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Reflections on Bauer and Gaskell's Towards a Paradigm for Research on Social Representations

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This commentary considers Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) much-cited paper *Towards a paradigm for research in social representations*. It examines both the main theoretical contribution of the paper (the project in representation) and the methodological guidelines that the paper puts forward, considering the impact of both of these in the field of social representations. It argues that there is considerably more conceptual and empirical work to be done on the interesting concept of the project, and also focuses on the issue of the 'disinterested research attitude' which Bauer and Gaskell (1999) propose, suggesting that this is more controversial than the rest of their methodological discussion.

Martin Bauer and George Gaskell's 1999 paper *Towards a paradigm for research in social representations*, published in the Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, has had a significant impact on the field of social representations. It has been cited over seventy times[1] and is important for several reasons. Firstly, as the title suggests, it makes a considerable methodological contribution to the field, and attempts to engage seriously with just how a researcher should *do* social representations research: in a field that has often been criticised for its methodological eclecticism, something which has been seen as causing *'conflict and confusion'* (Breakwell and Canter, 1993, p.6), this is particularly significant. However, it also makes a fascinating theoretical case for incorporating a more explicit conceptualisation of action and interaction into our consideration of social representations, in the idea of the *project*. This commentary will reflect on both of these important arguments, and attempt to assess the impact of the paper in the field of social representations, considering how influential these ideas have been for scholars in the area. It will also highlight some of the challenges that may persist.

Bauer and Gaskell (1999) begin their paper with a discussion of their theoretical concerns, and in particular elaborate on their 'toblerone' model of common sense (p.171), which feeds into later discussion on some important methodological concerns. Before this, they discuss the relationship between common sense and science in greater depth: what was particularly notable at the time of publication (some nine years before the English translation of *Psychoanalysis: its image and its public* [Moscovici, 2008] was finally published) was the close consideration of the different communicative processes between science and common sense – propaganda, propagation and diffusion. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) make it clear how, in Moscovici's original (2008) study, these different communicative processes related to different milieus (communists, Catholics, urban liberals respectively) as group members made sense out of psychoanalysis. Prior to the publication of this paper, much of the English-speaking consideration of social representations had tended to focus more on the other mechanisms of social representation (and perhaps in particular the content of representations) and there had been less awareness of the ideas on communicative processes, something which rather stunted the development of the theory in the Anglo-Saxon world (Duveen, 2000). Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) paper makes an important contribution to moving beyond this

[1] Source: Scopus, accessed 8th December 2011.

focus and to putting different forms of communication within and between different social groups back at the heart of social representations theory.

This focus is perhaps not surprising given their large-scale project on public understanding of biotechnology (Durant, Bauer and Gaskell, 1998), and it is interesting that of the papers that have subsequently cited Bauer and Gaskell (1999), around a quarter of them do so as an example of work on social representations of biotechnology. I would argue, however, that the paper's main contributions lie elsewhere. Drawing on Moscovici's (2008) psychoanalysis study, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) make it clear that a central part of social representations theory is its emphasis on considering common sense understanding in context, and not seeing it as a deficient or bastardised form of scientific understanding. This has always been central to social representations theory (Moscovici and Marková, 2000), and has been elaborated upon by a number of other theorists working with social representations, both before and after the publication of this paper (e.g. Farr, 1993; Jovchelovitch, 2008). Here, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) explicitly contrast social representations theory more directly with deficit and Hi-Fi[2] models within work on the public understanding of science, which assume that understanding becomes incorrect and fuzzy as it moves from the scientific realm to that of common sense; they make it clear how social representations theory provides a richer perspective from which to consider the different ways in which common sense can develop in relation to expert understanding.

They also make clear their position with regards to social constructionism using a helpful analogy of a stone being thrown into a pond: the ripples and *'what they tell us about the invisible depths of the pond'* (p.167) are of particular interest, whereas the stone itself is not. In this way, the nature of the object of representation (whether it is theories of genetics, mental illness or gender) is not the issue: instead, it is the representations of that object (the ripples) and how those representations relate to their particular context (the properties of the pool) that are of interest to social psychologists. This position, of course, holds that there is a stone (and an object of representation) in the first place, which would be an issue of some debate for social representations theorists who take a stronger social constructionist perspective, and suggest that representations can, in some sense, create the object that is being

[2] In the so-called 'Hi-fi' model, scientific understanding is regarded as the 'pure' form of knowledge, and any differences between this and public understanding are regarded as distortions, and attributed either to failings on the part of the general public (the audience) or problems within the process of communication. For further discussion, see Hilgartner (1990)

represented, and indeed the reality (see Jovchelovitch [2001] for some helpful discussion on this topic). However, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) make the additional point that in many ways neither of these positions are entirely adequate (despite their sympathy with the 'weaker' version). They say: *'Sometimes representations 'are X', in the sense of fusing the world and our experience of it; sometimes representations 'are of X', when we, in distancing ourselves, reflect upon them.'* (p.169). This is a helpful way of dealing with what can often become a rather circular debate, and, once again, roots itself in the group function of representations and communicative processes, and in their particular context.

The main theoretical contribution of the paper, however, comes in the discussion of the 'toblerone' model, which adds the dimension of time to the basic triad (Subject-Subject-Object) to form a 'project' (see figure 1).

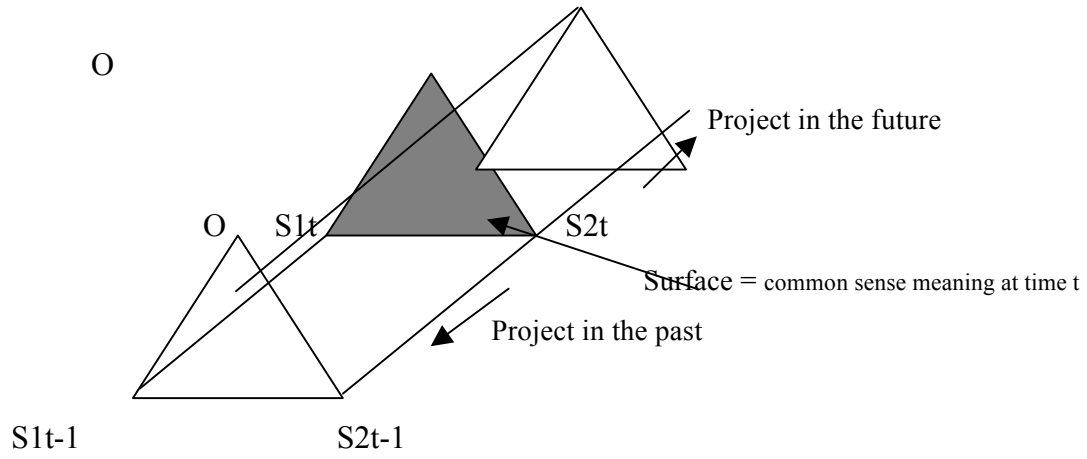

Figure 1: Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) Toblerone model of common sense

This model has two particularly important aspects: firstly, it emphasises action and interaction in social representation. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) describe the project that develops through time as *'akin to the experience of a common fate'* which links individuals within a social group *'via mutual interests, goals and activities'* (p.170). Representations, then, are not merely ideas held in the abstract, but are seen as central to the way we organise our lives and communicate with others. Secondly, the development of representations and projects is considered in a longitudinal fashion. This is also a crucial aspect of social representations: Moscovici (2000) moved away from Durkheim's (1898) notion of the collective representation precisely because he saw these as too static and unchanging (Farr,

1998). Instead, social representations change, evolve and develop as they are used and appropriated by different social groups, as they come into contact with other representations and other forms of knowledge, such as the scientific. In this way, as individuals within a social group use and draw upon social representations through their projects, transformation and development of representations, projects and indeed the group itself are possible.

Immediately after the introduction of this model, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) make it clear that seeing one 'toblerone' in isolation is an over-simplification. Instead, they argue that a number of projects (and corresponding representations) held by different groups will be organised around the common object of representation, rather like a 'pack' of toblerones. Again, this draws attention to the group function of social representations, and to the differences between collective and social representations. Whereas collective representations (in a Durkheimian sense) are widely shared (and largely unquestioned) in societies, social representations are linked to different social groups, and conflict, discussion and variation is therefore inevitable. This also allows for a consideration of the power relationships between different representations and different groups (see Foster, 2003a). While Bauer and Gaskell do not state this explicitly, they do argue that *'in reality, the pack [of toblerones] would be contorted, with toblerones of different sizes, and twisted in elongation, and possibly with different numbers of toblerones at different times.'* (p.172).

It is interesting to reflect, twelve years later, on how influential this model has been. Indeed, Bauer and Gaskell (2008) do this themselves in a later paper, and acknowledge the need for their original model to be both conceptually developed and also extended: for example, they suggest in this later paper that representation should be seen as a function of subject, object, project, time, medium and intergroup context. They also extend their discussion to include a greater consideration of power between different groups and representations, drawing on Latour's (1987) 'wind rose' metaphor, which, they argue, allows for a greater consideration of minority and majority perspectives, and both the impact of representations on the object of representation and the particular constraints of reality that might be imposed on the situation. Despite this substantial theoretical contribution, almost three-quarters of the other researchers who have cited Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) paper have done so because of its methodological contributions or as a work on public understanding of biotechnology. Few empirical studies seem to have drawn more directly on the way that projects might be operating in relation to groups and to representations, although some

subsequent papers do make references to the theoretical utility of the toblerone model: Jodelet (2008), for example, mentions its potential *'to account for the diachronic transformation of social representations through social exchange'* (p.424). An empirical exception is Foster's (2003b; 2007) work on mental health service users' representations of mental health problems which makes extensive use of the idea of service users' (and professionals') projects with regards to mental health. Whether the utility of the concept in this case is due to the salience of mental health to mental health service users, and how projects might relate to other representations in other contexts, however, remains more unclear, and more work is certainly needed both to develop the concept of the project in more depth, and to consider its empirical applications. This development could take many different directions, but an interesting one might be to consider how projects develop and become active for the individual: Valsiner's (2003) discussion of a theory of enablement might be a useful place to start to make some of these links.

Where the contribution of Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) paper is perhaps more immediately obvious to those less familiar with social representations (especially given the paper's title) is in its methodological discussion. This is, however, very much related to their earlier theoretical discussion and model, and should not be divorced from it (although this has often been the case in papers that have cited this paper). The final half of the paper puts forward an *'ideal type'* (p.174) for social representations research. Methodology in social representations theory has been something of a contentious issue for some time, with discussion on which methods, and indeed perspectives, are the most appropriate (Flick and Foster, 2008). In a field that has seen qualitative and quantitative approaches to both data collection and analysis, it is easy to see how a confusion has arisen, and this has been a major criticism of the field (see Volklein and Howarth, 2005 for a full review).

Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) paper was therefore timely, providing seven *'implications'* (p.175) for research using social representations theory. The first, they state, is to be taken for granted: this is that research using the theory should continue to focus on both the content of social representations and also the process of representing. Taken for granted it may be, but it is nonetheless worth restating, especially in light of their earlier theoretical discussion on communicative processes and representations in action. Research into social representations needs to take both what the representation is, and how it is developed, maintained and communicated equally seriously.

Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) second methodological point relates to the group function of social representations. Here, they point out that it makes no sense in social representations research to rely on taxonomic clusters, as is so often the case in the social sciences. We should not expect all women to share a particular representation of a particular object, nor all thirtysomethings: this may be the case in certain (and perhaps unusual) circumstances, but it is not the researcher's place to impose this group membership onto participants. Instead, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) draw a distinction between *strong* 'natural' groups, who share a common project and history (a good example might be members of a small mental health service user organisation) and *weak* 'natural groups who share some aspects of their identity and project in a looser sense: here they use the example of mothers of young children from their own work on genetically-modified foods; other examples might include teachers dealing with children with ADHD (Skelly, 2011). The difficulty of this 'segmentation' and the need for *'sociological imagination'* (p.177) in approaching it is also covered: this would, of course, involve moving beyond our own assumptions as researchers about shared characteristics and considering group affinity (in relation to our research questions) in more complex ways.

Thirdly, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) highlight the need for cultivation studies, that is how different representations are cultivated in different communication systems, both formal and informal. This has been a focus of social representations theory for some time, and in part relates to the notion of the circulation and development of representations at different levels: Duveen and Lloyd (1990) suggest that representations circulate, develop and are maintained through three related levels: microgenetic, sociogenetic and ontogenetic. Microgenesis is the evocation of representations at the interpersonal, conversational level in everyday interaction; sociogenesis is the broader, societal process through which representations are generated over time, and ontogenesis relates to how representations become active for the individual – how we grow into representations as we become functioning members of a social group. Obviously, while it makes no sense to think of these levels as operating independently, it is important to think of ways of approaching them all methodologically. Farr (1993) comments that it has become commonplace for studies using social representations theory to aim to sample representations that might be circulating at the more sociogenetic level (such as within the media – here falling more into Bauer and Gaskell's formal communication system) and the more microgenetic (such as conversation in an interview – the more informal communication here). What is essential, according to Bauer

and Gaskell (1999) is that these studies focus on the plurality of representations that are possible from one single source.

Related to this, Bauer and Gaskell (1999) highlight the need for multi-method studies that allow for triangulation between different perspectives, representations and positions (see also Flick, 2007), before moving on to discuss the need for longitudinal studies. This, obviously, harkens back to their theoretical construction of the project through time: we can understand more about how representations change and develop, and how they impact upon and are impacted upon by the actions and interactions of different social groups if we study these groups and representations across time. Their sixth methodological point, however, highlights how particular times can also be significant and useful for the study of social representations. As Moscovici (2000) has already pointed out, meaning that might otherwise be taken for granted and considered a matter of fact comes to the foreground in times of crisis and change. When a new phenomenon, or new information, is reported, for example, different groups struggle to make sense of it in potentially different (and conflicting) ways which can make existing representations more obvious, even as they are contested. Numerous examples of this exist in social representations studies, from early discussion of HIV/AIDS (Joffe, 1999) to the way representations of nature are discussed and elaborated upon in the wake of a man-made disaster (Gervais, 1997).

Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) final methodological implication is that social representations researchers should maintain a *'disinterested'* or *'melancholic'* attitude to their topic of study, meaning that they should *'step back from direct intervention in social affairs'* (p.179) in order to better study and understand the representations of a particular group as sensitively as possible. Social engagement, they argue, is not impossible from a social representations perspective, but any programmes for social change or for action should not form part of the empirical enquiry. This is arguably the most controversial of the methodological points discussed in this paper (see Howarth, Foster and Dorrer, 2004 for a discussion of this). On the one hand, it is clear that the researcher needs to guard against imposing his or her own beliefs about what might be appropriate or 'better' representations in any given situation: this would, of course, run counter to the idea so integral to social representations theory that common sense should not be judged or regarded as deficient in relation to other forms of understanding, and its purpose and context must be carefully considered. It is clearly crucial that the researcher approaches any study of social

representations of any group with an open mind, and attempts to foreground his or her own existing representations so as to consider the effect that these might have on the research and analysis. However, as Jovchelovitch (2007) so eloquently points out, forms of knowledge, and the way that these are expressed in interaction, are shot through with issues of power and hierarchy: these lead to some social groups being subjugated, denied the right to have a voice, and to psychological and material suffering. Whether it is possible to approach such situations as social psychologists with a disinterested attitude is perhaps questionable. More recently, a tradition has emerged that aims to amalgamate social representations theory with participatory and community approaches to social psychology (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000; Howarth, Foster and Dorrer, 2004). These studies have relied more on the potential for social representations theory to highlight and foreground stigmatising and harmful representations, and to work with communities to try to change these. Representations that may be stigmatising can be held by members of a social group themselves (about themselves), as in the case of Krause's (2003) group of people suffering from chronic bowel problems. Alternatively, they may be held by a group about another particular social group, as in the case of mental health professionals dealing with mental health clients (Foster, 2007) or schoolchildren making sense of ethnicity (Howarth, 2007). There may be potential for social representations researchers to work with communities to examine, and change, these representations, rather than to remain disinterested, although this process will always be somewhat fraught with theoretical and practical tensions, and some (although certainly not all) of the elaboration of this point has so far remained rather abstract.

In conclusion, Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) paper goes far in both developing the theory of social representations conceptually, and providing clear methodological guidelines. It is not surprising that it has become so widely cited, and it is particularly interesting to see the range of journals in which papers which draw on it have been published: in addition to many social psychology journals, this also includes journals on communication research, information and food technology, education, risk analysis, medical sociology and marketing. This list would certainly suggest that social representations theory does indeed have a wide application across a number of areas.

However, it is perhaps because of the challenges that this paper throws down, both theoretically and methodologically, that it remains so relevant and interesting to researchers using social representations theory. There is still much to be done in elaborating upon many

aspects of the way in which representations develop and are communicated, how members of a social group act and interact with representations and with one another, and how groups interact with one another. Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) model, and their later contributions (Bauer and Gaskell, 2008) go some way to developing these debates, but there is more to be done.

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