

From Social to Political Psychology:
The Societal Approach

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Abstract

Because social and political psychology have many research topics in common, it is not easy to draw clear boundaries between them. Instead, we suggest that societal psychology, aimed at articulating individual and societal factors in explaining political behavior, attitudes and judgements, is the link between the two research traditions. In this chapter, we argue that analyses of societal dimensions may fruitfully complete more individualistic approaches of political processes. Social representations theory provides the theoretical framework for analyzing the links between individual cognitive functioning and more general societal factors that orient the way people think, act and interact in society. Evidencing common lay knowledge about socially relevant issues and analyzing organizing principles that structure individual positionings in this realm are the main features of a social representational approach to political psychology. We will illustrate the societal approach of political psychology by discussing and reinterpreting politically relevant research on individual positionings in terms of locus of control, on political socialization, on social representations of human rights and democracy and on normative stereotypes and their justification function.

From Social to Political Psychology: The Societal Approach

Introduction

The boundaries between social psychology and political psychology are hard to trace in a sharp way. Indeed, a large amount of research in social psychology has been devoted to issues such as racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Katz & Hass, 1988; Pettigrew et al., 1998), prejudice (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Biernat, Vescio, Theno & Crandall, 1996), gender (Hoffmann & Hurst, 1990; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1998), social justice (Deutsch, 1985; Bierhoff, Cohen & Greenberg, 1986) and nationalism (Billig, 1995; Bar-Tal, 1997). All these issues have an important political component. They are present on political agendas and are subject of political debates and decisions.

Even if the relationship between political science and psychology has been termed “a long affair” by McGuire (1993), scholars in social psychology do recognize the political dimension of their research topics only to varying degrees. For some, general cognitive processes are at work when people judge, think and decide about political issues. Typically, they study the way people reason about political phenomena, examine their individual decision-taking strategies, or establish personality- and knowledge-based typologies that explain different political orientations and positionings. Here, the political dimension is largely irrelevant to the extent that general models of information processing and decision-making are applied to political issues. Other social psychologists however claim that the analysis of individual cognitive processes alone would not suffice for an exhaustive explanation of political processes. Such analyses have to be completed by a more societal perspective that connects explanations on an individual level with analyses of social dynamics such as norms, beliefs, values and ideologies that guide and give meaning to individual political behavior. In such a perspective, the cognitive processes underlying the relationships individuals establish with their political environment are rather to be considered as manifestations of relational and societal dynamics than as their causes (Sears & Funk, 1991). Hence, in this chapter we use the term of societal psychology for designating the contributions of a more societal social psychology to political

psychology.

In the following pages we will describe examples of such a societal psychology. We will adhere to a rather large and integrative conception of societal psychology, one that embraces research that many scholars would probably not consider as part of the political psychology tradition. Our concern is to demonstrate that different research traditions in social psychology are based on analyses of societal dynamics while trying to account for the intervention of complex societal regulation mechanisms in individuals' cognitions, evaluations and decisions. Thus, like many others, we would like to extend our perspective clearly beyond a mainly individualistic vision of social psychological analyses especially when they are applied to the political realm, or, otherwise said, when they become political psychology.

It is also our assumption that social representation theory (see for instance Moscovici 1976; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Augoustinos & Walker, 1995) provides the necessary theoretical tools for analyzing the links between individual cognitive functioning and more general analyses of societal factors that direct the way people think, act and interact in society. As Moscovici (1976, p. 284) wrote “...we see two cognitive systems at work, one which operates in terms of associations, inclusions, discriminations, that is to say the cognitive operational system, and the other which controls, verifies and selects in accordance with various logical and other rules; it involves a kind of metasystem which re-works the material produced by the first.” At a general level, social representation theory deals with shared knowledge structures about issues debated in society and which orient individual positioning when judging relevant aspects of these social issues. Social representational analyses of normative lay knowledge about social issues debated in the public sphere form a crucial element of a societal psychology. Everyday communication about abstract political issues necessarily presupposes some kind of common understanding between the parties involved in a discussion, otherwise one party would not be able to understand the point of view of the other party. Social representations contribute to the construction of such shared meaning systems that allow individuals to communicate with each other. But social representations concern not only shared and common knowledge. One of the researchers' task is to evidence the structure of differences

in understanding that typically characterize individual and group positioning towards political issues. Defined *a priori* or inferred *a posteriori*, organizing principles of individual and collective positioning therefore are central features of a societal psychology.

Unlike research on general psychological processes, societal psychology is concerned with the study of meaning and content in political positioning. It is indeed hard to imagine what politics would be without collective processes of meaning assignment. A democratic functioning of a political community is characterized by antagonistic positionings towards socially relevant topics. One may even conceive of politics as an endless struggle between social categories (such as political parties), aimed at associating specific meanings to abstract concepts (Mouffe, 1993). The meanings of “democracy”, “human rights”, “freedom”, or “justice”, to take but a few examples, are not, and probably never will be defined in a universally accepted way. Instead, social regulations and complex systems of interaction shape the way people interpret these abstract principles. Furthermore, the focus on differential meaning assignment implies that societal psychology is necessarily embedded in a historical context. Meaning regulation systems are not stable and immutable social knowledge structures, but are transformed as a function of historical events and the political agenda.

It follows that in our view political psychology should study those social and cognitive processes that take place when individual and social groups position themselves towards issues discussed and debated in a given society. Decision taking in elections and votes is but one example of institutionally organized political processes. Other examples of issues that are embraced by such a societal political psychology concern political involvement, development of attitudes towards legal and political institutions, explanations of political events as well as judgements of politically relevant social categories. According to a societal approach, all these processes derive from symbolic regulations between social groups, captured in the concept of social representations. In this sense, they are never unproblematic, consensual and automatic, but rather object of debate and subject to inter-individual and temporal variation.

In the following sections, we will exemplify our social representational view of societal psychology. Different approaches that integrate societal explanations will be discussed.

In all of these, social representations intervene, even if their authors do not explicitly refer to the original theory. They show that shared knowledge on the one hand, and explainable differences in individual and group-based positionings towards these common frames of references on the other hand, provide an appropriate theoretical framework for a societal psychology. The diversity of these research orientations shows the wide range of social-psychological topics, societal psychology can be associated to. However, by no means the work under review here should be considered as an exhaustive collection of societal psychology.

Before presenting four realms of research it should be underlined that much of the research that will be presented was not aimed at developing a contribution to political psychology. However, in line with the ideas developed above we consider that the reported research trends exemplify a societal approach which is of relevance for political psychology.

The Societal Functioning of Locus of Control Beliefs

Political theories necessarily involve implicit or explicit beliefs about individual psychological functioning. Postulates of political theories bear for instance on the nature of basic psychological needs of individuals and on their readiness to commit themselves in social contracts in order to fulfill these needs. Often however these beliefs have been studied without framing them in a political perspective, and therefore the role of societal psychology is to highlight the role of such beliefs in political functioning.

The notion of control based on the theory of Rotter (1966) has certainly been successful in describing beliefs about differential individual functioning. In its initial definition the notion was culturally defined " When a reinforcement is perceived by the subject as following some action of his own but not being entirely contingent upon his action, then, in our culture, it is typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him. When the event is interpreted in this way by an individual, we have labeled this a belief in external control. If the person perceives that the event is contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this a belief in internal control."

(Rotter, 1966, p 1).

Following postulates were essential in shaping the theory (see Dubois, 1987).

Understanding personality is based on an analysis of the interaction between individual and environment. Notions as attitudes, values, expectations are indispensable in such analyzes and account for individual consistency in behavior. An important organizing principle of such consistency is the relative importance given by individuals to situational (external) and dispositional (internal) factors in evaluating outcomes of goal-directed actions.

The degree of internality is therefore defined as the likelihood that an expected outcome will result from one's own behavior and/or personal characteristics (traits, skills, attitudes) in specific circumstances. Individuals with high internal control see themselves at the origin of their positive or negative reinforcements, individuals with low internal control look for this origin in external circumstances such as chance, decisions of others or task difficulty.

Instruments have been developed for measuring the perceived locus of control of individuals. They often consist of questionnaires with forced choice items (see for instance Rotter, 1966). Examples of such items with a response choice could be: a) "Most of the accidents that strike people are due to bad luck"; b) "Misfortunes of individuals are caused by their mistakes" or: a) "In business, most of us are subject to forces beyond our understanding and control" or b) "Individuals can control events when participating actively in political and social life". For these two items a) choices would indicate an external locus of control whereas b) choices would indicate an internal one.

In several investigations (for a review see Dubois, 1987) a high "internal" score has been proven to be a good predictor for academic and professional achievement, and more generally for social adjustment. That it is generally better to believe in one's own internal control than to think that one is externally determined has led developmental psychologists to investigate variations in locus of control over the lifespan.

A first series of research illustrates the general hypothesis that growth in age is accompanied with the acquisition of various skills that make an individual more autonomous and more aware of his or her internal control capacities. Therefore scores on adapted locus of

control scales should increase in internality with age. Such a developmental trend was often verified and acquired almost the status of a consensually accepted fact, and exceptions were considered not to infirm a general rule. Some systematicness was revealed in those exceptions as the drop in internality during initial phases of adolescence (see Crandall, Katkowsky and Crandall, 1965; Sherman, 1984; Dubois, 1986). Such an exception could easily be explained away as during that phase of development youths are confronted with new challenges and new comparison groups so that they can experience some loss of control during that period of their life. However more important is the fact that a review of twenty years of research on the topic led to the conclusion that no systematic trend was observed in about one third of the studies.

Given the variety of instruments and methods used such a negative finding is not necessarily to be considered as a serious argument against the existence of a developmental trend, but it led researchers to put the question of what exactly is developing with age in the realm of internal versus external control.

An important hint to answer that question is to be found in a research by Bartel (1971) showing that the increase in internal control with age was verified for middle-class children but not for lower-class children. More generally numerous investigations in the United States have found that children of Anglo-Saxon descent were more internal than African or Hispanic Americans, "rich" children more than "poor", and also but less consistently so boys more than girls.

These differences could be interpreted in the frame of Rotter's theory: general expectations about efficacy of one's own actions can be affected by the social status of categories one belongs to. A difference could exist in what children of various gender, social and ethnic categories learn in their environment about the power they can exert in determining their own fate. Yet, a result by Nowicki and Strickland (1973) shows the intervention of stereotypical beliefs about sex differences: children of both genders when invited to answer the Rotter scale in a typical masculine or feminine way drastically change their responses choosing almost no external alternatives for the masculine way and no internal alternatives for the feminine mode. There is therefore no doubt left that externality is part of the female stereotype

and internality of the masculine one.

But even more generally one can speak about the existence of a very strong social norm: "internality" is considered better than "externality". Jellison and Green (1981) were amongst the first to consider that this normative aspect was not just an artifact but an essential ingredient of the locus of control attitude. Main results of their investigations are firstly that individuals giving many internal responses are considered more favorably than those with a few such responses and secondly that individuals are aware of the existence of such a difference in valorization. When asked to answer for themselves or as a average student, and when they are invited to embody a positive or negative self-image in their answers the scores of internality are significantly higher in conditions where a positive self-image is at stake.

Beauvois (1984), Le Poutier (1986) and Dubois (1994) have generalized these findings in several settings: school, social work, training sessions. Overall, individuals who express more internal control and more dispositional explanations for their behavior are better considered and more easily accepted, a criterion of success in these different settings being the increase of belief in internal control as a consequence of education, treatment or training. Results reported by Beauvois and Dubois (1988) show that pupils of eleven year are aware of the desirability of "internal" responses, even though not in such a strong way as it was the case for the students participating in the studies of Jellison and Green (1981).

The explanation for the importance of this internality norm offered by our French colleagues is in terms of social evaluation processes that imply that individuals are considered responsible of their fate. Belief in internal explanations and control of behavior are to be shared by those who evaluate and who are evaluated in socialization processes although they do not necessarily know very much about what effectively determines and controls human behavior.

Hence, this is a typical example of a societal reinterpretation of a line of research that has mainly focused on consequences of individual differences without taking into account the structural organization of these differences. What was considered to be a psychological characteristic is now also interpreted as a basic belief that assumes an important societal function in contemporary political systems. Thus, a belief according to which one's own

behavior leads to the expected outcomes may prevent commitment in collective endeavors. Paradoxically, the belief in individual autonomy and responsibility may lead to a modern, i.e. voluntary, form of serfdom (Beauvois, 1994), and therefore potentially lessens people's readiness for active participation in political processes.

Research On Political Socialisation

An explanatory model almost entirely based on the development of individual cognitive competencies has often been used for analyzing individual appropriation of meaning systems in the realm of politics: the more complex the cognitive instruments a child possesses, the more complex the political judgements he or she is able to make. This is the main conclusion of Connell's (1971) work on the "The child's construction of politics". Such an approach is also exemplified in Inhelder and Piaget's (1958) explanations of adolescents' political activism: the acquisition of formal thinking would enable the construction of alternative views on society. On the other hand the content of political ideas of youth was often explained by adherence to the political orientation of their parents and of other significant figures such as peers and teachers (see Jennings and Niemi, 1974).

Growth in cognitive complexity and transmission of partisanship are not the only factors that modulate political thought over the lifespan. Political socialization is the construction of a meaning system that involves of course cognitive operations and that evolves in a frame of societal regulations in a complex way.

The European value study published by Stoetzel (1983) shows a general trend of change in values across different societies. Such changes cannot be explained without societal analyses. But at the level of the individual they involve complex patterns of interrelationships between attitudes and beliefs that are progressively elaborated and that are emphasized in some cases by partisan choices. Examples are given in a study on tolerance by Vollebergh (1989).

The general change in values does not prevent a fraction of adolescents from manifesting intolerant attitudes usually described as ethnocentrism and sexism. A psychodynamic interpretation was proposed by Adorno and his colleagues (1950), who attribute

to authoritarian educational practices of parents the origin of aggressive drives that exteriorize themselves in detriment of weaker targets. Vollebergh (1989) expresses doubts about such an interpretation and reports data on significant differences between pupils from more or less prestigious educational tracks and also between boys and girls, the former being more often authoritarian, ethnocentric or sexist than the latter. Furthermore more consistent patterns of high correlations between these different syndromes appear for pupils from the more prestigious track but they are rather low for girls of the lower track. All these data are very difficult to explain in terms of a psychodynamic interpretation and Vollebergh proposes a model of political intolerance of minorities as an organizing principle of the interindividual differences related to these various syndromes. Indeed her data are intriguing, especially so the absence of significant differences in authoritarianism, ethnocentrism and racism between boys and girls who still did not develop political party preference and the presence of differences when party preferences do exist, the boys being than more authoritarian than the girls. However, a consistent significant difference in sexism and antifeminism exists as well before as after the appearance of party preferences. The process would then be one in two steps, sexist boys would be attracted by political parties and once they are involved in politics a generalization of their intolerance takes place. For females, the same organizing principle is socially more difficult to be actualized, hence the persistence of their more tolerant attitudes.

Another important factor in shaping political attitudes is the awareness of the existence of social conflicts. Clémence (1994) found that both for youngsters (19 -20 years) and for their parents awareness of conflict, even experimentally induced, led to more favorable attitudes towards institutional supports for different categories in need. This finding is to be related to findings reported by Torney-Purta (1983). Awareness of the existence of social conflict is generally related to social origin of children, at least in France (Percheron, 1978): when they are of a lower class origin they are more aware of the existence of different kinds of political conflicts, especially distrust of the government, than when they are of a higher class origin, but this difference is much more important for children under the age of 14 than for children above 13 years. Older children from higher class origin become almost as distrustful as

children from lower class origin. More generally, Percheron, Chiche and Muxel-Douaire (1991), in a study of a representative sample of Parisian youth (16 to 21 years), show that their opinions towards judiciary institutions are organized on the basis of a twofold principle: trust versus distrust in the judicial system (respectively confidence in the system and belief that rights of the accused are respected, versus absence of such confidence and belief that justice is unfair and does not respect rights of the accused), and contractual versus naturalistic conception of justice (laws did not always exist or are no longer adequate, they should be changed versus laws have always existed and remain adequate, they should not be changed).

In a questionnaire study (Doise, Staerklé, Clémence & Savory, 1998), carried out in Geneva with 849 youth of different age, school streams and pre-professional training, we showed that institutionalized definitions of human rights become more salient as a function of progress in age and scholastic experience. Links with advancement in educational level were particularly salient when analyzing individual positioning. With advancement in degree many more individuals evoked public rights, whereas a more libertarian positioning, and to a lesser extent an egalitarian positioning, decreased with advancement in degree. Progress in degree is significantly linked to an increase of definitions in less concrete and more positive terms, and to a very significant decrease of a reserved attitude toward protest against the establishment.

Finally, a more principled and enlarged human rights definition, as opposed to a more restricted and concrete conception, was furthered by advancement in degree, left-wing and communitarian political orientation, together with doubts about the usefulness of some public organizations for the individual and general attitudes which are less favorable toward family, religion and sport clubs.

On the whole, these studies on political socialization show the intervention of different societal factors in the development of political concepts. Growth in cognitive complexity is but one explanatory principle among others that accounts for the development of political attitudes and it therefore needs to be articulated with analyses of social regulation mechanisms.

Human Rights And Democracy Studied As Normative Social Representations

Social representations can be considered as defining the organizing principles of the symbolic relationships between individuals and groups (Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993). This assumes that various members of a population under study share common views about a given social issue. A system necessitates common frames of reference for participating individuals and groups. An important phase in each study of social representations is the search for a common map or cognitive organization of the issues at stake. In Moscovici's study (1976), this aspect deals with objectification. However social representation theory does not imply that individuals sharing common references necessarily hold the same positions. Individuals may differ according to the strength of their adherence to various opinions, attitudes or stereotypes, we therefore search for the organizing principles of individual differences in a representational field. A further assumption is that such systematic variations are anchored in other collective realities, in social psychological experiences shared to different extents by individuals and in their beliefs about other aspects of social reality (Doise, 1992-93).

A working definition of human rights may be based on the idea that mutual interactions and communications between humans generate normative representations. While interacting with each other, individuals know that their fate will be affected by that interaction, at least in certain domains, to a certain extent, at a certain cost. Normative representations exist about what these mutual effects should be. As there are many kinds of interactions, characterized by all sorts of differences in status, purposes, interdependency, and formality (Deutsch, 1985), there exist also various models of acceptable relationships, prototypes of fair and just relationships, principles of contracts that govern these relationships and they are part of human cultures. Human rights are such principles. They should, at least by intention, organize our social interactions. For historical (i.e. economical, political, military, religious, and also scientific) reasons, Western societies organized relationships within national and cultural boundaries, but also across them.

Studying human rights in social representations terms first of all implies a search for common reference systems and for their organization. To what extent does the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, or other institutional definitions, offer references that are common to the populations under consideration?

There are two kinds of studies dealing with this in a transcultural setting. The first kind derived from the interdisciplinary interview studies about representations of violations. In a questionnaire study (Clémence, Doise, De Rosa & Gonzalez, 1995), pupils and students aged 13 to 20 years and living in four countries (Costa Rica, France, Italy and Switzerland) were invited to answer 21 items presenting various situations involving violations or limitations of individual rights. Some of these situations (for instance, racial discrimination, imprisonment without trial or legal assistance, starvation) can easily be referred to classical definitions contained in the Universal Declaration. Other situations, dealing with the rights of children or with family affairs are less explicitly related to the Declaration. Some situations dealing with economic inequality or health matters (e.g., prohibition of smoking or hospitalization in case of contagious illness) are not covered by official definitions of rights. The results were very clear, for the various situations, the order of frequencies of relating them to human rights violations is very similar across countries.

The complete text of the Declaration was also presented to students of 35 countries (Doise, Spini & Clémence, 1999). Subjects were asked to answer questions about personal involvement, agreement and efficacy as well as governmental efficacy for each of the 30 Articles of the Declaration. The respondents were university students in psychology, law, science, social work and various other fields from the five continents. A hierarchical cluster analysis resulted in the division of the articles into two main classes which, in turn, divided into two subclasses. These subclasses showed an almost complete correspondence with the categories described by René Cassin (Agi, 1980), the chairman of the drafting committee of the Declaration. He classified the 30 articles of the Declaration in six groups, which fifty years later still are relevant.

The first main cluster opposes the whole of the more social rights (classes 5, 4 and 3) and basic individual rights (protection from torture and slavery and right to life) to a cluster of judicial individual rights (class 2), principles (class 1) and the three articles concerning societal

order (class 6). In each national group respondents show greater adherence to the basic and social rights than to the rest of the rights. These results clearly support the idea of a common organization of responses in various countries.

Social representation theory does not imply that individuals sharing common references hold the same positions. It is therefore important to investigate the differences in individual position. Modulators of position are beliefs about personal efficacy and the efficacy of institutions (for instance governments) in respect of human rights. Human rights positions bear a relationship with value choices. Values are considered general to the extent that they supposedly organize symbolic relationships within a social environment. Other relationships are to be sought in the representations individuals hold concerning the nature of conflicts between social groups and categories.

In studying the articles of the Declaration we combined an analysis of respondents' human rights positioning, their value choices and representations of conflict and injustice. We were led to the conclusion that, in general, strong support for the values of universalism and social harmony are systematically related to more favourable human rights attitudes. Intense experience of collective injustice together with less concern for personal happiness led to more personal involvement rather than to reliance on governmental efficacy. It was found that skepticism was relatively stronger in Japan and India and personal involvement was more often found in countries with serious rights problems, according to the ratings by Humana (1992), and with human development problems, according to the ratings by the United Nations Development Programme (1996). Stronger reliance on governmental efficacy was characteristic of more developed countries or countries who changed recently to a democratic regime. There are clearly differences within countries (Spini & Doise, 1998), for instance, respondents who strongly favor universalistic values have more favorable human rights positionings independently of national group. But it is also true that in countries where adherence to universalistic values is higher, attitudes to rights are more favorable. The same reasoning holds for the links involving other value choices, and perceptions of injustice and tensions.

We have also investigated individual positioning in our four country study on

violations and found that the first two factors were clearly organized by judgements on violations of rights explicitly mentioned in the Declaration. Individual positions were strongly related to the defense of individual rights against political and economic authorities or to a fatalistic world view minimizing individual initiatives but accepting more willingly managerial and state control.

This exemplifies that people's attitudes are embedded in representations of the relationship between individuals and political as well as other types of institutions. Findings of our research on social representations of human rights are another illustration of the heuristic value of the societal psychology approach. Individual positioning in the realm of human rights is not only assessed as an individual attitude varying in strength, but as a societally anchored pattern of beliefs about the respective roles of individuals and governments.

Research On Justification Of Inequalities And Normative Group Representations

Up to now, we have discussed research dealing with the intervention of societal forms of knowledge in judgements, evaluations and positionings towards shared representations. The impact of norms and ideologies on individual cognitive functioning was evidenced through examples in the realm of attribution processes, political socialization and social representations of human rights. In this last section we will provide examples of societal psychology at the level of group representations, usually referred to as stereotypes. As different kinds of inequalities and status differentials between social categories are at the center of political debate, we will focus on representational dynamics associated to dominant high-status and subordinate low-status groups. The analysis of the processes underlying people's representations of their own social status as well the status of relevant outgroups is indeed an important aspect of societal psychology. After all, people's support or opposition to political measures concerning social inequalities can be considered as positionings towards shared representations of inequalities. First, justification mechanisms of inequalities are discussed. We then will pursue with research illustrating the role of representations of national populations, held by westerners, in the construction of judgements on the political situation across western and non-western countries.

This line of research exemplifies representational strategies developed by a high-status group, western countries, to account for a relationship with a low-status group, non-western countries (see also Jervis, this volume, for a more political approach to nation perception).

It has been recognized for some time that group representations fulfil social functions. They are seen as social and cognitive devices that help to explain and give meaning to the characteristics of members of a social group. They account for the current situation of the group in a given social setting, and thus justify and legitimize inequalities between social categories (Doise, 1978; Tajfel, 1981). In this perspective, representations associated to high- and low-status groups are socially constructed and allow to perceive their favorable and unfavorable positions as legitimate and “normal”.

Justification mechanisms occur at different levels. Jost & Banaji (1994) have developed a conceptual distinction between group and system-justification in order to account for findings inconsistent with previous theorizing on social justification. “Group justification refers to those attitudes and behaviors that promote the material and psychological interests of the ingroup at the expense of relevant outgroups, whereas the attitudes and behaviors associated to system justification serve to maintain the integrity of the current social system, even at the expense of the ingroups’ interest.” (Rabinowitz, 1999, p. 18). This distinction has an important consequence, as it allows to account for different justification strategies adopted by low and high-status groups in a social setting. For members of high-status groups, the two tendencies of group- and system-justification are consistent with one another, whereas for individuals belonging to low status groups, they reflect conflicting interests. In the latter case, devotion to the interests of the oppressed ingroup works against the interests of the present, inequitable social system. This argument is supported by a meta-analysis in Jost and Banaji’s work (1994) of studies on the broadly accepted hypothesis that people evaluate members of their own group more positively than they judge members of outgroups (Tajfel, 1982). They found that 85% of low-status groups evaluated outgroups more positively than their own groups.

It is especially the system justification angle which is related to societal psychology. Shared attitudes and behaviors destined to protect the value system which underlies

the divisions of the surrounding world can be considered a strong case for the intervention of social representations in individual cognitive processes. System justification is mainly a strategy adopted by dominant high-status groups to secure social status quo. Several researchers have indeed pointed out that stereotypes of low-status groups, held by members of high-status groups, are surprisingly similar, even if the groups under consideration such as women, children, or the unemployed do not have much in common (Doise, 1973; Condor, 1990; Jost & Banaji, 1994). It is hard to imagine which processes, if not shared representations of what it means to be in a low status position, can account for this finding. Both of these arguments provide evidence for a system justification mechanism that accounts for findings inconsistent with Tajfel's social identity theory. In what follows we will further elaborate on representations destined to rationalize a social situation opposing a low- and a high-status group.

Although social psychologists share a broad consensus about this social function of stereotypes, relatively little research has been carried out on this specific topic. The studies of Hoffmann and Hurst (1990) are an exception to this lack of empirical support to the justification hypothesis. Developing the work on stereotypes in the social learning tradition (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), they argue that people construe images of gender groups not solely because they perceive women and men in different social roles, but because gender stereotypes allow to rationalize the division of labor between the two gender groups. Their results show that subjects associate female traits to members of a fictitious "child raiser" group and male traits to members of a "city worker" group. This attribution of stereotypical traits was even stronger for subjects who were requested to find explanations for the division of labor and also for those who were told that the two groups were "different species", rather than "different subgroups of the same culture". Thus, the rationalization process operates by associating intrinsic, "natural", differences between social categories. The perceived attributes of members of dominant and subordinate groups are congruent with their relative position in a social setting and allow therefore to explain the status differences between the groups.

The findings reported above provide tentative support to a relatively new concept in social psychology: "essentialism". According to Rothbart and Taylor (1992),

essentialism describes the mechanism through which an arbitrary social category is perceived in much the same way as a natural category. Essentialism refers to the belief that an attribute common to all members of a category organizes the different elements of a group representation. This common “essence” confers to the group that is perceived in an essentialist way a specific ontological status. The group, along with all the attributes that are associated to it, is defined on the basis of this common, and supposedly profound feature of the group. Group attributes are thus viewed as stable and common to all group members. Therefore, essentialised social groups are viewed as natural, close to biological, categories. The lay belief that a common feature defines group membership is connected to a great explanatory power of the essence that allows people to easily draw inferences on the characteristics of group members. This implies that once people know to which group given individuals belong, they think they know a great deal about the characteristics of the members of this group.

This essentialisation process is likely to occur for groups defined with salient surface characteristics such as the color of the skin, gender or age. On the basis of these visible attributes, people infer deeper characteristics which are linked together by a naive theory. More importantly however, the essentialist images associated to groups reflect specific social settings, and are therefore best considered as a consequence of existing relationships. Essentialist representations of groups help to maintain the prevailing social setting and provide tools to justify social inequalities. That is why low-status and minority groups are most likely to be represented in an essentialist manner, distinctively different from other groups and with a high level of perceived homogeneity among its members (Mullen, 1991; Abelson, Dasgupta, Park & Banaji, 1998; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1998). Members of high status groups should therefore be especially likely to adhere to essentialist conceptions about low status groups. As the study by Hoffmann and Hurst (1990) suggests, an essentialist perception of social categories goes hand in hand with the rationalization of social inequalities, precisely because the immutable character of essentialist attributes supports the idea of social and political status quo. “Members of a given social situation are likely to refer to some intrinsic feature of the parties involved in order to strengthen social stability” (Yzerbyt, Rocher & Schadron, 1997, p. 40).

Studies that connect essentialist categorization and justification processes are still quite uncommon. We therefore would like to illustrate this point by showing how people living in a western country, Switzerland, think about the political situation in western and non-western countries in general. This allows us to illustrate that representations associated to subordinate low-status groups can be analyzed even at a global level of comparison. At the same time, these studies provide an example of representation and justification processes that do not concern inequalities within a nation, but between nations. Indeed, studies on the perception and explanation of inequalities have mostly focussed on the situation of low- and high-status groups within national contexts. It is therefore important to examine to what extent the same mechanisms as evidenced in studies at the intranational level can be applied to the perception of international relations.

In a series of studies (Staerklé, Clémence & Doise, 1998) we investigated representational processes associated to countries described as democratic and non-democratic, a distinction hypothesized as equivalent to representations associated to western and non-western countries. We were interested in understanding how people construe their representation of the political situation, measured with perceived respect of a series of human rights, across western and non-western national contexts and how they explain the favourable and unfavorable political situation in these national contexts. The first hypothesis stated that people should associate representations of society, operationalized as the inhabitants, to representations of the state which was described as the government. We expected that participants should judge these political contexts as if they were following the ancient statement according to which “The inhabitants have the government they deserve”. A second prediction concerned the asymmetry between political judgements on western and non-western contexts: if people adhere to a normative conception of liberal democracy, they should see national populations, more than governments, as the driving political force in western countries. When judging non-western countries however, they should perceive their government as omnipotent, and the inhabitants as weak, submissive and passive. A final prediction stated that people should account for an unfavorable political situation in a country with judgements of a lesser political

involvement of its inhabitants.

The basic paradigm of these studies is experimental: participants, Swiss students, read a short description of a country where political decisions are taken either democratically or non-democratically. Another description refers to a country described with stereotypically positive or negative attributes associated to the national population. Respondents are then asked to list up to three countries that correspond to the formal description.

In a first study, respondents read *either* a description of a democratic or non-democratic government *or* a description of positively or negatively described national population. Results show that participants draw similar inferences on the political situation on the basis of a democratic government and a positively described national population on the one hand and on the basis of a non-democratic government and a negatively described population on the other hand. Thus, people establish links between the government and the national population in order to construe a representation of the political situation in a national context.

In order to determine the respective weight of the positive / negative information and the government / population information, a second study combined the two descriptions of the government and the inhabitants. Thus, each participant was informed about the political organization and the stereotypical national character of the population. Here, results show that when a negatively described population is combined with a democratic government, the perceived respect of human rights is very clearly lower than when a democracy is inhabited by a positively described population. In non-democratic contexts however, the population information does not have any impact on the unfavorable evaluation of the human rights situation. These results confirm that the representation of the political situation depends on the character of the inhabitants in a western country, and on the political system in a non-western country. Furthermore, in both of these two studies a greater proportion of inhabitants was perceived as being opposed to human rights violations in western than in non-western countries.

A third study finally corroborated these findings by showing that in western countries, inhabitants are seen as more responsible than the government for the favourable political situation. In non-western contexts however, the government is clearly more responsible

than the inhabitants. This latter result reveals that participants recognize that human rights violations are perpetrated by various governments in non-western countries. But it implies at the same time that non-western national populations are viewed as unable to resist the political dysfunctionings of their governments.

On the whole, the results of these studies provide evidence that when people living in a supposedly democratic country, Switzerland, judge other countries, they refer to shared representations concerning the main features of typical western and non-western countries. Contrary to the widely shared assumption that perceivers should be familiar with the national contexts they are judging, they demonstrate that a representation of a western or non-western country *as such* is sufficient to activate a series of images that is best captured as lay conceptions of the relationships between state and society across western and non-western national contexts. These lay conceptions embrace justification processes of inequalities between western and non-western countries and shows that the rationalization of a given hierarchical social structure may take different forms. In these studies, they operate by way of representations of normative qualities associated to democratic citizens such as political involvement which in turn is denied for inhabitants of non-western countries. Therefore, the general mechanism according to which high-status groups develop representations of the social structure where each group is at its right place, operates in a quite similar manner within countries as well as between countries. Ongoing research indeed confirms that people use stereotypical and counterstereotypical attributes of national populations in order to justify material and other inequalities between western and non-western countries.

Conclusion

Our contribution was aimed at pointing towards links between social and political psychology. Research in social psychology has many political components, and it is not an easy task to draw clear boundaries between these two research traditions. Therefore we have suggested that the contribution of social psychology to political psychology is to be found in a general approach we have termed “societal psychology”. The main objective of this perspective

is the investigation of the intervention of societal forms of shared knowledge such as ideologies, norms and social representations in individual cognitive functioning.

The research traditions we have presented as prototypical examples of societal psychology can seem to be very heterogeneous. A first series of research originated in the realm of personality research, a second series dealt with developmental issues, a third was investigating the cross-cultural nature of human rights studied as social representations and the last series dealt more directly with the traditional social psychological theme of intergroup perception and discrimination.

However, our putting into perspective of each of these research trends was guided by a common concern. We have tried to show that societal functioning intervenes in very different endeavors, such as evaluating oneself or another person, becoming politically socialized, understanding universal judicial norms or intergroup evaluations.

The societal perspective allows us to understand that internality is first of all a criterion for establishing the degree of congruence with the dominant norm of individual autonomy and responsibility. Political socialization is not just a matter of growth in cognitive complexity, it is also a construction of a meaning system evolving in a frame of societal regulations. Our human rights studies try to investigate the extent to which such regulations reach beyond societal borders and enable institutionalized human rights definitions to function as common reference systems. But if such “universalistic” normative representations cross borders, justifications of existing inequalities also extend into the realm of differences between governmental regimes.

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