Lauri on organ donation or how to teach the theory of social representations using a quality empirical study

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> [Sociological imagination] is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. (Mills, 1967: 7)

This commentary reviews an article that has been rarely cited but that has proved most useful in my teaching of the theory of social representations, especially given my desire to emphasise the practical applications of this theory. *Metaphors of organ donation, social representations of the body and the opt-out system* by Mary Anne Lauri from the University of Malta was published in 2009 in the British Journal of Health Psychology. Its publication followed former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's coming out publicly in favour of an opt-out system of organ donation, alternatively called "a system of 'presumed consent', where it is assumed that an individual wishes to be a donor unless he or she has 'opted out' by registering their objection to donation after their death" (NHS Blood and Transplant, 2008).

In addition to dealing with a very significant and relevant social object, the main interest of Lauri's article in the context of teaching the theory of social representations lies in a) its potential to demonstrate the usefulness of the theory in the 'real' world, and b) its original and sophisticated analysis which demonstrates in a most vivid way the benefits and limitations of thematic analysis, an analytical procedure that has become common in qualitative research over the last few years (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Teaching the theory of social representations to MSc students (who arrive, very often, without any background in social psychology) and helping them to use it for their end-of-year dissertation has proved a challenge at several levels. Among some of these challenges are the lack of "elaboration and clarification of the key conceptual distinctions" (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999: 163-164); the complexity of some of the theory's key concepts such as dialogicality and themata referring, as they do, to larger philosophical debates students may not have come across before; and the absence of firm guidelines as to how to conduct a social representations study (ibid.).

In the first part of this commentary, I will provide a short description of Lauri's article, describe how she has used the theory of social representations to help design a

social marketing campaign in Malta, and discuss how the analysis she performed on her focus group data represents a most useful example for students keen to use the theory of social representations in their academic work. The quality and originality of her analysis will be highlighted in greater detail in the second section of this article where I will discuss some methodological issues concerning social representations theory and the benefits and limitations of thematic analysis, especially in the context of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. Building on my appreciation for the theory of social representations and on my experience as a teacher and dissertation supervisor, I will argue that students need to move beyond a mere description of the phenomena under study and dare using their 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1967) in their interpretation of these social objects.

METAPHORS OF ORGAN DONATION, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY AND THE OPT-OUT SYSTEM

This article builds on the doctoral work that was conducted by Lauri while she was a student at the London School of Economics in the 1990s. Her PhD research programme provided the building blocks for a social marketing campaign that took place in Malta in 1996, which aimed to increase the number of organ donors[1]. Following former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's public advocacy in favour of opt-out systems in 2008, Lauri wrote this article with the objective of applying relevant lessons from the Maltese context to the British one. To this end, she focused on two factors key to an understanding of people's attitudes towards the opt-out system: 1) how one looks upon organ donation; 2) how one looks upon one's own body. While the doctoral research project also involved surveys and individual interviews, her 2009 article focuses on the results from five focus groups that were conducted with 40 people, both male and female and from different age groups.

Departing from traditional health campaigns with their focus on 'one best way' of understanding a scientific issue (Noar and Head, 2011; WHO, 2002), Lauri stresses the need for change agents to "understand the deeply rooted views held by the general public" (Lauri, 2009: 663) and to build on lay theories developed to make sense of organ donation when trying to change attitudes and behaviours about such a challenging and complex issue. It is in that context that the theory of social representations becomes a most useful tool as its focus on lay beliefs (Moscovici, 1973 as quoted by Lauri, 2009: 649) promotes an alternative approach to health communication, one based on a respect for, and an understanding of, the views held by lay people, and one which is able to

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[1] This campaign was rather successful: starting from a low base of 12 transplants in 1995, the number of transplants in Malta went up to 32 in 1997 and 30 in 1998 (Lauri, 2009: 649). While the author acknowledges that this improvement may have been the result of other factors, it is fair to assume that the communication campaign was a success factor behind this improvement.

identify the possible gap between these views and those put forward by experts. By highlighting the essential role played by the social representations of the body held by lay people, the article also highlights the need to take into account other related representations when examining a specific issue, something also discussed by Provencher (2011).

The analysis of the focus groups follows a three-step process. First, Lauri performs a thematic analysis, which leads her to identify five major themes (normative context; decision making; death and body image; ethical issues; and medical issues) produced by the group discussions. Although at this initial stage, the analysis reflects, to a large extent, the different topics that were included in the interview guide, Lauri's skills at interpreting her data are visible through the relevance of the labels she uses for these major themes. Her selection of these specific categories points towards a deep understanding of the topic and of the relevant literature - a fundamental attribute of a quality thematic analysis as pointed by Silverman (2010), and exemplifies the way a researcher's reflections become part and parcel of the process of knowledge production (Prein and Kelle, 1995).

In the second phase of analysis, the focus group transcripts are examined through the prism of specific concepts from the theory of social representations, in particular the idea of metaphors as a way of objectifying new ideas. Here, Lauri explicitly builds on the work developed by Wagner and colleagues (1995) on objectification by metaphor in the social representations of conception.

In the final part of her analysis, summarised in a most convincing way in Table 3 on p. 660, Lauri pursues her interpretive work by associating these metaphors to three different social representations of the body visible in the discourses of her participants: 'body belongs to God'; 'I own my body'; and 'I'm my body'. She explains the key role played by these social representations in their understanding of organ donation and opt-out systems in the following way: "positive and negative views towards organ donation were rooted in the metaphors which the participants used to describe organ donation. These, in turn, were dependent on the images they had of the body, again expressed through metaphors" (Lauri, 2009: 659). The author thus shows how a specific social representation can encompass different metaphors and generate different attitudes. She also makes clear how the sense-making efforts of lay people take place within a larger context that includes other social representations, in this case, social representations of the body. The connections between metaphors and the three social representations of the body constitute a turning point in the analysis of the data collected for this project as they allow for the explicit use of a concept associated with the theory of social representations as a way to go beyond a sheer description of the phenomena of interest, here organ donation and opt-out systems.

Metaphors of organ donation, social representations of the body and the opt-out system, thus makes two different contributions. At an empirical level, Lauri shows how the theory of social representations can have a concrete impact on key aspects of our social lives through its ability to reveal "how people make sense of such a complex issue by giving their own lay interpretation of the views and opinions directed at them by experts such as medical practitioners, political leaders, and the church and how different ways of elaborating these views lead to different public opinions" (Lauri:

2009: 648). By focusing on a real-life issue with concrete, life or death, implications, the article can be used to show students, unfamiliar with the theory of social representations, its applicability in the 'real' world and thus increase the theory's appeal to people who may not be as keen as colleagues in the social representations community to explore its theoretical aspects. The concrete links between the research project behind this article and the successful social marketing campaign that took place in Malta at the end of the 1990s (Lauri, 2008) shows the power social representations studies in particular, and qualitative research in general, can have in the area of health where, traditionally, quantitative-based studies have been used to influence and direct social policy and communication programmes, by providing a more subtle understanding of lay people's views vis-à-vis these issues (for a similar argument, see Joffe, 2002, 2003). On the methodological front, the analysis performed on the focus group transcripts represents an excellent example of the potential offered by thematic analysis in social representations work but a thematic analysis that goes beyond description and allows researchers' sociological imagination to express itself.

Having discussed the empirical contribution and presented the main points of Lauri's paper, the value and richness of her methodological contribution will be discussed in greater detail in the next sections. After introducing some of the methodological challenges faced by the theory of social representations, I will discuss how thematic analysis has become, for some researchers and many of our students, the accepted way of conducting social representations studies. Next, I will argue that, although it presents a number of advantages, especially in the context of quality issues associated with the use of qualitative methods, thematic analysis comes with a number of limitations. These limitations seem to have been circumvented in Lauri's work through an analysis where interpretation and sociological imagination are still welcome.

METHODOLOGY AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Contrary to other theoretical frameworks available within the discipline of social psychology, the literature on social representations has offered very little in the form of firm guidelines on methodological issues. Keen to demarcate themselves from a more positivist perspective, social representations theorists have often left methodological options open-ended, as issues to be decided according to the specific requirements of the phenomenon being investigated (Breakwell and Canter, 1993). As noted by de Rosa in her article on *Le besoin d'une théorie de la méthode* (2002), most of the advice one can find on methodology comes from empirical studies done within that theoretical framework. Interestingly, she also observes that most studies have been of a descriptive nature focusing on the content of specific social representations. Overall, qualitative research methods have dominated the scene with individual and group interviews as key techniques of data collection (ibid.). On the analysis front, besides the more quantitative techniques developed, among others, by the Aix-en-Provence School (Abric, 2003), various forms of thematic analysis (however, often not specifically referred to as such), by which transcripts of individual and group interviews are coded and organised into

themes, have been the analytical techniques of choice for many social representation researchers (eg, de-Graft Aikins, 2005; Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998; Howarth, 2002).

The example of these studies and the apparent simplicity of the step-by-step approach to thematic analysis proposed by authors such as Attride-Stirling (2001) have encouraged many MSc students, anxious to produce their dissertations in a very limited period, to use this technique. Indeed, the vast majority of social representations projects that I have either supervised or marked over the last three years have relied on this analytical procedure. However, when inadequately implemented, thematic analysis often results in descriptive works that fall short of the subtlety and depth of analysis that characterise quality social representations studies.

Indeed, the theory of social representations puts forward a social constructionist paradigm in which social actors construct their social reality. In this paradigm, "meanings are created (and changed) through a process of interpretation" (Esterberg, 2002: 15) and each social individual is perceived as an active agent and as a "productive source of knowledge" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 15). As pointed by Esterberg, the main objective of researchers operating within that perspective is to understand "how individuals construct and interpret social reality" (2002: 16). However, researchers also partake in this process of social construction. The meanings of research they produce will be the result of a negotiation process between them and their subjects and will, as such, reflect their interpretation of their subjects' efforts at constructing their own social reality.

Doing so requires the use of a more deductive approach whereby the researcher sets out to test hypotheses developed independently of the data, something that seems to go against the inductive analytical view of qualitative research where the focus is on a description of the multiple realities of the social object under study carried out by the different strategic social actors. However, this dichotomy between the two approaches is at best, unproductive, and at worst, totally misleading as it does not take into account the fact that "there are and can be no sensations unimpregnated by expectations" (Lakatos, 1982: 15, quoted in Kelle, 2000). Social scientific research is not produced in a theoretical void and researchers come to the analytical phase of their work carrying some theoretical baggage that must be incorporated. It is this theoretical baggage that enable researchers to bring an element of surprise into the interpretation of the data, as is visible in the use of metaphors in Lauri's analysis. Thematic analysis, without this element of surprise, runs the risk of producing mostly descriptive works where the complexity and originality that result from a deep understanding of the field are lacking. In the next section, I will briefly discuss thematic analysis, its connections to computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software and the limitations that come with it.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: OVERVIEW AND LIMITATIONS

First developed in the 1980s in the context of phenomenological approaches to ethnography (Hycner, 1985), thematic analysis has grown in scale over the last three

decades and become the object of many publications, books and articles. While several definitions of thematic analysis can be found in this literature, the following one encapsulates its main elements: "Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Daly, Kellehear, & Glicksman, 1997, quoted in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 3). A number of researchers (eg, Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006), have put forward specific steps one should perform when doing a thematic analysis and, for many of our students, these steps have become the orthodoxy, a procedure that should ensure one does a good piece of work. The appeal of this 'mechanical' approach has been reinforced by the development and increased availability of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as Atlas-ti, Nudist or NVivo, which have simplified the code-and-retrieve tasks associated with this technique. For instance, NVivo includes a number of tools that can assist researchers in the development of theoretical concepts and the testing of hypotheses and, as a result, is described Gibbs (2002) as a 'theory builder's software'. The software is built around the idea of nodes defined as "a way of connecting a theoretical concept or idea with passages of text that in some way exemplify the idea" (Gibbs, 2002: 57). The possibility to create 'memos' at each stage of the coding process allows one to trace and re-create the analytical procedures followed by the researcher and thus increases the transparency of the analysis performed, one of the quality criteria earmarked by Gaskell and Bauer (2000).

However, as pointed out by Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson in their 1996 article that discusses some problems in the production of ethnographic texts, over-reliance on these programs may have had some unintended consequences. In particular, these authors deplore what they describe as "a trend towards a homogenisation, [...] the emergence of a new form of orthodoxy, especially at the level of data management" whereby the analysis of qualitative data tends to be limited to the coding of the textual data and the software is used purely as a code-and-retrieve device (Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson: 1996: paragraph 1.4).

While people like Boyatzis (1998) have made clear that the coding process is only the first step in the analysis of researchers' data and that it has to be followed by an interpretive phase, it could thus be argued that too often thematic analysis stops at the coding phase and does not reach the phase of interpretation where the sociological imagination identified in Lauri's work can express itself. As we have seen above, this is even more the case when one uses CAQDAS where, as noted by Thompson (2002), many researchers are tempted to see the coding and sorting tasks as the final aims, leaving unaccomplished or unsatisfactory the conceptual part of the analysis. This threat is identified very clearly by Coffey and her colleagues when they state that: "… there is an increasing danger of seeing coding data segments as an analytic strategy in its own right, and of seeing such an approach as the analytic strategy of choice." (Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson, 1996: paragraph 7.7.)

Indeed, going back to the definition of thematic analysis offered at the beginning of this section, one could argue that the problem lies in the word 'description'. Good quality qualitative research should aim to go beyond a mere description of the phenomenon. It should aim to understand, to interpret the phenomenon through the use of relevant theoretical concepts and through its location within a larger context.

CAQDAS has also been 'accused' of privileging a grounded theory approach at the expense of other approaches (Lonkila, 1995). In the context of the theory of social representations, this has meant that the explanatory power of the concepts linked to the theory may not have received the amount of attention and the recognition they deserve, leading to an under-exploitation of the power of that theory. Over the last fifty years, the theory has developed a number of concepts such as anchoring, objectification, themata, dialogicality, which can illuminate the social phenomena we are studying. However, in order to do that, the analysis of the phenomenon being studied needs to go beyond a sheer description.

It may be time for teachers of the theory of social representations and dissertation advisors to re-assess the current emphasis on coding in the analysis of qualitative data, to make clearer to their students the benefits there exist in going beyond the description of social phenomena and the need to pay more attention to what Lonkila defined as "a large part of qualitative researcher's work, [that is] interpretation and a fine-grained hermeneutic analysis" (Lonkila, 1995: 48-49).

CONCLUSION

While discussing the concept of public accountability, Gaskell and Bauer proposed six criteria "with functional equivalence to the quantitative tradition" (2000: 343), a set of "clear procedures and standards of practice" (2000: 336) that will dislodge the unfruitful discussions that have plagued the debate about qualitative research. One of these criteria is 'surprise as a contribution to theory and/or common sense', a criterion akin to Mills's concept of sociological imagination (1967), which, I have argued, has played a key role in the quality of the analysis and interpretation done by Lauri (2009) in her discussion of organ donation and opt-out systems.

Attracted by the apparent simplicity of thematic analysis and the availability of related software many students, new to the theory of social representations and still unsure about how to use it, have turned to this analytical method and have produced too often works of a descriptive nature, not fully exploiting the full potential of the theory and the conceptual tools it has developed over the 50 years of its existence.

While it might be relatively easy for professional researchers operating within the social representations paradigm to go beyond a purely descriptive work, the task becomes a real challenge for students who only have a few months to produce their dissertation and who are already struggling to understand and appreciate the analytical powers of the theory of social representations. Numerous studies in student learning have highlighted the importance of illustrations and examples when teaching complex ideas to students. Thanks to its ability to show the relevance of the theory of social representations in practical settings and the quality of its analysis, Lauri's 2009 article on the *Metaphors of organ donation, social representations of the body and the opt-out system* represents such an example.

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