that there are alternative ways for conducting experiments. Understanding the role of social representations on how they are designed and conducted is a major step to refine experimental designs and allow an easier crossing between field and laboratory studies. And yet resolving the tensions between these two approaches continues to be a challenge. It eluded Wundt and it is hardly acknowledged within psychology, a notable exception being the work of cultural psychologists. Farr notes that the problem was dealt with satisfactorily by Mead, who offers inspiration for his own approach seeking to reveal different states of awareness of participants in the lab. The crucial point to note here is that participants refer both to experimenters and the persons invited into the lab.

It is not a matter of paying attention to the representations of either observers or observed. Participants in the research situation are not only its 'subjects' but also its researchers. Research, be it in the lab or in the field, is a social encounter and includes the world of observers and the world of the observed. How to take both into account and ease the dividing wall between these two worlds is the crux of the matter.

Designs can be culturally sensitive and take into account the representational encounters that take place in the lab, adjusting tasks and the setting to the aim of grasping how the world of experimenters produces effects on the world of the observed. The melancholic attitude in research (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) involves precisely researchers' careful consideration of their own involvement in research, the assumptions they bring with them, the prejudices and representations they carry as well as a trained eye and decentred ego that makes a systematic effort to avoid that all this baggage silences or distorts the research focus. Throwing our own representations, desires and culture at the people we want to study is not an option if the Other is to be allowed to enter the research process as a participant. To do this however, we need to learn to conceive of researchers as participants too, something which is difficult because it implies changes in position, identity and deep-seated assumptions of asymmetry in the research situation. To envisage designs that allow all involved to become participants, i.e., persons whose voice and world are taken seriously into account in the research situation is one of the most fundamental lessons of this paper.

The Future of Creative Tensions

In reading this and others of Rob Farr's papers for this Special Issue I was once again reminded of what is central to his scholarship and contribution: a capacity to unpack the historical streams that run deep in the paths we take today and show how a great deal of the issues engaged by social psychology's classical work were pointers for the social sciences. The separation proposed by Wundt continues to define our everyday practice and whether we like it or not is alive and well both in the institutional organisation and evaluation of psychological science and in our conceptual and methodological practices. His demonstration of this process in laboratory studies is a master class in this regard. It is also a striking anticipation of the idea of research as a social encounter and the conceptual and methodological issues raised by qualitative researchers and dialogical theorists today. Dialogicality and perspective were issues that Farr treated throughout his work and successfully introduced into the theory of social representations. As he shows, any

understanding of psychology and social psychology must engage with a deep-seated collective representation of the individual that in many guises and unacknowledged, rules what psychologists think about science, about human nature and about psychology itself. His antidote was the communicative act.

At the time of writing this paper Farr was not convinced that laboratory studies would be able to engage with their sociality and play a crucial role in re-socialising psychology. His pessimism has not been challenged by events in the more recent development of psychology. As we start the second decade of the 21st century psychology leans heavily towards the neurosciences and shows no signs of overcoming the separation proposed by Wundt. Social and cultural psychology, at least in Anglo-Saxon contexts, seems to be more and more squeezed out of psychology and forced to find asylum in other disciplines of the social sciences, which paradoxically have fully embraced its lessons and contribution (for an excellent account of this process see Wetherell, 2011). Given the current climate we all need to acknowledge the instability and fragility of our domain and think hard about where we want to be and what is the future of social psychology's contribution to its *alma mater*. Indeed part of the problem is that the *alma mater* of social and cultural psychology is not to be found in psychology alone.

Farr's solution to the historical difficulties of psychology and social psychology was to retrieve and expand the work of Mead, Heider and Moscovici into an approach that can create an alternative history, another stream in the large river of psychology. Psychology's long past can help, as can social psychology's insight that innovation always comes from minorities. In this sense, he knew the importance of minorities and was not bothered to be part of one. Today, more than ever we need to go back to the argument Rob Farr developed in this paper and throughout his scholarly work: history and society play a major role in shaping our scientific practice. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. It is in our hands how we understand this process and whether we follow or lead its determinants.

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