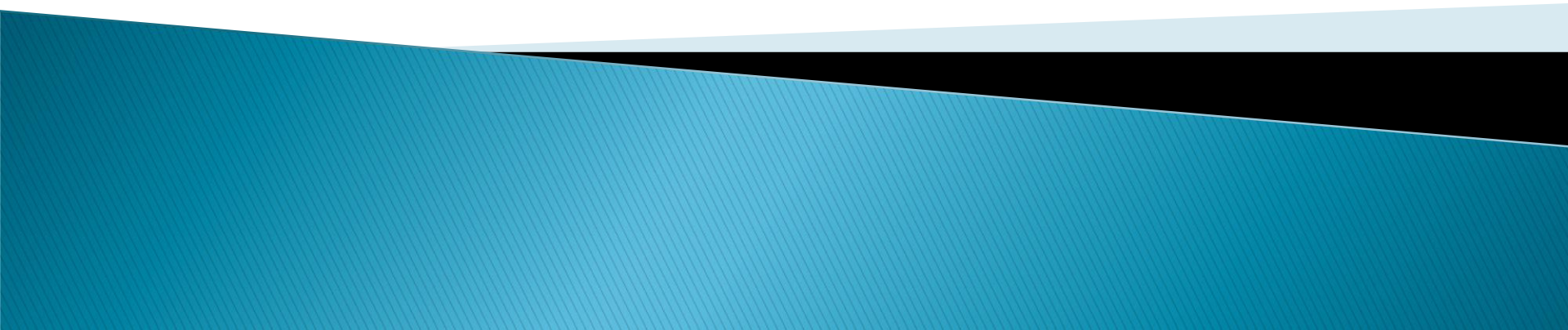


Social Representations and Identity

Critique of SRT



Social identity:

“that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”

(Tajfel, 1981, in Deaux and Philogene, 2001, p.258)

Tajfel - content of categories

What it meant to be defined as:

Jewish in Europe in the 1930s

Black in the UK in the 1970s

Breakwell (1979)

A woman in the 1970s

Also consider...

West Indian in the UK in the 1950s?

Muslim in Europe in the 2010s?

Majority of research of identity - processes rather than content of categories

Duveen: Social Representations Theory and Development

Social representations theory contributes to the development of identities

- Children are 'active participants in a symbolic community'
(Duveen, 2001, p.259)

- Newborns – not neutral objects –already invested with social identity
- Child is incorporated into a representational system:
 - a) gives the child a social designation
 - b) regulates the actions of other people around the child

- Child is first an unfamiliar object in the representational world of others – needs to be anchored – we use categories to do this
- Interactions with the child through use of these categories results in objectification of the child

Rubin, Provenzano and Luria (1974): Descriptions of newborns

- No difference birth weight, birth length, apgar scores
- Girls described as pretty, beautiful, cute, little, more than boys were
- Difference based only on physical form as a signifier for projected gender identity (social representations of gender)
- Fathers drew upon the most stereotypic notions of gender

Smith and Lloyd (1978)

- Unfamiliar female adults/children
 - 6-month-old babies – either gender congruent clothing/name or gender incongruent clothing/name
-
- First toy – gender congruent toy – consistent with the perceived gender
 - ‘Boys’ using gross motor movements – positive response from adult
 - ‘Girls’ using gross motor movement – less positive – interpreted the behaviour as distress

Gender differences are internalised – evident in play

- Equal levels of gender knowledge, but boys more gender congruent choices
- Gender knowledge is used to construct different identities
- Boys were using material culture to demonstrate identity

Children's thinking and behaviours – shaped by the social representations of community

Gendered use of space

Girls: small spaces around perimeter

Boys: The majority of the space in the centre

Variations in identities within gender groups

Duveen and Lloyd (1992) – gender and first year of schooling

Identical items carried different gender meanings in different classrooms

Individual differences within gender groups: variations on the recognised gender patterned behaviours

Consistencies between early patterns of classroom behaviour and different forms of identity development

Identities and Resistance

Individuals are projected into a social world marked by a complex set of relationships between social groups

When representations are internalized they are linked to a process of identity formation

e.g. **De Abreu** – identities linked to home mathematics, rather than school maths resulting in disengagement with school maths

Goldmann (1976)

Emerging identities set parameters on the social representations that can be accepted as it might mean the dissolution of an existing identity

Identity: the force that attaches us to an attitude or a belief
– to a **representation**

Relationship between identity and communication

When social representations are changed

- identities can change
- identity work to defend/re-negotiate identity

Resistance can be individual acts or social responses

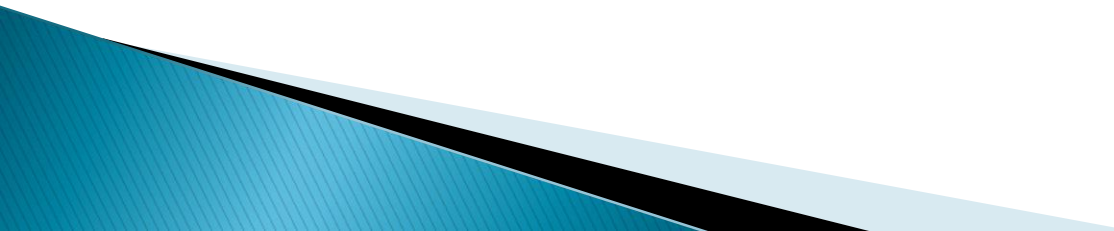
- If resistance is effective – results in **sociogenetic** change
(the social world generally accepts the existing identity)
- If not successful – **ontogenetic** transformations
(identities are restructured)

Reading

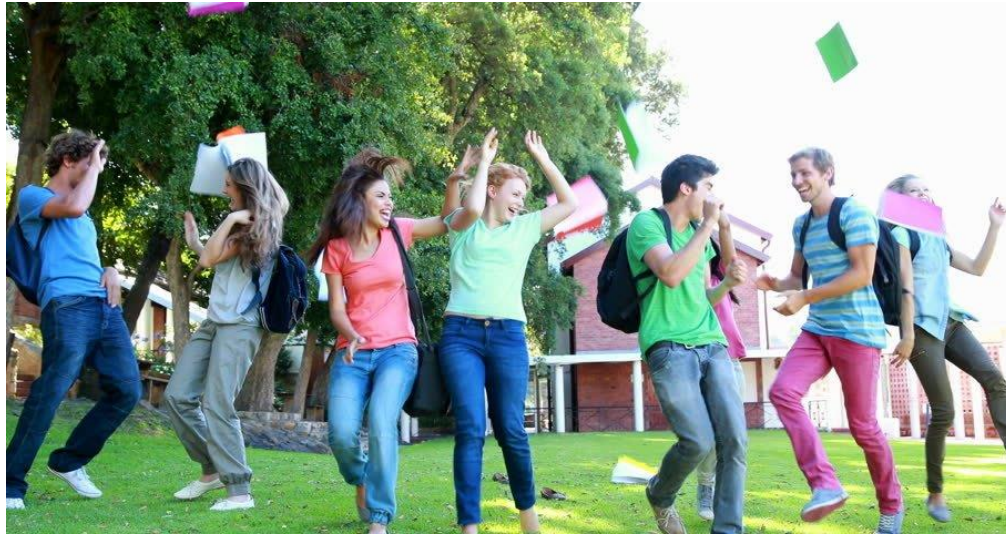
Duveen, G (2001). Representations, identities, Resistance. In K Deaux and G Philogene, *Representations of the Social*. Oxford; Blackwell.
Chapter 19

Breakwell, G. (2001). Social Representational Constraints upon identity Processes. In K Deaux and G Philogene, *Representations of the Social*. Oxford; Blackwell.
Chapter 20

Plus journal articles made available on Moodle
(studies of social representations and identity)



Break



10 Minutes!

Social Representations Theory: Challenges and Debates



Four key theoretical issues:

- Ambiguities in defining social representations
- Social determinism
- Cognitive reductionism
- Apparent lack of a critical agenda



Ambiguities in defining social representations

- Social Representations Theory

‘...a concept in search of a theory’

(Potter and Litton, 1985)

‘...the elaboration of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating’

(Moscovici, 1963, p.251)

- 
- Markova (2000, p.430) - ‘...attempts to provide an exhaustive definition of such phenomena are based on a misconception of their nature’
 - Issues relating to translation (Howarth, 2005)
 - Howarth – problems relating to the term ‘representation’

In English: suggests ‘reflection’ or ‘reproduction’

In French: includes a sense of it being active and purposeful

(Wagner, 1998)



Criticisms re. ambiguities

- Jahoda (1988) – social representations are similar to culture/ideology/common sense
- Eiser (1986) – aspects of cognitive theories simplified or exaggerated to make social representations theory distinct
- Billig (1988) – social representations theory can't be both a universal concept and a specific concept

(Howarth, 2005)

- Moscovici

A general worldview cannot explain 'the socio-cultural specificity of a representation as a form of knowledge particular to **a certain group**'

Social representations are indispensable features of social life **in all cultures** - so it can be seen as a universal concept

(Howarth, 2005, p.437)

Social representation - not just a social process nor just a cognitive process – it is **both at the same time**



Social determinism

- Moscovici - social representations 'impose themselves upon us with irresistible force' (1984a, p.9)

Criticism:

- Social Representations theory - too strong a focus on the influence of the social world on thought and action
(e.g. Parker, 1987)
- Jahoda (1988) - People live passively within an existing framework of social representations
- But: criticism - overly simplistic view



Social representations:

- construct symbolic boundaries for communities and identities of groups and communities
- are created through collective activity
- are validated through communication (so a social representation belongs to the group, not the individual)
- their content and form are influenced by historical, political and economic factors within and outside the community, as well as by the practices within it



Cognitive reductionism

- Alleged that the theory proposes individuals take small pieces of information and assimilating them into pre-existing cognitive categories
- Semin:
 - A theory of social knowledge and social change
 - A focus on the collective, but citing cognitive processes as key – specifically anchoring and objectification
- Billig: anchoring and objectifying as cognitive processes leads the theory into cognitive reductionism
- Potter and Edwards: anchoring and objectification stay on level of perception and cognition - individual level

- 
- But: Moscovici – focus on content of thoughts and the historical and cultural bases
 - Reconnection of the social and historical nature of cognition
(Markova, 2000)
 - Cognition is socio-cultural
 - Cognition is dynamic
 - Howarth:
Discursive psychologists (e.g. Potter and Billig):
See cognition and action in opposition
cognition = inside the mind action = in the social world

Moscovici: thought is social – rooted in culture and communication



Lack of a critical agenda?

- Ibanez, 1992, Parker, 1987: Social representations theory does not emphasise power and ideology
- But: Moscovici - ideology relates to the difference between the consensual and reified universes



- Consensual and reified universes
- Potter: if social representations allow us to make sense of our worlds, why is it that experts and lay people use different social representations
- But: Moscovici - scientists are rooted in own social worlds (socio-historical influence) So the consensual universe can influence the reified, not just the other way round
- Howarth: research question should be how and why do some representations come to be reified, while others do not?



Reading

- Howarth, Caroline (2006) A social representation is not a quiet thing: exploring the critical potential of social representations theory. *British journal of social psychology*, 45 (1). pp. 65-86.
- Howarth, C. (2011) Editorial: 50 Years of Research on Social Representations: Central Debates and Challenging Questions. *Papers on Social Representations*. Vol. 20, pp 9.1-9.11.
- Potter, J., Edwards, D. (1999). Social Representations and Discursive Psychology: From Cognition to Action. *Culture Psychology* Vol. 5(4): 447–458
- Voelklein, C., Howarth, C. (2005). A review of controversies about social representations theory: a British debate. *Culture and psychology*, 11 (4). pp. 431-454.
- Plus your own literature search