

RUNNING HEAD: A normative and dynamic approach

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The target article by Elcheroth, Doise and Reicher presents an ambitious, comprehensive and convincing overview of many of the epistemological assumptions of a social representations approach to political knowledge. In this commentary, we would first like to point out a number of issues which relate to their conceptualization of shared knowledge and to the implications of their approach for studying diversity and contestation. In response to their analysis of power and inequality, we then outline a normative and dynamic intergroup approach to social representations.

What is shared in shared knowledge?

Elcheroth et al. rightly point out the centrality of sharedness of knowledge in a social representational approach to political knowledge. Their perspective suggests that individuals elaborate common understandings of social reality which then enables them to communicate in order to take action on the basis of this shared knowledge. Elcheroth et al. readily admit that this point is hardly new or original. Many of the tenets of their approach can indeed be traced back to theories of the social self, in particular George Herbert Mead (1934) who understood individual conscience as a product of social relations. The second factor of social knowledge put forward by Elcheroth et al.—meta-knowledge—can also be found in Mead’s work since his analysis of the self is based on the principle of reflexivity through which people come to have an understanding of themselves through the awareness of how other people see them, through the anticipation of others’ responses, and through normative expectations which make social coordination and ultimately social order possible.

Overall, their view is strongly anchored in a self-other dichotomy which is illustrated by the fact that their arguments often refer to indiscriminate “others”, such as in “... our knowledge of the world is shared by *others* in communities of belief” (p. 7, our emphasis). Such a universalist conception of shared knowledge harks back to another Meadian concept: the “generalized other”. As in Elcheroth et al., Mead’s generalized other refers to significant and relevant, yet abstract members of reference communities, characterized by group-specific normative knowledge on which individuals rely to decide on behavioral options. Illustrating the centrality of this generic “other” in their analysis, the term “others” in this sense appears 32 times in their text, while “ingroup” (or “ingroups”) and “outgroup” or (“outgroups”) each appear only four times.

The indiscriminate use of “others” to refer to ingroup members suggests that it is unproblematic who these others actually are, and against whom they define themselves. From this view, it would follow that the issue of group boundaries between ingroup others and outgroup others is irrelevant, and that the contextual and perceived presence of others completely determines the psychological processes involved in the construction of political knowledge. Indeed, in many respects their text evokes the idea of close-knit communities in which members share, to varying degrees, common knowledge, norms and values. From our reading, then, this shared knowledge is rather consensually shared among members of some kind of generic ingroup. Debate, contestation, protest, radical disagreement are mentioned as important in their model, but surprisingly do not appear to play a major role in their interpretation of social representations.

We would argue that a social representations approach has actually the potential to go a step further. Let us first clarify the conception of shared knowledge according to some of the classical works in social representations perspective (see Augoustinos, Walker & Donoghue, 2006; Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Deaux & Philogène, 2001; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Flick, 1995; Markova & Farr, 1995; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). In their discussion of social practices (p. 19), Elcheroth et al. briefly evoke two fundamental notions, *objectification* and *anchoring*. These concepts define two central processes in the construction of social representations. Objectification refers to the transformation of general or scientific ideas into concrete and useful forms of knowledge. This process produces shared figures or symbols which incorporate the meaning of the original ideas, but which can be more easily used in everyday communication. As stated by Elcheroth et al., this process is at work in collective remembering, institutionalization of routine practices or cultural stereotyping of minority groups. Such collective practices create a common memory for group members. Abraham Lincoln, for example, symbolizes the founding values of the USA for Americans (see Schwarz, 1990), while left-wing and right-wing orientations are used as concise categorizations of political ideas in Western societies. Such shared and common points of reference are necessary for meaningful communication. However, this does not mean that all group members would share the same knowledge. The objectified symbols must indeed be incorporated in established and familiar beliefs which in turn depend on the social group individuals belong to. Because social representations

are elaborated through discussion and debate, individuals *anchor* such common reference points in the normative perspectives of their own groups. Thus, liberals and conservatives appeal to Lincoln to promote contrasting ideas and policies in line with their party affiliation, and the definition of the left/right distinction varies according to political movements.

Diversity, dualisms and social regulation

While we do not deny the importance of such an ingroup dynamic, we feel it only tells part of the story. In particular, we think that the Elcheroth et al. view of social representations does not spell out how exactly their conception of shared knowledge can be linked to the issue of diversity, notwithstanding their statement that a social representational approach “better accounts for the negotiation of plurality, diversity, and innovation, which are all central to our contemporary ‘thinking societies’” (p. 27). In order to develop this point, we follow up their idea “that a critical aspect of social representations concerns the way we divide people into categories in the social world” (p. 10).

Social representations theory emphasizes the importance of dualist principles at work in virtually any cognitive activity (Markova, 2006; Wagner & Hayes, 2005): antinomies between good and bad people, children and parents, friends and enemies, people high and low on the social ladder are but a few examples of antinomies where one everyday category is defined (and exists) only in relation to the other category. A dialectic view of human thinking view is also advocated by Billig (1989) who suggests that since human thinking is to a large extent an internal argumentation between antagonistic points of view, arguing (rather than thinking) should take center stage in analyses of social thought. We would therefore contend that at least one more factor should be added to the list of the four epistemological characteristics of social representations described by Elcheroth et al.: thinking in antinomies. Antinomic thinking is for example found in the context of ideological values. Both political and lay actors symbolize ideological values with antagonistic social categories which organize perceptions of minorities vs. majorities and of subordinate vs. dominant groups (Staerklé, 2009). Self-control, for example, is objectified into an antagonism between groups perceived to be in control of themselves and groups perceived to be “out of control” such as drug addicts, obese or psychologically unstable people (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). A normative categorization process thus creates and maintains antagonistic categories based on perceived conformity or transgression with

shared norms and values (see also Henry & Reyna, 2007; Kreindler, 2005). Similarly, the shared value of democracy is objectified with an antagonism between allegedly civilized democratic and allegedly uncivilized non-democratic populations (Staerklé, Clémence & Doise, 1998). We therefore suggest that antinomies are a key feature of social representations (Markova, 2006), in particular when they are objectified with antagonistic group relations. In political theory, such a view is advocated by Mouffe (1993) who suggests that the political process is all about regulating antagonistic intergroup relations.

In order to account for social diversity, then, a social representations approach should analyze the multiple regulatory principles of social relations (that is, organizing principles) which orient the positioning of social actors towards important social issues (Doise et al., 1993; Doise & Staerklé, 2002; Elejabarrieta, 1994). Such a view should provide a conceptual framework through which stereotypes of ingroups and outgroups in diverse societies are seen as the product of antinomies which structure shared knowledge. The model of lay conceptions of social order (Staerklé, 2009; Staerklé, Delay, Gianettoni & Roux, 2007) outlines such an approach. This model defines four shared representations of fundamental intergroup antagonisms each of which is based on specific modes of social regulation: between “good” and “bad” people (based on conformity with common values), between “winners” and “losers” (based on meritocracy), between cultural and ethnic ingroups and outgroups (based on intergroup differentiation), and between dominant and subordinate groups (based on inequality management). This model evokes some of the classical social representations research which has studied how people differentiate themselves from threatening outgroups (Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 1999). It provides a normative framework to study the multiple ways people are divided into social categories and to relate stereotype content of these categories to principles regulating social order. In line with social identity theory, this view also suggests that widely shared stereotypes derived from these antagonistic intergroup norms can be used as strategic tools which political actors draw upon to mobilize ingroups and to delegitimize outgroups (Reicher, 2004).

Such an intergroup approach to political knowledge relates social groups to specific positions in debates about a given representational topic. Group members constantly refer to multiple and competing types of normative reference knowledge which define the terms of social debate,

contestation and protest. By taking up a position, they then either support or reject shared knowledge. Both everyday communication and political debate about diversity in democratic societies can thus be studied with such a framework.

Power and inequality: Context or structure?

Our focus on intergroup antagonisms is closely related to the notions of conflict, inequality and power which more often than not characterize relations between groups. As the authors rightly point out, “any theory about social representations is fundamentally a theory of social *conflict*” (p. 27, emphasis in original). While in one instance they link the principle of conflict to “conflicting versions of reality” people are exposed to (p.27), in most other occurrences, and notably in the case of ex-Yugoslavia used to illustrate their model, the term “conflict” is understood as detrimental hostility between groups. Since conflict has mostly negative connotations in their text, we found it somewhat unclear why conflict would be so central in a social representations approach.

Although Elcheroth et al. look at social representations as a “theory of power” and analyze “how power works”, their conception of power seems restricted to communication processes and mobilizing functions of representations. To be sure, this is important and gives a fresh look at power processes which dynamically appeal to representations and identities. At the same time, it seems a rather “thin” theory of power which ignores the existence of structural power relationships. While the authors briefly mention the existence of status inequalities (p. 29), it remains vague how exactly representations are connected to existing power structures and asymmetrical intergroup relations (see Jackman, 1984). Claiming that it is “certainly not self-evident who is dominant and who is subordinate” even seems to be at odds with ample sociological (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984) and historical (e.g., Horowitz, 2000) evidence which documents the existence of relationships of power and oppression between dominant and subordinate groups, be it in terms of class, race, gender or any other categorical criteria. We therefore find it somewhat misleading to oppose “essentialising” conceptions of power which take social hierarchies as a “fixed background” (p. 28) to a representational approach to power which is characterized by constant negotiation and communication and contextual definitions of ingroups and outgroups. For to consider the existence of structural power relationships does not necessarily imply essentialisation of these relationships. Intergroup domination and asymmetry are

empirical facts, and social inequalities, oppression and exploitation are part of a social reality the existence of which does not depend on interpretative activities of individuals. But we agree with Elcheroth et al. that the way individuals react to and cope with these power relationships depends on the meaning they assign to these power relationships and to the construction of common identities derived from these asymmetrical intergroup relationships. This intertwining of status and psychological process is illustrated by research which shows that status inequalities shape the sense of self. Membership in high status groups promotes access to normative and ideological representations of the self as autonomous and bounded individuals, whereas membership in subordinate groups gives rise to a more communal and collective understanding of the self (Deschamps, 1982). In this normative view, identities are grounded in existing power relations between social groups and in the representations which sustain them (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clémence, 2001).

Conflict and the dynamic intergroup approach to social representations

More generally, what should be highlighted is the idea that conflict—between individuals and between groups—can also be constructive, and that conflict is indeed indispensable for social and political change. This is not only true for the development of individual cognitive competencies (Doise & Mugny, 1984), but also for wider social processes operating on a societal scale where minorities and majorities interact with each other. While the Elcheroth et al. paper seems to be closer to a social identity view where social influence is mainly located within groups (since group identification promotes conformity with ingroup norms), a social representational view accounts for social change by considering influence to operate also at the intergroup level (Doise, 1993; Howarth, 2006).

This brings us to the final point of this commentary which underscores the dynamic nature of the representational process (see also Moghaddam, 2006). Importantly, Elcheroth et al. (p. 5) introduce the three modalities of communication analyzed by Moscovici in 1961—diffusion, propagation and propaganda—on the basis of which Moscovici (1976) later developed his theory of social influence. When new ideas or unexpected events (e.g., AIDS, natural catastrophes, killings, or the Lewinski case) emerge in the public sphere, a phase of *diffusion* of information can be observed first. This phase occurs in a context of relative non-differentiation between actors and produces a network of common points of reference. In this process, media with a large audience contribute to the

circulation of various thematic elements and multiple opinions. This first phase follows a typical dynamic of *objectification* which gives rise to new norms resulting from the common influence exerted by different sources of communication. The second phase begins when powerful majority groups intervene in the debate and organize the information according to their norms and values. The message is directed towards individuals who look for cues which would help them to take up a position in the developing debate. Experts of the majority group may for example *propagate* priorities of the different elements of the new network of knowledge in order to consolidate well-established norms of the group. This is the typical majority influence phase in which majority group leaders can often easily orient opinions of their group members by integrating the new and unfamiliar information in the consensual beliefs of their groups. For minorities and subordinate groups, however, it is more difficult to make their claims heard. This is why their members have to adopt a more forceful perspective with a *propaganda* strategy which separates “true” from common knowledge. If the positions put forward in the propagation phase are expressed as flexible attitudes, those in the propaganda dynamic appear as firm and stereotypical. As Elcheroth and colleagues also point out, this is the typical form of minority influence in Moscovici’s conversion theory (1976): Minority groups propose an alternative point of view on a given issue and thereby enter a confrontational relation with the majority group in order to achieve social change (Butera & Levine, 2009; Moscovici, Mugny, & van Avermaet, 1985).

In this dynamic approach, social stability and social change is viewed as a communicative process of social influence between minorities and majorities (Duveen, 2001). Social stability is maintained through a system of mutual processes of social influence which sustain particular forms of social representations. Majorities strive to maintain their dominant position by resisting minority influence, for example through delegitimizing minorities and the alternative points of view they put forward. If majorities successfully resist the influence attempts, the network of social influence is stable, representations become emancipated and normalized, and existing social arrangements are maintained. The balance of influence processes shifts, however, through the active influence attempts by minorities, or, in terms of social identity theory, through collective action (Reicher, 2004).

Conclusion

Elcheroth and colleagues emphasize the differences or even the opposition of their perspective with a social cognitive approach deemed to be the dominant paradigm in studies of political knowledge (see Bar-Tal, 2002). From our side we would rather suggest that more integration is needed. Prior integrative work (Augustinos et al., 2006) has indeed shown that social representations and social cognition had much in common. There is for example a clear correspondence between the sharedness of representations and false consensus processes (Ross, Greene & House, 1977; Fields & Schuman, 1976), or between social anchoring processes in social representations and “hot” cognition processes as those theorized in political reasoning (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2000). The paper by Elcheroth et al. appears to share with this social cognition approach the idea that political actors should first of all be understood as individuals located within groups. As a complement to this view, we have argued here that the social representations approach fundamentally adds an (asymmetrical) intergroup communication and intergroup influence theory to political psychology. In this view, and in line with Elcheroth and colleagues, political actors cannot be understood in isolation from their social contexts. But in addition they can neither be understood independently of the hierarchical intergroup systems in which they take part and towards which they have to position themselves (see Doise 1993, Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spini, Elcheroth & Fasel, 2008).

The theoretical nature of the article by Elcheroth et al. should not give the impression that a social representations approach is necessarily conceptual and abstract. There is indeed a strong tradition of empirical research on social representations in many European and Latin American countries to which the authors only partially refer to. Instead, they ask to “be judged by the usefulness of the constructs” they provide rather than by their “faithfulness to a tradition” (p.11). Our guess is that constructs like *social representations* or *social identity* derived from grand European theories are indeed very useful to frame our empirical work in a paradigmatic view. At the same time, this usefulness can be further enhanced when the concepts are contextualized in relation to particular political phenomena, historical periods and cultural communities and then translated into testable models. More work needs to be done to gain a better understanding of the social dynamics which tie together social representations, intergroup relations and the structural features of diversity and inequality.

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