

Commentary: On the inertia of social representations

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In the paper by Andreouli (2010, this volume) it is claimed that the social representations perspective developed by Duveen and colleagues is successful in theorising the social-individual dynamics in processes of identity construction by taking into consideration the role of recognition in knowledge construction processes, but it is suggested that there is a need to draw from discursive approaches and positioning theory specifically to elaborate on the power dynamics involved and the character of positions through a consideration of the rights and duties associated with identity positions. By doing this, it is suggested, the integration of the two approaches would help elucidate the role of the ‘other’ in identity construction especially with regards to issues of identity legitimation.

Although the vision of introducing a stronger sense of power dynamics into social representations theory is a laudable one, it is questionable whether the post-structuralist framework of Harré and his colleagues provides added value over Duveen’s nuanced constructivist analysis of the dynamics of social interaction in relation to social representations and the role that other plays in the process of identity construction which he developed with colleagues in his more recent work.

The paper claims that in positioning theory societal discourses make available a range of positions, that is, a set of categories that people identify with as well as their meanings. Due to its ‘here-and-now’ quality, positioning can be seen as a

conceptualisation of 'doing identities' in talk. However, it is exactly this "here and now" of identities, disconnected from the "there and then" stemming from the inertia of social representations that Duveen explicitly resisted in positioning theory. Duveen (1993) from a genetic point of view argued, in the context of social gender identities, that the positions occupied by different identities may vary in the extent to which they constrain the child's future development. From this point of view the identity which a child brings into any social interaction will be an important influence on the course of the interaction and how meanings are negotiated through it. He continued to explicitly state that:

This [Duveen's view] contrasts with social-psychological theories which have drawn on post-structuralist writings to argue that children's 'subjectivity' is "constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate" (Davies, 1989, p. 229). Such theories emphasise the positioning of the self in relation to specific discourses, but they do so in terms which rarely stretch beyond the immediate horizons of a particular interaction. It is as though positions can be endlessly taken up and changed as children move in and out of different interactions. Yet are gender identities as mobile and flexible as this suggests? Is this not too synchronic a view, which excludes the diachronic consequences of taking up a specific position? Our own view is that the constraints of different positions constitute a kind of inertia which both carries the child into some kinds of interactions rather than others, as well as generating a more fixed identity than such discursive positioning allows (Duveen, 1993, p.4-5).

In order to grasp the notion of inertia of social representations that Duveen talks about one has to understand his dialectic/genetic vision of change from one knowledge structure to another structure in microgenesis, ontogenesis and sociogenesis. Duveen (1993) attributed great importance to the microgenetic process, which he saw as the motor of ontogenetic and sociogenetic change and he drew inspiration from both Piaget and Vygotsky in rendering intelligible the dynamics involved in this process and especially the post-Piagetian work of the 'social Genevans' (Doise, Mugny, 1984; Perret-Clermont, 1980; see Psaltis, Duveen & Perret-Clermont, 2009).

A basic understanding of the notion of positioning and the role of the other in identity and knowledge construction of the subject, as Duveen saw from a constructivist/genetic perspective, can be witnessed in his earlier work when discussing the role of parental expectations in social interactions on the development of gender identities (Duveen, 1993). Here he describes through experimental findings how parents and caregivers position their children as boys or girls as soon as they are

born, or even before they are born. When he discusses positioning in relation to this research, he was also trying to make the point that despite the fact that children share the same knowledge about the social marking of toys and practices, in their actual interactions one could identify different forms of femininities and masculinities organised around varying forms of valorisation and contact with the other gender or gender marked toys. It is in this sense that he discussed a social representation of gender as furnishing different positions of identity and this is how Duveen understood the symbolic value of social representations.

I feel that omitting any discussion of the *symbolic value of social representations*, *valorisation*, *constraints* and *resistance* in Duveen's work is the reason why the writer feels the need to complement the social representations perspective with the notions of rights and duties from positioning theory. Resistance is, for Duveen (2001), the moment when an identity refuses an attempt to be influenced by other. Resistance emerges as the result of a violation of expectations of how self and other can and should behave in relation to a valorised other and object (Psaltis & Duveen, 2006, 2007), thus putting constraints on how social interaction and co-construction unfolds in real time. This triadic configuration of positions/expectations towards object and other thus is formulated as the expressions of status asymmetries between interacting partners.

In the recent work of Duveen (Leman & Duveen, 1996; Duveen & Psaltis, 2008; Psaltis & Duveen, 2006, 2007; Psaltis, Duveen & Perret-Clermont, 2009) the symbolic value of social representations is exemplified in social interactions where the object and arguments around that object (a Piagetian task) are valorised leading to the alignment or conflict of varying sources of status asymmetries that in turn lead to different co-constructed forms of resolving socio-cognitive conflict. What this recent work has made clear is that the microgenetic process is enabled and constrained by a mixture of socio-cognitive structural constraints at different levels of analysis: cognitive (individual level), situational (framing of interaction by experimenter, task particularities, academic popularity of pupils in the classroom), and macro societal constraints (social representations of gender/identities). All these constraints at various levels of analysis can actually be seen as different forms of asymmetries that might actually conflict or align with each other in social interaction with diverse

effects in the outcomes of social interaction (Duveen & Psaltis, 2008). Aligned asymmetries of varying forms comprise an inertia that often decisively hinders ontogenetic and sociogenetic change of social representations by diminishing the free exchange of views and the construction of novelty and it is often the conflict of asymmetries that creates the possibility for novelty and change (Psaltis, 2005; Psaltis & Duveen, 2006; 2007). These findings support an insight that goes back to the early work of Piaget (1932) on the *Moral Judgment of the Child* and in his *Sociological Studies* (Piaget, 1977). Piaget saw morality and reason as two sides of the same coin. He identified essentially two “moral orders” (to use a term also used in positioning theory) in social relations. Relations of co-operation, that are based on mutual respect and relations of constraint, based on unilateral respect. These two social relations had profoundly different consequences for the subject’s cognitive development; in a sense the structure of knowledge that they could sustain. Relations of co-operation lead to the re-construction of knowledge but relations of constraint hinder re-construction of knowledge favouring only the transmission of a superficial layer of beliefs.

Based on this finding, the claim by Davies & Harré, (1999, p. 35) cited in Andreouli’s paper, that: “Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned”, seems problematic because the potentially contested nature of positioning (developmental, situational and societal) is obscured. The importance of developmental socio-cognitive constraints (former knowledge, expectations about self and other), in one word the micro-history of the subject and the inertia of social representations and social relations, is not recognised. A color-blind person seeing a chair from the back will not see the colour of a chair if he/she sees it from the front. Placing a girl in the position of an expert in the collaborative resolution of a problem with a novice boy will not necessarily make the girl act as an expert. There are rights and duties stemming from both the developmental, situational and the societal and these rights and duties can be aligned or conflicting with significantly different results in terms of the outcomes of interaction, both in terms of knowledge and identities. Generally, there is an interplay of developmental, situational and societal structural constraints with consequences for the outcomes of social interaction that seem to be lost in post-structuralist writings,

and it is exactly for this reason that Duveen thought that not much can be gained from such writings.

Another source of oversimplification of Duveen's work, making it appear as in need of complementarity by post-structuralist writings, lies in not making in the text the distinction between acting through a social representation (in an unreflective way) and reflecting on a social representation, which is important especially from a developmental perspective (see Zittoun et al, 2003 on reflective and unreflective use of symbolic resources). Surely one can think of the self as a representation of others, and one can think of what outgroupers think of ingroupers and follow different strategies accordingly (this was clearly shown in the work of Howarth (2002) on the stigmatised identity of living in Brixton). But this seems to me, is done in a reflective manner whilst the ethnographic work with children Duveen often engaged in explored acting through social representations in an unreflective manner, and the shift from unreflective to reflective use of social representations is a developmental achievement that is also missing from post-structuralist writings.

Finally, the example discussed from the interview of a naturalised British citizen of Chinese origin allows the reader indeed to identify continuity or inertia rather than discontinuity between the first and second excerpt as suggested by the paper. The discussion of the first excerpt is indeed excellent in identifying the way that the interviewee is acting through an assimilatory representation of Britishness that misrecognises her Chinese ethnic background and seems to be projecting English ways and values as the prototype of Britishness. But I think the author is mistaken to claim that in the second excerpt: "In an effort to be recognised, the participant employs a different comparison context and redefines the moral order of the situation", since I believe that the same moral order of asymmetric status (misrecognition of Chinese origin) is always at play. By comparing and differentiating her self from other migrants that do not actually speak the language, she is in fact still acting through the same exclusionary representation of Britishness. Her struggle is in fact not of respect for her background but of recognition that she has lost any connection with her background, or misrecognition of her Chinese background. A naturalisation as Anglicisation process is indeed at play as it was in the first excerpt. The same asymmetric triadic configuration between self, the migrants of Chinese

origin and British (English?) is always orchestrating the dynamics observed in the interview across both excerpts.

The role played by both others: British/English and immigrants of Chinese origin, in relation to the interviewee, is to orient towards consolidating an asymmetric valorisation of English as the prototype of British over Chinese. The added value of a systemic and triadic social representations perspective here is, at least in my mind, that positions of identity could have been identified as varieties of “naturalised” Britishness (as an object of representation) that are sustained by a different quality of social relations between Chinese and English. In the example given it could actually be claimed that a “naturalisation” process did indeed take place in the sense that being British is culturally essentialised on the basis of English content. The interviewee feels she deserves to be British because she was raised in England from a young age and knows the ways and language of the English for example. But one could imagine another position of naturalisation expressed by another interviewee of Chinese origin that would say “I am Chinese and in a really multicultural state as the UK should be, I might only speak Chinese and still be an equally “natural” citizen as any English citizen of UK”. That would have meant acting through a different triadic configuration where Chinese is at least equally valorised as the English and Britishness is equally inclusive of Chinese and English. In Piagetian terms that would be a relation of co-operation based on mutual respect, and such claiming of position would be expected to have its own inertia across contexts affecting the way contact and trust is enacted with varying others (see Psaltis, in press). The important element that distinguishes one position from another is in fact the forms of communication through which these positions have been shaped and not whether the one or the other group is used as a comparison/reference point. This is what can actually provide the critical edge in studying social representations of migration as it unravels the political, and ideological struggles around the issue of migration. These positions are not created every time *ex novo*. As Duveen (1993) argued social representations have inertia.

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