

The everyday politics of identities and social representations: A critical approach.

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INTRODUCTION

In the meeting, merging and clashing of representations and identities in everyday encounters we see ‘battles of ideas’ (Moscovici, 1998) that are consequential for local and national identities, intergroup relations, and the construction and contestation of the ways things are, or should be. Hence, following Moscovici, we can say that representations are ‘ways of world-making’ (Moscovici, 1988). It is in these battles for meaning that social identities and social realities are constructed in ways that support or contest the status quo with regard to social relations and, therefore, systems of inclusion, exclusion and power (Duveen, 2001, 2008; Ichheiser, 1949). These acts of social re-presentation are central to social and cultural practices (Jovchelovitch, 2007) for all groups and societies. They carry possibilities for producing competing and so hybrid and polyphasic meanings. The co-existence of competing and contradictory forms of

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knowledge demands dialogue, debate and sometimes resistance in the process of the ideological construction of realities. There is an everyday politics at stake in processes of identity and representation, particularly in their points of connection. Social representations therefore allow contrary possibilities for extending and limiting social action and, as such, can be both contestatory and ideological, as well as being transformed in everyday practices (Duveen, 2001). Augoustinos (2001) suggests that they naturalise and legitimise relations of domination, impose identities (in collusion with dominant discourses) and convey the weight of history. They are thus linked with particular social identities (Howarth, 2002) and underpin power relations and discourses – the politics of the everyday.

Social representations operate in ‘a system of values, ideas and practices’ (Moscovici, 1972) in which power relations, discourses and identities are central, serve to establish the social order by enabling a shared system of communication for social influence, social exchange and classification (Sammut & Howarth, 2013). They construct socially shared knowledge, practices and affiliations through interactional processes. A crucial question, however, is how this process of elaborating social representations can be understood and itself represented in academic work. A key issue for Social Representations Theory is whether it constitutes a critical theory. In his early theorising, Moscovici (1972) himself suggested that “*We must ask what is the aim of the scientific community. Is it to support or criticise the social order? Is it to consolidate it or transform it?*”. In response, various theorists have argued that power, ideology and transgression are under-theorised in Social Representations Theory (Billig, 1997; Howarth, 2006; Parker, 1987; Potter, 1996; Raudsepp, 2005). In response, some Social Representations theorists have defended understandings of social representations in ways that reify them and infuse them with ideological or hegemonic power by legitimizing their dominant and dominating position over alternative representations (Howarth, 2011). In order to take forward Social Representations Theory in this debate, it is helpful to examine the ways in which social representations are socially constructed and how reification infuses social representations (Batel and Castro, 2009). This would allow analysis of the politics that influence the hegemonic construction of social representations and better understanding of the competing interests at stake, and so the alternative representations that may be marginalized (Philogène, 1999, 2007, 2011). In particular, it focuses on meaning making as a negotiated, dynamic process that is socially situated and so

related to social positioning and the multiple intersectional social categories to which people belong (Philogène, 2000). A critical approach to social representations thus needs clear analyses of how representations are permeated with ideological power to justify the status quo and so maintain systems of inequality and exclusion (Howarth, 2004, 2014). Central to the paper is the recognition that theoretical approaches develop intertextually with reference to each other and to the social context. While, therefore, theories develop in both syncretic and antagonistic ways, there are helpful commonalities between theoretical approaches.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the expansion of a critical approach to social representations theory (see also Howarth, Andreouli & Kessi, 2014). It considers different ways in which politics and identities are inextricably linked by examining issues of racialisation and diversity that necessarily bring together personal experiences and societal processes. In doing so, it draws on theoretical resources that have become commonplace within parts of psychology and the social sciences. In particular, it focuses on meaning making as a negotiated, dynamic process that is socially situated and so related to social positioning and the multiple, intersectional social categories to which people belong. It is identity that explains why specific people draw on particular representations and defend them in the ways they do, ignoring or contesting other representations. As Subašić et al. (2012, p.68) suggest, identity processes are key to understanding social change and, hence, to accessing the critical potential of Social Representations Theory:

Social change is bound up with a psychological change in our sense of who ‘we’ are – a change from thinking of ourselves individually to thinking of ourselves collectively, but also a change in our understanding of the group’s position. It is when we think that this position is illegitimate and we consider a better position to be achievable (through the availability of cognitive alternatives and perceptions of instability) that changes in the reality of social relations becomes possible.

Subašić et al.’s focus on the individual’s understanding of their group’s position serves to highlight the interlinkage between individual and social processes and how the normative power of dominant discourses can become apparent in processes of identification (Howarth, 2002,

2006) and classification (Philogène, 1994, 1999). People take on the ‘presentation’ of the world as they find it, relate it to past experiences and understandings, and re-present it to themselves. One of the reasons that ‘changes in the reality of social relations become possible’, therefore, is because identities are always relational and as much about who we are not, as about who we are. They are, therefore, about border negotiations and contestations (Phoenix, 2009) and the mobilisation and the development of alternative positions (Elcheroth, Doise & Reicher, 2011; Lozada, 2014; Permanadeli, 2014).

The paper first considers the ways in which social representations theory needs to consider social categories marked by unequal power relations (such as poverty and racialisation) if it is to develop in ways that fit with recent developments in critical social theory. It then draws on the framework provided by intersectionality, positioning theory and the concept of ‘liveable lives’ to examine three everyday issues of social representations: children and poverty; the racialisation of the academy and representations of ‘race’ in the UK and US Censuses. In different ways, politics and identities are inextricably linked in each of these three issues. Each illuminates a different way in which social representations are contested because they have different impacts and different socioeconomic conditions. The paper concludes by arguing that conflict is itself important to the moving forward of social theory, including Social Representations Theory.

TOWARDS A *CRITICAL* SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS APPROACH

For Serge Moscovici, SRT as a theory was only useful if it allowed ways of gaining new understandings of social problems and improving lives.

“For me a theory exists only insofar as it fosters a practice of discovery, of facing social problems, and gives some meaning to our lives” (Moscovici, 1997)

The implication of this is that SRT has to be dynamic, addressing social problems in their historical and geographical contexts. It is somewhat surprising then that, while some social representations theorists (in Australia Latin America, South Africa, the UK and USA) have focused on issues of racialisation and diversity that have long been major social issues (Howarth,

2002, 2004; Jovchelovitch, 2013; Kessi, 2013; Moloney, 2007; Philogène, 2007, 2011) that they have not been more addressed in SRT. In making the argument for a Critical SRA, this paper will address the following key questions: How do representations serve ideologies of exclusion, discrimination and objectification in social relations? What is the impact of stigmatising representations on social identification, subjectivity and human ambition? And what potential is there for challenging representations that maintain the social practices of exclusion, discrimination and objectification?

In beginning to consider these issues for a SRT perspective, the paper will address the ways in which formal systems of Politics (systems of categorisation, inclusion/exclusion and representation) filter into everyday life through our interpersonal relationships at home, in schools and communities as well as our own sense of belonging and connection. In twenty-first century Britain the major social categories associated with ethnicity, social class, religion and age are becoming increasingly differentiated and associated with inclusions and exclusions.

Structural and institutional segregation show signs of increasing. In addition to aspects of increased residential segregation by ethnicity, our local neighbourhoods are becoming increasingly age segregated. The British educational system shows signs of social segregation by social grade and ethnicity. Half of all children on free school meals are educated in 20 per cent of schools, while the OECD rated our school system as the fourth most segregated for recent migrants. (Commission for Social Integration, 2015, p. 8)

The paper will consider exclusionary representations produced through social class and age (exemplified through childhood poverty) and that are racialising – in that they *(re)-produce* ideas about ‘race’. It examines the ways in which representations of social class and ‘race’ become problematic, and (need to be) contested and resisted in institutionalised practices and political discourses, and everyday sense-making, talk and action. Ambitiously, the paper also analyses the opportunities for transgressing racialised networks of power as well as the social psychological dynamics of resistance and so the possibilities for challenging racism and promoting social justice. In doing so, it considers issues of agency and subjectification, which are always central to the ways in which individuals and social structures are inextricably linked. In seeking to

develop and extend the critical potential of SRT, it draws on three sets of theoretical resources: intersectionality; positioning theory and liveable lives.

Intersectionality as Theory and Heuristic

Intersectionality provides a conceptual language for recognising that everybody is simultaneously positioned within social categories, such as gender, social class, sexuality, 'race' and nation (Crenshaw, 1989). So even when focusing particularly on one social category (such as 'race', gender and social class), it is not possible to understand that category in isolation. A full understanding of any social category requires the analysis of differences, as well as commonalities, within groups. For example, feminist researchers have shown how women's experiences and life chances differ according to their 'race', ethnicity, sexuality and social class—i.e. gender and sexuality are class-based and racialised social relations (Brah, 1996; Lutz et al., 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Intersectionality also helps make clear that all categories are associated with power relations and so cannot be neutral (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Hankivsky, 2014). Instead, social categories mutually constitute each other in a parallel way to how social representations are multiple and help to co-construct each other.

Positioning Theory

The notion of social positioning fits well with theorisations of intersectionality in that positioning theory helps to explain how some of the multiple social categories to which people belong become part of their identities and/or motivate their social actions and practices. Davies and Harré (1990) developed the concept of 'positioning' to recognize that people are not fixed in social locations, but take up different positions within each social interaction. In each interaction people can take up, ignore or resist the positions other people assume they will (and so make available to them). Social positions are, therefore, flexible, shifting and contested. One person may occupy different positions as an interaction progresses and in different interactions, but experience themselves as the same (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Clémence (2001) shows how social representations and positioning are mutually dependent concepts. The positions that people choose to create for themselves and to take up can be part of

their ‘identity projects’ (i.e. part of the process of trying to become who/what they envisage themselves to be, Giddens, (1991) and become ‘subject positions’ if people take up them up as their own. Positioning is, therefore, performative (Butler, 1999), in that people ‘do’ identities in interaction. Given the complexity of social interactions, social categories and social representations, interactions also raise possibilities of contradictions in positioning that, as Wetherell (1998) suggests, can produce ‘troubled’ subject positions arise as people negotiate conversations (Wetherell, 1998).

‘Liveable Lives’

Judith Butler (2004) theorises the ways in which discourses of the normative construct what are considered to be ‘liveable’ or ‘unbearable lives’ by giving recognition to some ways of living and everyday practices rather than others. It follows from this that those who have childhoods constructed as ‘non-normative’ are unlikely to be able to recognise themselves in their culture’s canonical narratives of what it is to be a person. This is particularly the case since, unlike gay men, lesbians and drag queens who are the focus of Butler’s theorisation, non-normative childhoods do not trouble or disrupt normalizing accounts—even though current preoccupations with auto/biography have led to more acknowledgment of patterns of childhood that do not fit the norm. According to Butler (2004) autonomy and subjectivity are constrained by normalizing processes and so those constructed as having ‘unbearable lives’ have to assert their claim to a liveable (or bearable) life through recognition.

CHILDREN’S POSITIONING IN RELATION TO POVERTY AND CONSUMPTION

In many affluent countries, an increasing number of children are living in poverty (UNICEF, 2011) and negotiating the difficulties that living in economically straitened circumstances entail. Over 16 million US children, for example, live in poverty. The ways in which children experience life in poverty and reflect on it serves to illuminate that they learn early how they are positioned in their social contexts and have sharp understandings of the systems of values, ideas and practices that constitute the social representations of poverty within their societies. The fact that they keenly appreciate the import of those social representations is demonstrated by the

ways in which they are able to imagine the impact of their current struggles with poverty on their future lives and so attempt to craft 'liveable lives' for themselves. An understanding of children and poverty is thus arguably enhanced by bringing social representations theory together with other theoretical approaches.

This section draws on children's own accounts produced for two television documentaries, one in the UK and the other in the US. These accounts were, therefore, presented as part of journalistic social representations of poverty that were attempting to bring the issue to public attention. Yet, both presented children's own accounts and so allow analysis of children's own social representations of poverty and their understandings of their own positioning. The following extract is of two British girls, Courtney and Holly, both aged eight years old, talking in one of their bedrooms.

COURTNEY: Holly's family can afford nicer clothes than me because her family work and my family don't./.../ for like if something breaks down in our house, her dad can fix it and mine can't because he can't afford the money to get the council to fix stuff and that. If your family work you get more money in your house but if they don't you get less money in your house and my mum can't lend me the money when I become 21 or whatever or however older I become and then so I just wanna work and do whatever I want to do.

HOLLY: You never know when you get older you might be a richer--you never know

COURTNEY: I think that my future is going to have more of the bad things in it than a few good things 'cause her-- she is going to be richer when she grows up and I'll be poor.

I'm just saying=

HOLLY: =Social workers might pay for you or summat.

COURTNEY: They won't, social workers will be dead by the time I'm 21. None of my family are working. I'm a little kid about 3, 4, I'll just ignore my future and wait for my future until it comes up and that. (*Poor Kids* BBC documentary 7 June 2011)

Courtney in the above extract, shows sophisticated understanding of how she is subjected to her parents' structural positioning and how their family constitutes a unit in contradistinction from Holly's family, who are slightly more economically stable because Holly's parents are employed.

Not only does Courtney take a relational view of positioning, she advances an explanation for her family's poverty that shows that she has taken up social representations of poverty that Holly does not dispute. Her way of categorising her social world is an individualising one. Poverty is attributed to her parents' lack of jobs, not to government policies or society. This narrative has implications for how she orients to the future and to social action. A remedy for her is not simply to wait to see if she gets richer (which Holly's attempt to comfort her might seem to be suggesting). Thus, she eschews the notion of social workers rescuing her from poverty, having already established that it will be her own agency through employment that is likely to provide her with the possibility of a liveable life.

The theme of future orientation to employment as the way out of poverty was also evident in ten-year-old Kaylie's account in the US documentary on children living in poverty. Kaylie and her twelve-year-old brother, Tyler lived with their mother, whose financial difficulties had intensified when she was made redundant from her factory job. This resulted in several house moves, with the result that Kaylie was not at school when the first part of the documentary was filmed.

KAYLIE: I really want to be in school. If you don't get a good education then you don't get much money, you don't get a good job, you end up sleeping at your mum's. You end up being behind a lot of rent and you get kicked out. You end up being homeless and then with no food.

In a situation where the family experienced acute food poverty, both Kaylie and Tyler did what they could to contribute to their household income. Tyler mowed lawns and Kaylie collected cans along the railway track, earning between two and five cents per can (*America's Poor Kids*, BBC Two, 6 March 2013).

It is striking that in Kaylie's account, as in Courtney's, there is a clear construction of a causative link between being without a job and detrimental impacts on wellbeing, with no expectation of being cushioned by the state. Their common sense social representations of poverty are political in being individualising, but enabling a future vision of better possibilities through employment if she can get back to school and get a good education. As with Courtney, Kaylie shows clear

understanding of her social positioning, the precarity her family faced and that there are polyphasic, contradictory possibilities for her future:

KAYLIE: When we can't afford to pay our bills, like our house bills and stuff, I'm afraid that we'll get homeless, and me and my brother will starve.

The children in both documentaries used their social representations as a means of 'world-making' (Moscovici, 1988). The world they described was not pleasant, but was one in which they constructed social identities in opposition to the status quo and the power relations that were serving to exclude them from 'liveable lives'. The ways in which they crafted their imagined futures was agentic and so hopeful, but recognized that their circumstances could foreclose their future possibilities (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007) if they did not get educated and get jobs. The intersection of their socio-structural positioning and age allowed them more possibilities for imagining, and working towards hopeful futures, but also made them vulnerable to vicissitudes outside their control.

While the above examples from documentaries have been selected because they are evocative, their narratives are similar to those reported in numerous studies in a range of countries. For example, Skatterbol et al. (2012) found that Australian children formed representations of poverty at an early age and worried about social exclusion and managing life as a result of poverty, rather than poverty per se. This affected their feelings of self-worth and could depress their aspirations. In consequence, they used a variety of creative strategies to cope with economic adversity. This chimes with the findings of a UK qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life (Ridge, 2002, 2007), which found that children in poor families understood the financial constraints on their parents; a finding echoed in a number of UK and US studies (e.g. Chin, 2001; Croghan et al., 2006; Phoenix, 2009; Pugh, 2009; Ridge, 2012). Not only do children have well-developed social representations, but those representations are consequential for their social relations (with their parents and others), their current positioning and their imagined futures.

SOCIOSTRUCTURAL POSITIONING AND RACIALISATION IN THE ACADEMY

In 2014, there was a burst of attention in the UK to statistics initially publicised by UCL scholars, showing that only 85 professors in the UK are black (60 British black) and 17 are black women, making 0.4% of all professors (Alexander & Arday, 2015; UCU, 2013). These disproportionately low figures have, not surprisingly, generated concern as well as calls for change and an improvement in the position of black academics in the UK. The figures, however demonstrate another way in which social representations operate and have material consequences. In this case, not representations held by particular individuals, but systems of values and beliefs that make it seem natural and taken-for-granted that black people are not academics. Nirmal Puwar's (2004) notion of 'bodies out of place' provides an analytic frame for understanding how social representations might have material consequences in the academy; an idea further applied to institutions by Sara Ahmed.

'Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others... After all, institutions provide collective or public spaces. When we describe institutions as 'being' white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces.' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157)

The taken-for-granted social representation of UK universities as 'white' embodied spaces helps to explain why it is harder for those embodied as black, than embodied as white, to make progress within them.

...academia is not a neutral location. This is a *white space where Black* people have been denied the privilege to speak. Historically, this is a space where we have been voiceless and where *white* scholars have developed theoretical discourses which formally constructed us as the inferior 'Other' ... *Here*, we were made the objects, but we have rarely been the subjects... As a scholar, for instances, I am commonly told that my work on everyday racism is very interesting, but not really scientific, a remark which illustrates this colonial hierarchy in which Black scholars reside (Kilomba, 2012, p.300).

In the extract above, Kilomba is talking of German universities, showing that the issue of the exclusionary consequence of racialised social representations is not confined to Anglophone, high income countries. These historically located exclusions operate as implicit ‘micro aggressions’ in academe (Rollock, 2012). As institutions, then, the social representations constructed within universities both serve to maintain the status quo and produce ‘zones of discomfort’ in sites that structure the relational field in which people interact (Lewis, 2013). These are evident, not only in hiring, firing, and promotion practices, but extend even to the ways in which equalities policies are implemented. From her research on the implementation of equal opportunities policies in one UK University, Ahmed (2012) found that strategic posts on equalities are not well resourced or well appointed, that appellants are often ostracised. The approaches taken to ‘equality & diversity’ are formulaic and universities treat ‘commitment [to diversity policies] as a nonperformative’ that work *by not bringing about the effects that they name*’ (Ahmed, 2005).

In these circumstances, black academics and those from other minoritised ethnic groups have to manage the cognitive polyphasia that comes from being academic, but recognising that black people in general are not recognised as belonging in academia and from seeing that universities apparently comply with the Race Relations Amendment Act by having equal opportunities policies, but that these do not seem to result in real change. The unconscious process of being interpellated (Althusser, 1971), being ‘hailed’ or recruited into these racialised ways of understanding the world and one’s own subjectivity in itself produces painful exclusions that can affect black academics’ ability to act (Brah, 1999). Everyday academic practices can, therefore, be viewed as entailing social representations that produce politics of (un)belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The precarious positioning that this potentially produces contribute to maintaining the political status quo and illustrates why social representations are never innocent, but always have political implications. Studying them allows us to effectively address what is at the core of these positions and how we then help normalizing the status quo. Indeed representations are not innocent. They are a game of power and persuasion.

CENSUSES AS A SOCIAL REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND POLITICS

This third and final example of how social representations operate are permeated with ideological power, examines the ways in which the UK and US Censuses have been revised and analysed to consider how census categorisations illuminate everyday politics of representation. Contestation about representation matters because of its meanings for social positioning and, hence, what constitutes a 'liveable life'. In recent decades, contestation about the categories enumerated in the UK and US Censuses has served to highlight the ways in which social categories and representations are socially constructed and that there are sociopolitical consequences to the categorisations chosen. It is apparent, for example, that our societal landscape is structured on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, language, age, disabilities, nationality, religion etc. and that the social representations of people in census categories change as social understandings does. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the ways in which racialised and ethnicised categories are represented. For example, in both the UK and the USA, the introduction of questions allowing the enumeration of a 'mixed ethnicity' category generated controversy (Owen, 2007, 2012).

The 2000 census in the United States provoked a flurry of media attention in the months leading up to it, as well as in its aftermath. At issue was the new federal decision permitting Americans to identify themselves with more than one race on the census form. Advocated in large part by interracial-married couples and their offspring, this bureaucratic change in racial classification practices was widely interpreted in the press as having a wider significance for the nation as a whole. As one reporter put it, "the change is fueling a weighty debate about the meaning of race" (2000). Other articles spoke to the same thought-provoking effect of the new classification standards (Morning, 2005, p. 111).

The 2000 US Census produced 63 'race' categories. The debate about racialised categorisation matters in the context of how the Census is used. On the one hand, as administrative data, census categories are used to generate policies about different groups in the population and create the

official language and taxonomy of race. The categories enumerated have been pre-judged to warrant attention. In terms of racialisation, the fear of those from minoritised ethnic groups is that enumeration will be used as an instrument of control, rather than for beneficent allocation of resources. Enumeration is, therefore, always contested. On the other hand, census categories such as ‘mixed ethnicity’ have arisen because of insider struggle for recognition of mixity. The reification of the category and the availability of demographic data on those in mixed categories can, therefore, also contribute to the burgeoning of mixed identities and so to the further contestation about the naming of the categories as well as encouraging claims for political representation. The names of the categories constructed thus combine beliefs and practices that classify the population and shape the racial order. The cognitive polyphasia that is produced through the institutional and social practices the categories are rendered meaningful. These then help determine who belongs to each category and its status in relation to other groups.

The introduction of ‘mixed’ questions on the UK and US Censuses illustrates well that censuses are social representations, rather than counts of naturally occurring categories. This is even more apparent when the history of censuses and their geographical specificity in relation to ethnicisation and racialisation is considered (Morning, 2012). For example, as a result of the Holocaust, countries such as France and Germany do not collect statistics about ‘race’. For different, equally contentious reasons, Lebanon does not collect ethnic or racial data. In Mexico, Columbia and Peru, the censuses identify ‘indigenous’ populations, but do not enumerate the African-descent population. David Owen (1996) pointed out that the ethnic group question has changed in each Census in the UK (as it has in the US). For example, the white category is more disaggregated over time. The “Irish” category has changed and the treatment of ‘Other’ and ‘Mixed’ categories varies between Censuses and are not entirely comparable. Simpson et al. (2014) suggest that the ethnic group question is broadly comparable at the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses, although the same individual may answer differently if the fit with their identification is not good. These shifts, contestation and historical and geographical specificity of census categories indicates the fluidity of social policy to do with racialisation and ethnicisation. It also raises questions about anchoring and objectification in relation to social representations of ‘race’ and ethnicity.

Stanley Lieberson (1993) pointed out the tensions between the fluidity of social categories and constantly changing social realities and the rigidity of fixed classifications used in censuses. To a large extent the categories used are a result of trial and error and making what are deemed to be the best possible choices at a given time. This can be seen in the evolution of the UK Census:

‘The first time an ethnic question was included in a British census was in 1991. Extensive testing of a possible ethnic question had been conducted. Some tested versions included an option of ticking more than one category, but multi-ticking was found to be unreliable. Other versions included a separate category of 'mixed', but this too was rejected...

If the person is descended from more than one ethnic or racial group, please tick the group to which the person considers he/she belongs, or tick the 'Any other ethnic group' box and describe the person's ancestry in the space provided.’ (Owen, 2012, p.1)

Yet, in 2001 and 2011, the UK Census did include (different) ‘mixed’ questions. Similarly, in 2010, the US Census reintroduced the category “Negro” which led to strong negative public reaction and its official removal in 2013 by the US Census Bureau.

The point here is that census questions are not innocent, timeless or decontextualized. The questions change over time and are different in different places (as discussed above) for socio-political reasons. They help to illuminate the ways in which everyday social representations of racialisation and ethnicisation are conflictual and polyphasic in many societies. Contestations over identity representations fuel changes in census questions and lead to further contestation and identity change. While censuses are designed to enumerate populations in the service of social policy and population control, the dynamism and contradictory nature of categorisations that would be expected from intersectionality and positioning theories means that minoritised ethnic groups are able to use census demographic data to argue for changes in social arrangements and identity change. The contestation thus entails contradictory possibilities and, as in the case of claims to ‘mixed’ identities also allows claims to ‘liveable lives’ (Butler, 2004).

The UK and US decennial Censuses provides important examples of the creative ways in which people use social representations, created in this case through state practices, to challenge and

resist practices that limit social relationships and co-constructions of identity in their everyday lives.

“What we do is evidently shaped by social norms, by institutional possibilities and institutional constraints. But equally, we can act – act *together* that is – to alter norms, institutions, and even whole social systems.” (Subašić et al., 2012, p.66)

Social representations can, therefore, function as strategies that enable resistance to normative representations and protect people’s sense of self. Moscovici (1998, p.377) suggested that, ‘in the process of formation of a representation there is always both conflict and cooperation’. In critically re-evaluating social representations theory, it is important to recognise that anchoring and objectification may not operate in ways that produce settled representations. Instead, censuses (and monitoring surveys) are continually contested because social representations are continually in flux. The act of re-presenting the social world carries with it the possibility for critique, resistance and transgression.

CONCLUSIONS

The above examples show three ways in which, as Moscovici suggested, representations are ‘ways of world-making’ that are central to social and cultural practices (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Moscovici, 1988). In the first, the representations served as a means through which children constructed identities and crafted imagined future ‘liveable lives’. In the second, they produced concerted practices that rendered black academics as ‘bodies out of place’ and hence justified their under-representation in the academy and in the third example, representations and social categorizations mutually constitutes each other in ways that normalize some racialised categories and pathologise others. Taken together, it is evident that social representations do produce competing and polyphasic meanings. Nonetheless, these social representations serve to construct social identities and social relations in ways that serve to maintain the status quo (even though resistance to exclusion and repressive power relations can lead to change).

The paper thus establishes that social representations continue to have social relevance and theoretical purchase. One of the aims of the paper was, however, to consider whether social representations theory constitutes a critical theory that can adequately analyse power, ideology and transgression. As Jovchelovitch and Priero-Hernandez (2013, p.31) suggest, ‘How representations meet, compete and transform each other in public spheres is one of the most interesting problems of our time’. This paper has shown that social representations theory is most helpful used in conjunction with other social theories that can show how representations serve to maintain systems of inequality and exclusion.

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