

## **Commentary on The Epistemological Significance of the Theory of social representations (Marková 2008)**

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Cantor planted a seed of doubt amongst mathematicians and physicists and after Gödel mathematicians had to concede and accept that even mathematics had its limitations, and that beyond it was intuition (Dangerous Knowledge, 2010). This at the same time challenged and opened new routes in defining and studying mathematics. In *The Epistemological Significance of the Theory of social representations* Marková (2008), amongst other things, outlines possible ways in which the connection between dialogicality and the theory of social representations could do the same for the social sciences and social psychology in particular, i.e. how it might challenge its traditional positivistic and individualistic epistemology and establish new ways of exploring complex social phenomena. This essay will explore some of the implications this connection might have on the future development of the theory of social representations as well as what it might contribute to social psychology and epistemology in general. The final point of the argument will be to show how this connection has been empirically used to challenge established concepts such as stigma as well as to find a new way of explaining the functioning of the human mind.

### **DIALOGICALITY AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS**

Dialogicality has had a number of intellectual ancestors such as Hegel, Bakhtin, Mead, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein and Goffman and has been used for challenging the way human behaviour, cognition, and communication have been studied (Gillespie 2010). Depending on the fields and topics to which dialogicality is being applied, it may be defined in various

ways. According to Bakhtin (1979 as cited in Marková 2003, p83), dialogicality implies that individuals live “in a world of others’ words” and the “limits of the self is not I, but I in interrelationship with the other”. On the other hand, Moscovici defines social representations as a “system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication...” (Moscovici 1973 cited in Wagner et al. 1999, p 96). According to him, social representation is not a sum of individual representations but is understood as a system which is produced, maintained and transmitted through communication between individuals and the social world.

Ivana Marková has contributed greatly to explaining the connection of the theory of social representations with the dialogicality of the Bakhtinian Circle. *The Epistemological Significance of the Theory of social representations* outlines the basic presuppositions which arise from their interrelationship. However, it cannot be understood on its own since it is essentially a recapitulation of the theses presented in Marková’s other works and namely her book *Dialogicality and Social Representations: The Dynamics of Mind (2003)*. Starting with the definition of dialogicality as “capacity of the mind to conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the ‘Alter’” (Marková 2003, p13), Marková (2008) asserts that the self and the other are interdependent and that rationality, language and thought are a result of dynamic Ego-Alter relations. In other words, while the Ego and Alter define one another they also determine relation to “an object of knowledge”. This approach abolishes traditional dichotomy between self and the other. In opposition to Descartes’ assertion that humans exist because they think, dialogical rationality is based on communication, i.e. we are because we communicate, “and to communicate means to be for another and through the other for oneself” (Marková 2007a, p 1).

The relationship between dialogicality and social representations, according to Marková (2003 and 2008), arises from the fact that ontology of the theory of social representations is founded on the mutually dependent relationship of Ego-Alter which meant that social representations are always directed and filtered through others. Therefore, without the dialogue between the Ego and Alter, there would be no social representations (Marková 2007b). I can be in dialogue with another individual, group, organisation, nation, group, community and so on. Many misunderstandings of social representations have emerged from the fact that they function on different levels and in different forms: on the individual (as the

content of the subjective mind), interpersonal and cultural levels (Raudsepp 2005). This also meant that in order to include all the levels, the researchers needed to appropriate their methodology. This issue will be addressed later in the essay.

## **DIALOGICALITY, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

The history of social sciences, basing its epistemologies on Cartesian and Platonist definitions of reason and knowledge, has been part of the search for stability, for theories and answers that could not be refuted, for absolute truths. Social psychology has found this 'stability' in individualistic traditions. However, as Latour (1994) notes the dualist paradigm is no longer enough and positivistic traditions on their own are not capable of grasping complex social phenomena (Jovchelovitch 2007, Farr 1996, Cole 1996). Marková's (2003 and 2008) main critique of individualistic theories in the field of social psychology, e.g. attribution and social identity theory, is that they are not focused on the dynamics of social interaction. She therefore proposes that the alternative theory of social knowledge should be based on dialogicality and the theory of social representations. The fact that the theory of social representations is based on the triad Ego-Alter-Object is according to Marková (2008) main contribution of Moscovici and the theory of social representations to the new epistemology. It is this triangularity, i.e. interaction between the Ego and the Alter in producing new knowledge(s) and representations, in the theory of social representations and in dialogicality that, according to Marková, separates these theories from the individualistic traditions in which Ego maintains independence in producing new knowledge(s). Another contribution of this epistemology is establishment of the Ego-Alter and object triad as the starting point and the unit of study. Furthermore, it focuses on tension rather than equilibrium and establishes change as equally important for the theory of social knowledge (Marková 2003). The object and the border between Ego and Alter are not stable but rather fluid and changeable. Marková agrees with Moscovici that it is tension that makes this new theory of knowledge dynamic.

Moscovici has been critical of the epistemological basis of social psychology from his first works. In *Psychoanalysis: its image and its public* he claims that he wants "to use the phenomenon of social representations to redefine the problems and concepts of social psychology by emphasizing their symbolic function and their power to construct the real"

(Moscovici 1961 cited in Marková 2008, p483). It was the lack of possibility of a dialogue with the social psychology of that time that Mosovici (1972) mentioned as the main incentive in his search for a different approach to research in social psychology. That and the gap between the social sciences of that time with contemporary social problems urged him to establish a theory that would promote “a real dialogue in which we can rediscover the freedom to analyse objectively all the aspects of a problem and to consider the various points of view emanating from the society in which we live” (Mosovici 1972, p 32). According to Marková (2008), the social representations achieve this because of their dialogicality, i.e. absconding single categories as a starting point and focusing on the interactions amongst social phenomena. Marková (2003) admits that dialogicality is just a hypothesis, an alternative epistemology to the positivistic individualistic theories. Examples will be provided later presenting some of the advantages of the research that was done using the framework of dialogicality and social representations.

## **DIALOGICALITY, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Voelklein and Howarth (2005) and Raudsepp (2005) claim that socialisation within empiricist and other traditions which did not include education in dialectical and historical materialism makes it harder for individuals to understand the social representations theory. This has been seen as one of the reasons why there have been so many misinterpretations and critiques of Moscovici and his successors. However, the opposite might be argued, i.e. that by opting for epistemology of common sense social psychologists might be overlooking other important issues. By relating the theory of social representations to dialogicality another aspect of this criticism arises.

Marková (2003) suggests that we should see the mind as the culturally and historically rooted human ability to communicate and understand signs, symbols and meanings as well as to create new ones. However, her focus on its cultural and historical development and on dialogicality as the main characteristic of the human mind leaves room for criticising the apparent omission of its biological, cognitive and evolutionary characteristics. Voelklein and Howarth (2005) mention cognitive reductionism as one of the main critiques of the theory of social representations. It needs to be explored if this might be

overcome by trying to bridge the gap that exists between constructivist and naturalist traditions in social psychology. The aforementioned definition of dialogicality by Marková is not in opposition with understandings of intentionality<sup>1</sup> by Tomasello et al (2005) or with Searle's (1996) collective intentionality<sup>2</sup>. However, these two authors see intentionality as intrinsic to nature. Based on this presupposition Searle is able to explain the co-existence between external and human-dependent nature, and Tomasello and his colleagues manage to explain the dependence of the human mind's development on culture.

If reaching for the other and dialogue are in the foundations of the theory of social representations, does not that mean that, as one of the paradigms of social psychology, it should not be closed to the findings coming from the neurosciences, social cognition and evolutionary psychology? If it is to be dialogical does it not have to be able to “withstand tension and conflict within itself and must have the force to endure the conflict and tension” in order to maintain vitality (Hegel, 1830 cited in Marková 2003, p24)? On the other hand, as Latour (1994, p54) notes “people are not prepared to abandon an arbitrary but useful dichotomy, such as that between society and technology, if it is not replaced by categories that have at least the same discriminating power as the one jettisoned”. Here the author refers to the dichotomy between society and technology, but the criticism that the social representations has been receiving from the ‘others’ has been seen as a signal that in order to come closer to establishing the new epistemology social representations theory needs to engage in a dialogue with other paradigms in social psychology.

Some of the attempts to generate the dialogue have been represented in a book edited by Deaux and Philogène (2001). In their search for a common ground the authors introduce social representation theory to American social psychologists in hope to give their contribution towards discovering what bridges are possible between these two orientations. Similarly, Marková (2007b) tried to relate the social identity and social representations theory since they both put an emphasis on interactions and interdependencies and both try to understand challenging and complex social phenomena. The question remains if the persisting segregation between social representation theory and orientations which perceive

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<sup>1</sup> For Tomasello et al intentionality is a capacity of humans to understand and share intentions

<sup>2</sup> Searle defines collective intentionality as sharing of intentional states, such as intentions, thoughts and desires

themselves as more naturalistic and positivistic is a consequence of the insurmountable differences between their epistemologies or we need to look for the reasons elsewhere. Whatever the answer, the theory of social representations needs to continue reaching out not only for the findings that are in line with its main tenets, but also for those which are challenging and contradicting them. Even though Marková (2003) dismisses the possibility of bringing dialogicality into connection with the physical and natural world, the dialogue with social cognition, evolutionary psychology and other approaches might open the way for the theory of social representations to accomplish Moscovici's (2001) initial goal of a theory which encompasses the transformation of knowledge and communication.

## **METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

In *The Epistemological Significance of the Theory of social representations* Marková asserts that social representations are fundamentally dialogical which generates various implications on the methodology used in the research using this theory as theoretical framework. Examples will be provided to show advantages of the research founded on dialogicality and social representations. Farr (1993) claims that social representations are formed and exist in the culture, not in individuals, and that is why research done solely in the laboratory cannot grasp the cultural and historical aspects of social representation. Resulting from Marková's (2003 and 2008) understanding of the connection between dialogicality and social representations, even the research that only takes into consideration different aspects of social representations and does not internalise interactional epistemology cannot grasp the implications of the theory of social representations for social psychology.

The researchers who study social representations cannot only focus on subject and object, but have to include the interactive relationship between them. In their studies on trust Marková and Gillespie (2007) are aware of "ontogenetic, historical, cultural, and sociopolitical characteristics" of social representations and Bauer and Gaskell (2008, p 9) conclude that the unit of analysis of social representations is "the Ego-Alter unit of communicating people, taking each other into account, and being co-ordinated by intentions". The authors have developed the "Toblerone model of social representations" which should incorporate the process, structure and functions of social representations. According to this model, researchers need to study social representations as a product of

interaction between subject, object, project, time, medium, and intergroup context. The implication of dialogical research is that arguably an infinite number of elements, such as time, location, economic and cultural resources might be added to it, and Marková (2003) does not dispute this. Her counterargument is that the social representation theory should be focused on the research of social phenomena in their interdependencies because it opens the way towards a research that will give insight into not only human social nature but also into “the plurality of thinking and communication in creating social reality and on the expression of human life experiences and emotions” (Marková 2008, p 481).

Jovchelovitch (2007) argues that this movement of the research from the object to the relationships that generate social representations, together with the abolishment of the hypothesis of linear development and the equalisation of different kinds of knowledge(s), is the main contributions to the research based on dialogicality and the theory of social representations. There have been numerous studies based on this framework, and two of them will be presented here to show how this kind of research can be successful in challenging pre-existing definitions and concepts and reaching new insights into the functioning of the human mind. The first example is Howarth’s (2006) approach to challenging Goffman’s stigma theory. As Marková (2003, p 169) noted, dialogicality presupposes that power, discrimination and exploitation can determine whether groups are considered minorities or majorities. Drawing from this presupposition, Howarth proposes a dynamic approach, defining stigma as “a dialectical process of contestation and creativity that is simultaneously anchored in and limited by the structures of history, economics and power” (Howarth 2006, p 450). She calls for seeing it as a social rather than psychological construct and puts responsibility on institutions, collectives and the society as a set of systems of difference, privilege and inequalities, concluding that resisting stigma has to be a collective rather than the individual effort of the stigmatised.

Gillespie et al. (2008) theorise about how a person committed to multiple communities might have conflicts potentially resolvable through internal dialogues. They seek to find the dialogical processes that underlie people’s sense of community by analysing a British woman’s World War II diaries. The authors conclude that: “The line between the people in June’s community and the voices that populate June’s own thoughts is impossible to draw. June is not just in a community, but the community is in June” (Gillespie et al 2008, p 51). Drawing from Marková’s (2008) understanding of the dialogicality of social

representations and assumption that cognition and dialogue are ‘multifaceted and heterogeneous’, the authors focus on the context in which a person is located and on the community of voices within the individual to erase the boundaries and gain new insights into the way the human brain functions.

This essay evaluated the relationship between dialogicality and social representations as proposed by Marková in her seminal works and mainly in *The Epistemological Significance of the Theory of social representations*. Marková argues that Moscovici has intended for social representations theory to become established as the new epistemological and theoretical basis of social psychology and theory of knowledge in general, which can be accomplished due to the fact that social representations are dialogical. However, this paper showed that to achieve this, the social representations theory needs to continue dealing with criticism raised against it. Furthermore, it showed that it is possible to draw parallels between dialogicality and studies of intentionality in the areas outside the theory of social representations. Finally, examples of studies based on dialogicality which have been done in the field of social representations theory were presented. Those studies are used as evidence that the connection between these two paradigms does offer a framework for a challenging and more holistic approach to understanding complex social phenomena as proposed by Marková. The above arguments have been presented as a potential incentive for the theory of social representations to persist in opening channels for a dialogue with other disciplines of social psychology. By becoming more dialogical it might come closer to Moscovici’s initial dream for the theory which can better deal with the complex social phenomena. One only needs to take one look at the state of our current society to realise it is high time all was done to accomplish it.

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