

Gerard Duveen on the epistemology of social representations

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Gerard Duveen's concern with the epistemology of social representations was one of the major foci of his work, both in terms of his research on child development and of his socio-cultural studies. In these two lines of research Gerard draws on ideas of two scholars who had a tremendous influence on his work: Jean Piaget and Serge Moscovici. Piaget's and Moscovici's oeuvres are based on different epistemologies and this fact also manifests itself in the ways Gerard treats epistemological questions. His studies on child development are mainly influenced by Piaget's epistemology while his socio-cultural studies owe a great deal to Serge Moscovici. In view of this I shall reflect upon Gerard's ideas that he develops in his paper on 'Construction, belief, doubt' (Duveen, 2002) which belongs to Piaget's epistemology and on his last paper on 'Social actors and social groups: a return to heterogeneity in social psychology' (Duveen, 2008) which is based on Moscovici's epistemological point of view.

GERARD DUVEEN AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST

In his paper on 'Construction, belief, doubt' (Duveen, 2002) Gerard makes an important distinction between two epistemological perspectives with respect to social representations. Both perspectives are constructivist, yet in different ways. The first concerns the manner in which social scientists structure their research, reason about phenomena under study and form explanations about them. In this sense, epistemology either is, or is not, constructivist; therefore it would be wrong to refer to the *degrees* of constructivism. Constructivism is an alternative to positivism, behaviourism and all epistemologies that assume that knowledge is

acquired either from innate potentialities of the mind or passively accepted through the senses and information flowing to the brain. It is because constructivism is an alternative to these epistemologies, that talking about degrees of constructivism would confuse the matter. Construction is an active process and this is all that matters. Gerard emphasises that his position is neither an old fashioned idealism nor crude materialism. He explains his constructivist position as follows: 'The theory is a constructivist theory which treats subject and object of knowledge as correlative and co-constitutive. From this perspective the world which is known is the product of the set of socio-psychological structures through which it has been constructed' (Duveen, 2002, p. 140). In other words, in knowing any phenomenon in the world, we can know only what we can grasp by means of available concepts, individual and social experience and the ways of communication. He further states that 'human knowledge is identical with the world as it is known, which does not imply that our knowledge of the world is complete' (ibid.p.141). Co-construction leads to new forms of knowledge and thus, to new realities. Therefore, the knower's psychological structures enable him/her to constitute the object of knowledge and so the knower and the object of knowledge co-constitute one another.

The second epistemological perspective in relation to social representations is more specific. Social representations have numerous *functions*, e.g. an identity function, an ideological function and equally, they have an epistemic function. This means that representing is a constructive process which brings objects in the world closer to the knower as existing phenomena. In contrast to the first perspective of epistemology, here, in the second perspective, Gerard suggests that we can talk about weaker or stronger ways of constructing arguments about beliefs or knowledge. For example, Gerard's research on development of the child's cognition shows that epistemic functions involved in explanations and moral arguments among young boys and girls can be stronger or weaker depending on their autonomous or heteronomous standing as well as on their gender.

Gerard is emphatic that these two epistemological features of social representations, i.e. the one, which refers to the theory of social representations as a theory of social knowledge, and the other, which refers to epistemic functions of social representations, must not be confused because they imply different levels of analysis. It is in and through the former perspective that we pose research questions. And it is in and through the latter perspective that questions obtain their meanings, which either constrain or liberate human conduct. It is this latter, the functional perspective of social representations that Gerard develops in his studies of the development of the child's cognition.

I find Gerard's paper on 'Construction, belief, doubt' particularly interesting because here he clearly states his constructivist position concerning the relation between knowledge and beliefs in the development of the child's cognition and he suggests that the constructivist model he establishes could have more general social-psychological implications. Duveen's constructivist perspective in the epistemology of social representations derives from and builds on Piaget's constructivism, structuralism and rationality. Piaget's concept of 'construction' applies to the child's cognitive development which is accomplished through progressing in subsequent stages and more generally, through a step by step learning by experience, discovery and integrating new knowledge into the already existing mental constructs. When Piaget (1970) refers to 'structure', he applies it to various fields of science and scholarship, all within cognitive domains. Gerard Duveen, although he is using the concept of 'structure' in the sense of 'psychological structures', identifies himself as a constructivist but not as a structuralist. Within his constructivist position he insists on two further assumptions. He points out that '[i]f social representations can be considered a constructivist social psychology' (ibid. p.141), two qualifications must be added. The first qualification differentiates him from Piaget. Unlike Piaget's position, Duveen's constructivist position is inherently social. This means that the child does not acquire knowledge solely through his or her own reasoning and through adaptation and accommodation, but instead, the child always constructs knowledge in the dynamics of social life, in communication and social practice. Psychological structures, therefore, are social products. The second qualification Gerard shares with Piaget: the constructivist position is genetic. The genetic argument of the constructivist point of view is based on the perspective of structural hierarchies: social-psychological structures, through which phenomena are known, are already products of the sociogenetic, the ontogenetic and the microgenetic structures (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990). While the genetic feature concerns the transformation of knowledge into more advanced forms as in Piaget, the social construction of knowledge brings into the theory socio-cultural traditions and common sense knowledge.

We need to remember that Duveen's constructivist approach is applied to the development of the child's intelligence. His interest here is focused on transformations of one pattern of thought to another one, or from beliefs to knowledge. This is not only the Piagetian way of progression in human thought, but it is also Durkheim's way of thinking about the growth of human rationality throughout history. Although for Durkheim all representations are rational beliefs, some become closer to true knowledge than others as mankind progresses from religion to science. Collective representations are socially true, Durkheim (1912/2001)

states in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. They are founded in the nature of things and they hold to and express reality. Religions, too, express reality in one way or another and therefore, all are true in their own fashion: there are no religions which are false. All religions respond, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence and this is why for Durkheim a collective representation is a rational belief. Nevertheless, Durkheim does not develop the concept of rationality of representations any further.

In his studies of moral development Piaget (1932) makes a distinction between co-operation and constraint, that is, between symmetric and asymmetric relations of the self and others. According to him, only symmetric relations between individuals allow for co-operation and it is co-operation that enables the construction of knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge, therefore, is never a sheer acceptance of the point of view of the other. In contrast, asymmetric relations imply constraint and therefore, ‘there is only the possibility of belief’ (Duveen, 2002, p. 144) or compliance due to the authority of the source. On the basis of this Piagetian concept of construction Gerard (Duveen, 2002, p.145) comes up with a table of dyadic relations that suggest a distinction between beliefs and knowledge:

Belief	Knowledge
Constraint, asymmetry, compliance	co-operation, symmetry, conversion/innovation

Having made this distinction he maintains, nevertheless, that when we talk about beliefs and knowledge, we are often not talking about different things ‘but about the ways in which forms of understanding are constructed and sustained within particular ways of engaging within the social life or within people’s general orientation towards the world’ (Duveen, 2002, p.149).

The Piagetian way implies the progression from beliefs to knowledge relying upon the classic, i.e. Kantian form of rationality. This means that the action of reason and of intellect excludes partly or totally actions that are based on motives, desires or emotions, i.e. on ‘irrational’ activities (Kant, 1788/1873). The Piagetian rationality, like Kantian rationality, is universal. All children pass through the stages of operational development and through these states they construct, step by step, higher forms of intelligence. The transformation from beliefs to knowledge is a model, Gerard suggests that it is also applicable to social representations in general.

GERARD DUVEEN AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL EPISTEMOLOGIST

In his socio-cultural studies (e.g. Duveen 2007; 2008; Wagner et al. 1999; Wagner et al. 2000) Gerard, together with colleagues, builds on Moscovici's epistemology. Although in his work on the development of child intelligence the social nature of thought is part of Gerard's epistemology, it is in his socio-cultural studies that the social nature is thematised.

The point of departure of the epistemology of social representations and communication is a triangular relation between the Ego-Alter-Object (Moscovici, 1972/2000). The epistemology assumes not only knowledge and beliefs, but the totality of human experience embedded in, and accumulated through, history and culture: knowledge and beliefs include the struggle for social recognition, desires and their symbolic transformations, ethics and morality, judgements and evaluations of self/other relations and of objects of knowledge. It is an epistemology of living experience and of daily thinking rooted in common sense, which is being transformed into new forms of thought and new social representations when conditions for these obtain.

There is no place for the epistemology of living experience within the bounds of the Cartesian and Kantian rationality; instead, within those bounds, the epistemology of living experience would count as irrationality. Neither would it count as rationality in Piaget's epistemology of the transformation from beliefs to knowledge and in his presumed relations of asymmetry and symmetry and of constraint and co-operation, respectively. The epistemology of living experience presupposes more complex kinds of relations between the Ego-Alter. In one sense, we can of course assume that relations between the Ego-Alter can be those of constraint and force, implying compliance or beliefs due to the authority of the other. However, and most importantly, the rationality of beliefs in the Ego-Alter-Object relations is captured in trust and communication between the Ego-Alter rather than in the constraint due to asymmetric relations and authority.

It is this latter kind of rationality that, to my mind, Gerard adopts in his socio-cultural epistemology. He reflects on Moscovici's (1961/2008) ideas in *La Psychanalyse: son image et son public* concerning different communicative systems that Moscovici identifies through content analysis of the French press. Referring to Moscovici's three genres of communication, i.e. diffusion, propagation and propaganda, Gerard (Duveen, 2008) specifies different types of social groups corresponding to each of these communicative genres and consequently also to different representations of the members of the in-group and the out-group in each instance. Thus Gerard characterises diffusion as the voluntary association of the members of

the in-group who possess a skeptical intelligence, while the out-group embraces forms of dogmatism. Gerard describes this kind of group in terms of *sympathy*. Propagation, on the other hand, refers to groups in which a central authority sets limits to creativity or intellectual curiosity. The out-group either does not share the belief in the legitimacy of such authority or of the relevant ideology. Gerard calls this kind of group a *communion*. Finally, propaganda is used by groups whose political commitment and organization defines the way of conduct of the in-group. In contrast, the out-group is either committed to a different kind of ideology or simply does not share the ideology of the in-group. Gerard characterises such a group in terms of *solidarity*.

To my mind these ideas link rather well with Moscovici's (1993) analysis in 'Reason and Cultures' where he argues that what makes one group distinguishable from another is 'the act of privileging a type of representation and as a result, a form of communication' (ibid. p. 47) with other members of that group. He calls this kind of group loyalty a *fiduciary rationality*. As I understand it, fiduciary rationality is a form of dependency among group members that arises from *within*, from trust and loyalty among members rather than from the constraint of authority or from an outside pressure. It is trust and loyalty that enable the formation of social and group relations (see also Simmel (1950) on this point). The relations within a group are necessarily asymmetric in terms of authority or knowledge due to heterogeneity among members of the group. Communication within the group, too, is asymmetric because asymmetries are necessary features of any communication and there would be nothing to communicate about if asymmetries in status, knowledge and otherwise did not exist (e.g. Marková, I. and Foppa, K. 1991). What holds members of the group together is trust and loyalty and these relations of mutual dependence lead to the development of rules and norms of acting as well as constraints within the group. Thus we see that rules and constraints in groups do not develop from asymmetric relations as in Piagetian epistemology, but, in Duveen's case, from sympathy, communion or solidarity – or from fiduciary rationality in Moscovici's case. Such informal constraints develop from the inner relations within the group, before any more formal organization is formed. Communication is a fundamental feature of this rationality based on trust and an implicit *contract* among the in-group members, but not on *construction*. In Moscovici's terms, people must already share a culture or indeed, a social representation, before they start 'constructing'. A contract but not a *construct* is an ethical requirement for communication and here we can say with Mikhail Bakhtin, that there is no alibi for communication.

We can also recall here that George Herbert Mead (1915) drew attention to the error in assuming that individual citizens originally possessed natural rights and that subsequently, society developed formal institutions in order to protect these natural rights. Mead points out that, on the contrary, it was the society that had to recognize the existence of these rights and that, equally, formal social institutions had to recognize them. Mead is critical of seventeenth century philosophers like Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke who do not appreciate this fact. Thus Mead says that if John Locke had the knowledge of contemporary anthropologists he would have recognized that people had been organized in informal groups and that from these groups later on formal institutions developed. Formal institutions arose out of communities that had already formulated their norms, rules and customs. In other words, rights were already in existence and they were recognized by group members, although in a different form than in governmental institutions. Therefore, special introduction or special instruments were required to establish them in formal institutions.

Equally, fiduciary rationality is rooted within each specific group and binds a group together. Rationality of the common sense, too, Moscovici points out, is based on fiduciary rationality. Accordingly, in his theoretical and empirical studies of culture and social representations Gerard focuses not on transformations from beliefs to knowledge but on Moscovici's concept of cognitive polyphasia: on the simultaneous and dynamic co-existence of different modalities of thinking and knowledge, for example, of traditional and modern, ritualistic and scientific, strictly logical and heuristic. From these studies Gerard also arrives at the recognition of the conceptual challenges of exploring the relations between social representations and culture. As he points out, when we talk about social representations, we always relate them to a particular object. In contrast, the concept of culture refers to a more diffuse body of social representations which characterise features that distinguish one community from another one (Duveen, 2007). In this conception, epistemological resources of social representations and communication are much broader than those in studies of transformation of beliefs to knowledge. These resources are hardly ever neutral with respect to social actors. Instead, as phenomena in the making, social representations are formed and transformed in and through asymmetries, conflict, discontinuities and tension rather than through a continuous and upward route towards cognitive ideals of 'true' knowledge.

We can say that Gerard, as a social scientist, embraces cognitive polyphasia in his own creative work, applying simultaneously different modalities of thought and knowledge to different lines of his research. His sensitivity to the needs for different epistemologies in relation to different fields of enquiry was characteristic of his thinking and deep scholarship.

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