

Social Representations or Discursive Constructions? A Commentary on Tracey Skillington’s (2016) Article ‘Defending the ‘Public Interest’’

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In her paper ‘Defending the ‘public interest’’ (Skillington, 2016), published in this special issue (Vol. 25, Issue 1, of Papers on Social Representations), Tracey Skillington adeptly draws on a framework informed by Social Representations Theory (SRT). The SRT framework is utilised in order to explore the ways in which representations function in relation to two important contemporary issues; hydraulic fracking in the State of New York, and land leasing in Africa. Through the analysis Tracey highlights some key social representations, such as, democracy, exploitation, suffering, justice, nationalism and colonialism. In this commentary I offer a reflection on the contribution the paper makes and suggest where future work in the area might focus.

The paper opens with a brief account of the environmental crisis we are facing in contemporary society. This is put in the context of the current struggles to preserve natural resources and offer equity in the distribution of the effects of the environmental crisis. Further, the context of capitalism is offered to present a case in which corporations are often responsible for causing the most damage to our environments, yet often escape many of the consequences of their actions. Indeed, through reference to the Climate Accountability Institute (CAI, 2013) Skillington highlights that “90 corporations [are] responsible for almost two thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions” (Skillington, 2016, p. 2).

The author then moves on to offer an account of her methodology and the theoretical framing of her research. In this account SRT is offered as a comprehensive framework from which to explore messaging surrounding the two case studies. The rationale for this account is built nicely though an examination of the key facets of SRT in terms of the ideologies that are created through social representations and the identities constructed through these representations and ideologies. Such an approach appeared to fit very well with her focus on the specific social issues of ‘fracking’ in New York and land leasing in Africa given their potential social and ideological impacts. Furthermore, the case is explicitly made for SRT in this context as Skillington highlights how one of the key critiques of SRT is that it “pays insufficient attention to scenarios of conflict and ideological mobilization amongst competing interests” (p3) which is certainly not the case in these two case studies.

Attention then turns to the two case studies and the data collected for both. They are clearly very different in nature, which considering one is based in New York State, and one in Africa; one concerned with fracking as a practice to generate mine natural gas for energy use, and one concerned with land leasing for food production. Yet Skillington negotiates these clear differences in context by suggesting that similar social representational framings are utilised in both accounts to construct and manage the arguments they are presenting. Such similarities were suggested to include: a crusader’s struggle for justice across time; the bridging of old and new campaigns for justice; an emphasis of the mythical basis of the opponents’ truth claims; and the use of visual protest iconography. Whilst I can indeed see these elements flowing through the two distinctly different cases, it did feel there might have been some overlooking of the ‘situatedness’ of such issues that have not just ‘come to be’ but rather have emerged through a series of complex and interplaying processes (Foucault, 1991). For example, if we were to take some of

the underpinnings of a more critical approach we might suggest that the different social, political and historical contexts of the two cases needs to be given a little more attention in order to account for the extent to which these representations are indeed wedded to, and embedded in, contemporary discourses (Fairclough, 2013). In fact, the broader context both case studies share, globalised capitalism, could have been developed further. This would demand a more detailed account of the hypercapitalist (Graham, 2000) society which diminishes nation state responsibility to address environmental issues and places the power to act largely in the hands of the corporations that profit from environmentally damaging practices. Development in this area could have potentially enhanced the social critique of organisations such as the World Bank Skillington covers at the beginning of her article.

Throughout the analysis Skillington competently employs the SRT framework to engage with the representations and framings of the arguments, and counter arguments, in relation to the two cases. Of particular credit to the analysis is the ways in which the author identifies two key types of ‘anchoring’ (Lowe, 2012): specifically a thematic anchoring in which socially familiar ‘themes’ (colonialism, community, and safety) are evoked through the representations; and a more individual or social psychological anchoring in which ‘us’ and ‘them’ representations are constructed. Adopting this approach enabled a strong account of both the social and individual representations at play, highlighting how these representations attempt to appeal to their desired audience. Indeed, in her interpretation of the representation of the fracking campaign Skillington offers an insightful account of the ways in which the economic, individual and social intersect. Such complex functioning enables the representation of the case for fracking whereby there are both economic incentives to utilise this as a method to cope with future energy demands, alongside and explicit rebuffing’ of the potential counter arguments through an ‘emotional anchoring’ enabling the discrediting of the arguments made by the ‘other’ (in this case the anti-fracking campaigners). This was of particular interest given the emerging work that has been conducted exploring the ways in which ‘scientific skepticism’ is utilised as a discursive method to deny climate change (e.g. Engels, Hüther, Schäfer, & Held, 2013). Such literature might help further develop SRT in this element of accounting for social representations and discursive constructions of environmental practices, ‘knowledges’, and arguments.

In relation to the analysis of the material surrounding land leasing in Africa, Skillington also makes some very interesting and pertinent observations of the social representations being utilised. For example, her account of the ‘uncultivated lands’ was of particular interest in this context given the ways in which the ‘us’ and ‘them’ are positioned. The ‘us’ being the ‘civilised’ and the ‘them’ being the ‘uncivilised’. Here we see the author draw on references to literature relating to Roland Barthes’ (Barthes, 1973) extremely interesting and influential accounts of ‘myths’, coupled with literature on colonialism, agriculture and power (e.g. Araghi, 2000) to further develop her argument. This enables Skillington to offer an account of the ways in which such understandings of ‘unoccupied’ land are constructed and legitimised. Future work could develop these arguments by considering some of the more theoretical literature surrounding colonialism (Mamdani, 1996), historical land stealing practices in Africa through colonial and racial discourses (Fanon, 2008), ethnocentrism and allochronic discourse (Fabian, 1983), and eco-colonialism (Lizarralde, 1992), as they may be useful in further understanding how such social representations emerge as ‘common sense’ notions and offer a deeper understanding of the power relations at play.

Finally, throughout the analysis of both case studies in general, some depth to the analysis might have been lost through the utilisation a SRT approach when representations are seen as ‘frames’ or static messages as opposed to an approach which fully accounts for the specific emergence and implications of the messaging. For example through her extremely insightful account of the link between social representations and how these function at an individual level to appeal to ‘us’ v ‘them’, it did appear that the analysis might have benefitted from some engagement with the extensive discursive work that has been undertaken surrounding social identity constructions and the implications of this on racism and discrimination (e.g. Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Rapley, 1999; Van Dijk, 2000; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Such accounting might have helped further develop the situated nature of many of the representational strategies utilised in Tracey’s data. In addition, through this literature more could have perhaps been said with regards to the subject positions such framings offer up and thus the implications these potentially have for the actors involved. Indeed, the analysis and/or discussion could have been further enriched by the broader account of ‘us’ and ‘them’ offered by Michael Billig (1995) in his account of the ways in which such nationalistic discourses circulate subtly through all manner of things in what he considers as forms of ‘banal nationalism’.

In summary, this paper offers an interesting and insightful account of the social representations of two important case studies. Tracey set out to engage fully with issues that have largely been overlooked in SRT, those in which conflict and ideologies are central, and certainly in this light she achieved her aim. Another of her goals in this paper was slightly less obvious, that being the policy implications of her findings. In addition, whilst the paper was successful in utilising SRT for the analysis, as the points above highlight, there are more issues that future work in this area might consider. Indeed, perhaps the incorporation or future development of these issues highlighted in this paper, enabled through a media analysis, might be a useful direction. Further, it would also be useful for future work to perhaps consider the ways in which individuals engage with, and resist/replicate such representations though an analysis of the ways in which these issues are constructed and negotiated on social media and/or comments sections of websites. That said, the overall theoretical understanding and analytic application of SRT in this context was indeed insightful and interesting, uncovering some key representations in this context.

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