

The individual as the source of progressive thinking: A comment on Liu and Sibley (2006)

Christian Staerklé

University of Geneva
Email: christian.staerкле@pse.unige.ch

This paper comments on James Liu's and Chris Sibley's article "Differential effects of societal anchoring and attitude certainty in determining support or opposition to (bi)cultural diversity in New Zealand." Three issues are discussed, beginning with the specificities of the New Zealand context. Second, the epistemological discrepancies between attitudes and social representations are highlighted. Finally, the main finding according to which sharing information with others gives rise to opposition to multiculturalism, whereas individual cognitive activity leads to support for multicultural policies, is discussed regarding its normative implications. It is concluded that the paper provides an important input for current research on social representations, and that Liu and Sibley have taken the issue of the relationship between attitudes and social representations a step further.

The research by James Liu and Chris Sibley on attitudes towards multiculturalism in New Zealand provides a thoughtful and original contribution to social representations theory and research. I will discuss this paper from three angles. First, the specificities of the New Zealand context will be highlighted, then the link between attitudes and social representations will be focused on, and finally the normative implications of some results of the research will be discussed.

The New Zealand context

Granted that social representations reflect the social and cultural conditions of the context in which they evolve, one of the strengths of Liu's and Sibley's paper is that it thoroughly takes into account the specificities of New Zealand in terms of its race relations. Being unfamiliar with the particular context under study, I found it intriguing to learn about the historical status of the Maori indigenous people in New Zealand and its potential impact on ethnic identity and on social representations of ethnic relations. In particular, the role of Maoris in creating a national and cultural identity based on a positive and complementary relationship between the majority (NZ Europeans) and the minority group (indigenous Maoris) could have far-reaching consequences. I cannot think of many studies which have shown that a national majority builds its identity on a positive relationship with the national

minority. Rather, the general tendency seems to go in the opposite direction in the sense that minorities are a “problem” for majorities, representing a symbolic and material threat to the majority identity (Green, 2006; Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Even though this positive representation of Maoris is far from being consensual, it nevertheless shows that the intergroup relation between national majority and minority groups is not necessarily characterised by discrimination and conflict. This ambivalence in attitudes towards minorities is remarkable in light of recent studies which have shown that national majorities (NZ Europeans, in this case) tend to project their own values and norms on the superordinate national group (New Zealand). As a result of this “ingroup projection”, minorities are perceived by majority members as deviant outgroups not respecting the values of the ingroup (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Staerklé, Sidanius, Green & Molina, 2005), a process typical of U.S. race relations, for example (e.g., Biernat, Vescio, Theno, and Crandall, 1996; Sears & Henry, 2005). In contrast, this process of ingroup projection would be less prevalent among the NZ majority, or would at least be contested by a considerable part of the population. If so, Maoris would not be judged as a function of their conformity with majority values, but as a legitimate group in its own right, with their own norms and values. From a normative point of view, this looks like an ideal way to help build positive intergroup attitudes, even though the question raised by Green (this volume) remains unanswered: are (at least some) NZ majority members genuinely interested in acknowledging the cultural and social equality of Maoris, or do they follow the logic of the velvet glove described by Mary Jackman (1994), by “paternalising” the minority with kind words, but without a real willingness to grant them equality of rights and correction of historical inequality ? Be it as it may, the paper thoughtfully raises this key question for the handling of race relations.

Attitudes and social representations

On a more conceptual level, another strength of the paper concerns the fact that it reaches out to different theoretical frameworks. It has long been recognised that there is a strong connection between attitude theory and social representations theory, even though the two come from distinct epistemological traditions (e.g., Doise, 1989; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1994; Jaspars & Fraser, 1984; Tafani & Moliner, 1997). In the present framework, the two paradigms are used together. Thereby, as Willem Doise would argue, the authors refer to different levels of analysis, a necessary strategy to study social representations successfully.

Liu and Sibley show that attitudes towards multiculturalism can be studied from a social representational perspective and that attitude formation can be accounted for within such a framework. In order to do so, the authors refer to what they call “societal anchoring”, made up by interpersonal discussion and exposure to mainstream news media. This approach allows investigating the origins of attitudes as a function of communication patterns. Sharing information with others, or receiving information through media channels, is shown to shape the valence of attitudes: the more participants were exposed to mainstream communication and the more they discussed multiculturalism issues with friends and colleagues, the more they were reluctant to grant rights to Maoris. This finding illustrates how a social representational approach can contribute to attitude research. Indeed, attitude researchers have traditionally not been interested in why exactly people hold the attitudes they hold. In order to compensate this shortcoming, social representations seem a suitable approach to complement attitude research by providing a framework through which the social, cultural and communicational underpinnings of individual attitudes can be investigated.

The second link between attitudes and social representations is performed with a measure of attitude certainty which is shown to be related to positive attitudes towards

multiculturalism: the more respondents are certain of their attitudes, the more they are willing to grant rights to Maoris. This finding is at odds with the general principle according to which strength and valence of attitudes are orthogonal (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). And contrary to the finding concerning the link between societal anchoring and attitudes towards multiculturalism, I did not find it very clear why attitude certainty was related to support for multiculturalism. The authors argue in terms of “emotional involvement” which should lead to the construction of a “hot”, stable core of representations. It is hard to follow this argumentation, since it cannot be taken for granted that attitude certainty, a cognitive concept, can readily be translated into emotional involvement. Furthermore, such an interpretation of attitude certainty does not explain why this hot core should in the end be related to support of multiculturalism rather than to its opposite, that is, rejection of multiculturalism. Thus, future research might investigate the social anchoring of attitude certainty itself, and to look for potential mediators between attitude certainty and attitude valence, i.e., support for multiculturalism.

The Liu and Sibley study aims to contribute to the building of the long overdue bridge between attitude theory and social representations theory. I agree with the authors that links between theoretical paradigms that hitherto have not been sufficiently in contact with each other should be encouraged in order to foster a more complete understanding of societal issues such as attitudes towards multiculturalism. In order to do so, however, the epistemological foundations of the two paradigms need to be discussed. As an empirical research paper cannot do justice to the complexity of this question, I will propose a few comments on the conceptual relationship between attitudes and social representations.

The epistemological differences between social representations and attitudes are well-known: despite the fact that in the early stages of scientific social psychology attitudes were understood as socially embedded knowledge, they have gradually evolved into an eminently individualistic concept. This is most obvious in the innumerable studies which implicitly rely on an individualist worldview and in which individual liking or disliking of social objects is the starting point of any social psychological analysis (Beauvois, 1994). The social representations paradigm is necessarily at odds with such a perspective, since representations are not contingent upon particular individuals holding them. Instead, the focus is set on sharing and transforming information in order to create socially useful knowledge. Thereby, the two frameworks are based on different theoretical assumptions concerning basic human motivations and the role of social relations in the explanation of psychological processes. Social representations theory stresses the need to make sense of the surrounding world, to communicate with others in everyday life, to be able to understand others and make oneself understood and to collectively cope with various types of threat. Attitudes, in turn, are seen as psychological devices in the service of individual cognitive and motivational needs such as accuracy of judgements, self-esteem or self-enhancement (which can for example be attained by aligning one’s attitude with those of fellow group members). Given the huge amount of attitude research carried during the last decades, this is of course a crude simplification, as many attitude researchers also study the social origins and implications of attitudes. Nevertheless, these epistemological differences are too important to neglect them.

This raises the question how the relationship between social representations and attitudes can be conceptualised without denying their respective epistemological features. Two avenues can be proposed which point towards such a connection. First, it is possible to view attitudes as a specific component of social representations, as the individual expression of existing social and cultural knowledge. In this view, attitudes become individual positionings in a network of existing social representations (Jaspars & Fraser, 1984; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993). Such an approach rejects the idea that people have self-justificatory

attitudes which do not require further explanation. The fact that people like or dislike a given social object is not (only) a manifestation of individual psychological functioning, but should be seen in the context of structural and cultural knowledge which provides individuals with the “raw material” towards which they can position themselves. Let us take the example of multiculturalism: the fact that individuals support or oppose such a set of policies first of all requires that they know what multiculturalism is all about. This, in turn, presupposes that multiculturalism is a “hot” topic in New Zealand which is debated and towards which contrasting opinions exist. Put otherwise, the very existence of attitudes implies some collective elaboration of knowledge, that is, social representations. It is through social representations that attitudes gain their meaning. The fact that attitudes towards multiculturalism of a large number of persons can be scrutinised and compared tells by itself that these persons refer to common reference knowledge towards which they take up a position. Only if a given object has been present in the media and in everyday discussion can people construe an attitude towards this object. A single person can of course have an attitude towards an object which is unrelated to social representations (say a person likes yellow circles), but such an attitude is socially not meaningful, and therefore not of interest as an object of study in the perspective of social representations. Thus, attitudes are interesting only when they bear on social objects which are the outcome of communication processes in particular groups or in the wider society: Without social representations, no meaningful attitudes.

Related to the idea that attitudes are individual positionings of social representations, a second option to integrate the two paradigms refers to the communication processes on which attitudes are based. For theorists in the social representational tradition, one of the central questions is the way attitudes (or positionings, for that matter) are distributed within a community. Why do certain individuals hold positive attitudes towards socially debated issues such as multiculturalism, while others hold negative attitudes, and still others do not take on any position? Indeed, if there is consensus about a given social object, there is no point in analysing them from a social representational point of view. Social representations necessarily imply disagreement and confrontation of positions.

It is this fundamental feature of social representations that has led Willem Doise to suggest that one of the main tasks of researchers in the social representations paradigm consists in studying the principles which organise individual and group-level differences of attitudes. Such organising principles are often studied by means of multivariate statistical techniques. In the present study, a MDS analysis leads to the distinction between resource-specific (material) and value-based (symbolic) multicultural policies. This distinction can be considered as an interesting example of an organising principle, because these two sets of policies and the attitudes towards them imply different representations of the social order to be established in New Zealand. Each type of policy is justified with a specific set of reasons which ultimately is expected to regulate the intergroup relation between the majority and the minority in a given direction. Resource-specific policies are aimed at establishing a social order in which historical material inequality between Maoris and NZ-Europeans is minimised, whereas symbolic policies are expected to foster a multicultural society in which the traditions, values and norms of discriminated against minorities are (formally) recognised by the government and by majority members. This distinction therefore organises the way the relation between the NZ European majority group and the Maori minority group is conceived of.

The analysis reported in the paper shows that symbolic policies are clearly more supported by majority members than resource-specific policies. This is an important finding, but it would also have been interesting to see whether the two anchoring variables, communication

and attitude certainty, would exert differential effects on the attitudes towards the two sets of policies. Such a strategy would have allowed going beyond a main effect model which ignores the possible interactive effects between anchoring and organising principles. Similarly, it might be beneficial to investigate more thoroughly the links between the two anchoring variables, for example to see whether attitude certainty is related to communication patterns. In this sense it might be useful to consider Moscovici's original work (1961) on social representations and psychoanalysis. There, he suggests that different modes of communication—diffusion, propagation and propaganda—give rise to corresponding systems of knowledge—opinions, attitudes and stereotypes. In other words, Moscovici embeds attitudes in a social representational framework already in the very first study on social representations. For him, attitudes are the outcome of propagation, a type of communication where social actors (the catholic press, in this case) consistently defend a particular point of view, while being flexible enough to accommodate dissenting views. Thereby, attitudes are individual and relatively stable outcomes of communication processes. This communicational view of attitudes reminds us that attitudes toward multiculturalism should not be considered as consensually held opinions within a social group, but rather as individual expressions of an ongoing societal debate on the legitimacy of multiculturalism.

The individual as the source of progressive thinking

A final comment bears on the normative implications of some of Liu's and Sibley's results. According to their main hypothesis and main finding, discussing multiculturalism among friends and colleagues and being aware of the debate surrounding this issue in the media leads to more negative attitudes towards multicultural policies, whereas attitude certainty—considering multiculturalism as an important issue and being certain of one's opinion—leads to more positive attitudes. This result suggests that sharing information within a group leads to a conservative stance towards multiculturalism, presumably indicating a preference for a more assimilationist model of social order in which the values of the White NZ majority are the symbolic yardsticks by which the society is organised. The support for a societal model in which minority rights are recognised, in turn, is based on individual cognitive activity: the more a person thinks about multiculturalism, the more she will be in favour of it. Thus, collective, societal anchoring of representations gives rise to conservative attitudes, whereas individual anchoring leads to a progressive stance. The disturbing conclusion that societal progress is the outcome of individuals rather than of groups is implicitly advanced by the authors, but is not really discussed. In this view, sharing information within groups is only a way to confirm existing social arrangements rather than questioning them. Through the dissemination of a majority dominated model of society, societal anchoring reduces individuals' readiness to consider societal alternatives. It thereby contributes to the maintenance of the social status quo, by legitimising the granting of privileges to the majority and by denying collective rights to minorities.

Of course, the present study was not designed to provide answers to the question whether multiculturalism is better served by individual or collective processes. And as the authors readily acknowledge, their hypothesis is culture- and domain-specific. Nevertheless, a discussion of the implications of this result seems warranted as a number of studies have shown that social progress is the outcome of a collective handling of social problems rather than the result of individual coping with societal issues. Henri Tajfel (1981), for example, has insisted on the distinction between individual and collective strategies to cope with a negative social identity. He suggests that social mobility, an individual strategy, reinforces status quo as it legitimises the existing status hierarchy, whereas collective mobilisation, performed in

the name of social groups, is the motor of social change. In a social identity view, these collective strategies usually imply some kind of group identification and endorsement of group norms. This is not the case in the present study, although it is plausible that such processes play a role in the construction of attitudes towards multiculturalism. Yet, a wider understanding of societal anchoring would probably have altered the findings and the conclusion. If societal anchoring were to be defined with, for example, ideological conceptions of how the society should be organised or with measures of social status of individuals, as an indicator of the hierarchical position occupied by individuals, then it seems likely that societal anchoring would play a more “positive” role in the construction of attitudes towards multiculturalism.

This leads to the conclusion that in future studies it would be worthwhile to investigate the conditions under which societal anchoring in general, and communication patterns in particular, yield support for multicultural policies. It seems plausible to assume that the specific content of discussion, and the type of media to which people pay attention to, determines at least to some extent whether its influence is positive or negative. It could also be that social status of individuals interacts with the communication patterns, as low-status persons typically read and watch other media than high-status persons.

Conclusion

The research by Liu and Sibley provides an important input for current research on social representations. It has many features which make it a study of interest for researchers in the social representations tradition. First of all, the topic of multiculturalism lends itself to an analysis in terms of social representations, as it fulfils the criterion of a widely debated social issue towards which groups and individuals take up position. The methodological strategy is sophisticated, and could provide an important impetus for future research. The study also takes up an “old” theoretical challenge, by linking the social representations paradigm to attitude theory. Notwithstanding the fact that I have suggested a number of complementary avenues which might clarify the conceptual link between the two, there is no doubt that Liu and Sibley have taken the issue of the relationship between attitudes and social representations a step further.

References

- Beauvois, Jean-Léon (1994). *Traité de la servitude libérale. Analyse de la soumission*. [Treatise on liberal serfdom: An analysis of submission]. Paris: Dunod.
- Biernat, M., Vescio, T., Theno, S., & Crandall, C.S. (1996). Values and Prejudice: Toward understanding the impact of American values on outgroup attitudes. In C. Seligman, J.M. Olson, & M.P. Zanna (Eds.), *The Psychology of Values: The Ontario Symposium* (Vol. 8, pp. 153-189). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Doise, W. (1989). Attitudes et représentations sociales [Attitudes and social representations]. In D. Jodelet (Ed.), *Les représentations sociales* [Social representations] (pp. 240-258). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France
- Doise, W., Clémence, A., & Lorenzi-Cioldi, F. (1993). *The quantitative analysis of social representations*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Doise, W., Clémence, A., & Lorenzi-Cioldi, F. (1994). Le charme discret des attitudes [The discreet charm of attitudes]. *Papers on Social Representations*, 3, 1-3.
- Eagly, A., & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The psychology of attitudes*. New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

- Green, E.G.T. (2006, in press). Guarding the gates of Europe: A typological analysis of immigration attitudes across 21 countries. *International Journal of Psychology*.
- Jackman, M.R. (1994). *The velvet glove. Paternalism and conflict in gender, class and race relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jaspars, J., & Fraser, C., (1984). Attitudes and social representations. In R. Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds), *Social Representations* (pp. 101-123). Cambridge & Paris: Cambridge University Press & Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'homme.
- Moscovici, S. (1976 [1961]). *La psychanalyse son image et son public* (2^{ème} éd.). Paris: PUF.
- Mummendey, A., & Wenzel, M. (1999). Social discrimination and tolerance in intergroup relations: Reactions to intergroup difference. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 158-174.
- Sears, D.O., & Henry, P.J. (2005). Over thirty years later: A contemporary look at symbolic racism and its critics. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 95-150.
- Staerklé, C., Sidanius, J., Green, E.G.T., & Molina, L. (2005). Ethnic minority-majority asymmetry and attitudes towards immigrants across 11 nations. *Psicologia Politica*, 30, 7-26.
- Stephan, W. G., & Renfro, C. L. (2002). The role of threats in intergroup relations. In D. Mackie and E. R. Smith (Eds.), *From prejudice to intergroup emotions* (pp. 191-208). New York: Psychology Press.
- Moliner, P., & Tafani, E. (1997). Attitudes and social representations: a theoretical and experimental approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 687-702.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.