

The Social Construction of Knowledge

Social Representations and Political Understandings

What are Social Representations?

- A form of symbolic knowledge intrinsic to public life
- In public life social representations are
 - Generated
 - Developed
 - Challenged
 - Supported
 - Changed
 - Die

How might they die?

Concepts of Mental Illness

- Animism - possession by evil spirits
- Animalism - animals that had to be severely controlled
- Insanity – broken mind, couldn't be repaired
- Illness - mentally distressed should be treated humanely
 - In institutions? In the community?
 - Jodelet (1991) – Aix-au-Provence

Social Representations

- Moscovici's response to Durkheim's 'collective' representations
- SRs: reintroduction of the psychological - emphasis on the dynamic quality of representations
- Lay theories of phenomena that are important to us
 - Folk beliefs or systems of belief about common objects
 - Concepts, images, and theories that we create of our changing world
- Systems of values, ideas and practices that serve two kinds of functions:
 - Change the unfamiliar to the familiar so they bring order and manageability to our world
 - They facilitate communication
- Moscovici (1961; 2008) Psychoanalysis

Social representations as a social construction

- Possess a dual existence:
 - Product of social thinking – structure beliefs and knowledge about phenomena psychologists consider important
 - and
 - Processes by which we construct our reality – understood as mechanisms that shape how we think and talk about objects, events and people

Social Representations

- Jodelet (1991):

“Social representations are images that

condense manifold meanings that allow people to interpret what is happening;

categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we deal,

theories which permit us to establish facts about them.

When we consider social representations embedded in the concrete reality of our social life, they are all the above together.”

Social Representations Approach

- Importance of language and communication
 - Lifeworld exists in all contexts where people engage in communication and seek mutual understanding

But

- Acknowledges the importance of non-verbal material in the study of human psyche (*e.g. Joffe 2002*)
 - They highlight also the symbolic, emotive and social aspects of how people make sense of their world – how lives are lived; practices etc.
- Actor always already embedded in the horizon of their lifeworld as the space that delineates the intersubjective conditions for possible communication (*Jovchelovitch, 2007, 109*)
 - Set parameters for people's lives

Processes: Anchoring and Objectifying

- Anchoring - categorizes a new object into our pre-existing mental systems
 - Renders a strange and unfamiliar object familiar using familiar (existing) categories – recognition and naming
- Objectification - crystallization of the new object into a figurative core.
 - Representation
 - is liberated from the immediate context;
 - cannot now be changed by individuals
 - provides the basis for communication

Reified and Consensual universes

- Consensual universe - society is seen as being a group of individuals who are equal and free
 - Shared conventions – language, topics, questions etc.
- Reified universe - society is seen as a system of different unequal roles and classes
 - Scientific discourse/Lay discourse
 - System of interaction is shaped by roles and positions
 - Power relations appropriate to social context
 - Discourses from specialised fields constitute 'scientific' discourses e.g. the language of psychoanalysis
 - Acceptance rather than reciprocal understanding

Core and Peripheral social representations

- Abric (1984)
- Different focus of importance for different people/groups

e.g. Value of formal schooling

Effectiveness of Freudian psychoanalysis (*Moscovici*)

Cores of social representations are organised around antimonies

(*Markova, 2003*)

Periphery elements flexible and context specific

Cognitive polyphasia – conflicting representations

Social Representations

- Prescriptive
 - socially constructed metasystem
 - regulate, controls and directs individual minds (but not deterministic!)
- Can influence at unconscious level
 - guide decisions and actions
 - make us consider other people's opinions and thoughts
 - shared conceptualisations used to make judgements
- Social representations are autonomous
 - have an existence independent of any individual
 - they lead a life of their own

Key research areas – **all political**

- Identity and Resistance (*Duveen; Breakwell*)
- Health (*Herzlitch; Joffe*)
- Madness (*Jodelet*)
- Political/Public Life (*Jovchelovitch*)
- Education (*Duveen; Ivinson*)
- Identity, Economic Transformation and Education (*Me*)

Recognising knowledge systems of 'others'

- Social practices – tendency to construct the 'other' in relatively negative terms
- Everyday life, media, institutions – unintentional and intentional
- Jovchelovitch: trajectory of our relations to...
 - e.g. deviants, 'the mad', remote peoples (e.g. colonialisation)
 - historically this is often negative
- Social representations, attitudes and practises often exclude the perspective of the other – devalues and rejects the knowledge of the other
- Knowledge – a construct that requires others – but **politics** is the **formalised rejection of knowledge of the 'other'**

Power, Cooperation and Conflict

- Production of social representations permeated permanently by relations of power
- Cooperation provides a common code to discuss, debate and constitute social realities
- Conflict provides debate as different interests and relations of power compete
 - Construction of accounts never neutral
 - Related to larger struggles of a given society
 - Some groups – greater chance than others to assert their version of reality
 - e.g. Social representations of de-industrialisation
 - Government manipulation of understandings of closures of coal mines through evoking dominant social representations of mining/miners/future of UK via media
 - Shaped the representation field through which sense was made

History and Social Identity

- Narratives of origin (*Liu and Hilton, 2005, 539*)
- Group social representations of shared history and future – central to identity, norms and values
- Defines the social identity of peoples, how they relate to other peoples and to current issues of politics and diversity
- Transmits identity across generations
- Helps explain
 - Different reactions to political events
 - Perceived rights and obligations

Consider how might this explain different responses to current political events in the USA?

- Public opinion and elite decision-making groups – memories of events e.g. Iraq War
- Prescriptive element – more than just collective memories/shared perceptions
- Social Representations
 - Constitute symbolic environment and give content to a lifeworld
 - Define roles and legitimize actions through reference to historical experience
 - e.g. UK as ‘world policeman’ institutionalized through permanent seats on UN Security Council

Consider - how are people in the UK dealing with dramatic change and transformation stemming from ‘Brexit’ and the US election?

- Legitimize a society’s social and political arrangements
- Identity of a people conditions response to political events

Social Representations of De-industrialisation

- Understandings of closures of coal mines
- **Consider - how different interested parties might have manipulated social representations of...**
 - Mining
 - Miners and their families
 - 'The Government'
 - Margaret Thatcher
 - Arthur Scargill
 - 'The police'/police officers
 - The UK's history
 - The future of the UK

National Identity and Democracy

- How do people who live in a system considered to be democratic understand democracy? What does it mean to them?
- Magioglou (2000)
 - Do young people have an 'ideal' democracy different from existing one?
 - Is their 'ideal' democracy seen as possible or impossible?
 - 'Democracy' – important due to Greek historical foundation
 - Freedom, equality and justice
 - Principles and procedures of the representative system (e.g. elections)
 - Non-existence and impossibility of ideal democracy
 - Symbolically present to judge reality
 - Central nucleus of social representation : values of freedom, equality and justice – indispensable to democracy

National Identity and Trust in Politics

- Jovchelovitch (2007)
- 'Trust' enacted differently across cultures
- Lifeworld: mediated experience and bridging of multiple perspectives to create relationships and trust
- Brazilian mistrust of political figures representing institutions
- Trust of family, friends, neighbours, co-activists
 - Everyday life versus political institutions/'the State'
 - Corruption 'in the blood'



Lula: former Brazilian president
Seen as 'grassroots'



Dilma Rousseff: former Brazilian president

Consider –

- **Corruption ‘is in the blood’**
- **Everyday life separate from political institutions.**

A contradiction?

How can a theory of social representations explain this?

- Brazilian culture differentiates ‘general others’ from ‘close others’
 - General, unidentified other versus the concrete, known other
 - Deteriorated self-interpretation impedes relationships with generalised other

British National Identity, Immigration and Politics?

- Benign
 - Liberal
 - Welcoming
 - Helpful
 - Responsible
 - Dutiful
 - Charitable
 - Too trusting
 - Too tolerant
 - Too welcoming
 - Not helpful in long-term
 - Arrogant
 - Misguided
 - Putting nationals first
 - Protective
 - Selective
 - Helping from a distance
 - Sharing responsibility wisely
 - Dutiful
 - Charitable
 - Ruthless
 - Bigoted
 - Hostile
 - Uncharitable
 - Rejecting/shunning
 - Racist/Xenophobic
- Antonyms – conflicting social representations used by politicians

- Often disagreement over meaning and constitution of history
e.g.
 - New Zealand: Maori cultural renaissance/self-determination
 - UK: responsibility for former colonial countries
 - is it just ‘responsibility’? What else is being drawn upon and projected?
 - USA: ‘Immigration problem’?
- Political power and control – exploitation of cultural narrative

Consider – Who controls the narrative of a culture?

- Centrally represent historical affordances (media, monuments, books, stories etc.)
- But as political situation changes – new historical events and figures brought into play

Identity politics

- Not all people have a consensual social representation of their history
- **Hegemonic**: consensual throughout society
- **Emancipated**: different, smoothly interacting versions in segments of society
- **Polemical**: conflicting across different groups

Consider – examples of hegemonic, emancipated and polemical social representations?

Brexit? US election?

- **Hegemony and political influence**

e.g. need for national symbols

- Kilt/Scottish home rule
 - Masada (ancient fortress)/creation of state of Israel
- Symbols used to evoke particular social representations to achieve political aims

Symbols used in the UK?



Greece



Calais

Social Representations and 'Human Rights'

- What are 'Human Rights'?
 - **How is this conceptualised in the UK?**
 - **How is the concept of human rights used in our political system?**
 - **Is this now changing?**
- Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993)
- Cultural similarities and differences
 - Positionings
 - Values
- Universality of human rights?
- 'Human Rights'...
 - A western social construction?
 - Used to judge other cultures
 - Recognition and derogation of different knowledge systems

Social Representations, Conflict and Resistance

- Zamperini et al (2012): Genoa G8 summit protests
- Polemical social representations
- Prior to summit:
 - Social representations of activists as 'criminals'
 - Genoa transformed into militarized city
 - Italian media: social representation of Genoa summit as 'urban warfare', with activists as 'enemy of civil society'; 'black bloc'
 - Social representation polarised into dichotomy 'good vs. evil'
- Activists:
 - Stigmatized group later attempted to construct own narrative
 - 'Peaceful demonstrators' - distanced from 'black bloc'

Consider - how were the aims of the protest affected by the prior positioning of the activists?

- Activists: three core types of representation of the police
 - Police as coercive force – aggressive, irrational
 - Police as incompetent defence force
 - Police as the enemy
- Media constructed a symbolic reality – different from subjective experience of actors
- Specific importance in democracy?
 - Assumption of protective nature of institutions towards civilians
 - Stigmatizing of opposition to institutions
 - Circularity – support for symbolic constructions
 - Narratives remain part of a country's memory ('available' social representations)

Resistance

So, if narratives remain part of a country's memory ('available' social representations)

- Alternative social representations – sometimes historical
- Affords resistance to identities imposed upon individuals and groups
- Affords resistance to social representations/narratives imposed by power groups
- Justifies inconsistencies in own narrative
- Acknowledgement of recognition by the 'other' – engagement with different knowledge systems – responses?

Positioning, conflict, resistance...

- **Fracking**
- **House building on green belt land**
- **Membership of the European Union**
- **Green tax**
- **Organ donation**
- **Global warming**

Useful reading

- Doise, W., Spini, D., Clemence, A. (1999). Human Rights studied as social representations in a cross-nation context. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 29, 1–29.
- Elcheroth, G., Doise, W., Reicher, S. (2001). On the knowledge of politics and the politics of knowledge: how a social representations approach helps us rethink the subject of political psychology. *Political Psychology*, 32 (5), 729–759.
- Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). *Knowledge in Context: Representations, Community and Culture*. London: Routledge. (Chapter 4)
- Liu, J. H., Hilton, D. J. (2005). How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, 537–556.
- Moscovici, S. (2001). *Social representations*. Oxford: Blackwell. (Chapter 1)
- Zamperini, A., Menegatto, M., Travaglino, G. A., Nulman, E. (2012). Social Representations of Protest and Police after the Genoa G8 Summit: A Qualitative Analysis of Activist Accounts of Events. *Papers on Social Representations*, Vol 21, 15.1–15.30.

4.00 – 4.30 pm: Break

4.30 - 6.00 pm: Independent work

‘Designing a study using a social representations approach’

As a group:

- Decide on a topic of study
- Research this area from a social representations perspective

6.00 – 8.00 pm: Discussing study design and potential findings

- Determine an appropriate method for exploring this
- Critique the usefulness of a social representations approach (strengths/weaknesses)