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Participants Presentation

Genesis, development and actuality of the Social Representation theory in more than fifty years (1961-2011 and beyond): the main paradigms and the "modelling approach"



European/International Joint Ph.D.
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The Geneva School

THE SOCIO-DYNAMIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

THE SOCIO-DYNAMIC APPROACH

- ✘ Some titles:
- ✘ Doise, W., Spini, D., Clemence, A. (1999) “*Human rights studied as social representations in a cross-national context*”
- ✘ Spini, D. (2005) “*Universal rights and duties as normative social representations*”
- ✘ Staerke, C., Clemence, A. (2004) “*Why people are committed to human rights and still tolerate their violation: A contextual analysis of the principle application gap*”
 - ✘ The basic assumption is that human rights can be studied as social representations following the model of Doise

W. DOISE: BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

✦ SR are organizing principles of symbolic relationships between individuals and groups.

1) First assumption: various members of a population under study share common views about a given social issue. SR are generated in systems of communication that necessitate common frames of reference for individuals and groups participating in the relationships. An important phase in each study of SR therefore is the search for a common cognitive organization of the issues at stake in a given system of social relations. In Moscovici's (1961) terms, this aspect of the study of SR deals with objectification.

However, **SR theory does not imply that individuals sharing common references necessarily hold the same positions.**

2) A second assumption is that differences in individual positioning are organized. Individuals may differ according to the strength of their adherence to various aspects of SR.

Therefore, in our studies of SR we search for the organizing principles of individual differences in a representational field.

3) A third assumption is that such systematic variations are anchored in collective symbolic realities, in social psychological experiences shared to different extents by individuals and in their beliefs about social reality (Doise, 1992±3).

Individual positionings in representational fields cannot be exhaustively studied without analyzing their anchoring in other social systems of symbolic relationships.

HUMAN RIGHTS AS SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

✘ Common understanding:

- ✘ Do members of different national and cultural groups organize their understanding of the UDHR in a similar way?
- ✘ The hypothesis is that official definitions of HR and lay definitions have a common organization in different countries

✘ Individual positioning

- ✘ Organizing principles of individual differences.
- ✘ General coherence in the attitudes towards human rights in different areas should not prevent individuals from differing in their specific attitudes
- ✘ They will differ in the relative efficacy they attribute to institutions and to themselves for having these rights respected

✘ Anchoring in values

- ✘ The relationship with general beliefs and values
- ✘ The representations they hold concerning conflictual relationships between social groups and categories
- ✘ National contexts

CONCLUSIONS

- ✘ Individuals differ systematically in beliefs about their own and the government's efficacy in having human rights respected
- ✘ An individual level and a pancultural analysis converged in the definition of four groups of respondents (advocates-most favorable), sceptics (less favourable), personalists (high personal involvement and scepticism about governmental efficacy) and governmentalist (low personal involvement and strong belief in governmental efficacy)
- ✘ Individual-level analyses show that positionings are anchored in value choices as well as in perception and experience of social conflicts
- ✘ Pancultural analyses confirm the importance of national context concerning the attitudes of scepticism or advocacy, personalism and governmentalism

EXAMPLE 1

- ✘ Staerke, C., Clemence, A. (2004) “Why people are committed to human rights and still tolerate their violation: A contextual analysis of the principle application gap
- ✘ An experimental study showing a large gap between support for general principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and denunciation of concrete violations of these principles.
- ✘ Participants indicated their level of support for each human right and the unacceptability of violations of it.
- ✘ A dual principle was found to organize positioning towards the violations:
 - a) Participants with a **rights-based orientation** denounced the violation independently of the victims’ attributes
 - b) **Context-oriented respondents** relied on the perceived deservingness of victims and considered the violation a just sanction of an unacceptable act.

Judgmental differences were moderated by the situational context and participants’ extent of agreement with human rights.

EXAMPLE 1

✘ *News item 1: No interference with privacy*

V1 : Drug traffic, V2: Shoplifter

Thursday at 7 a.m., the police searched, without a warrant, the house of a young woman suspected of heroin trafficking (shoplifting). After a meticulous search, the police found some proof of the offense.

Violation of human right: Home search without a warrant

Art. 12 UDHR: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

EXAMPLE 1: THE CONCLUSION

- ✘ As illustrated in interviews reported by Bechlivanou and colleagues (1990) and Doise (2002), laypersons define rights not by strictly applying principles that they endorse, but by focusing on the normality of acts committed by individuals to which principles need to be applied.
- ✘ They adjust their decisions as a function of contexts and persons. As discussed in the domain of social rights in daily life justice cannot be achieved without taking into account the perceived deservingness of the actors (Feather, 1999).
- ✘ Individuals not only reject the universality of rights, which is seen as a source of misuse, but also their restrictive application, which is seen as a cause of exclusion.

THE CONSEQUENCES

- ✘ Human rights become disconnected from formal justice norms when they are analyzed from the point of view of representational everyday thinking.
- ✘ This “news item effect” could explain the recent reactions towards the U.S. treatment of prisoners in Iraq and the Guantanamo Bay camp.
- ✘ Before major newspapers revealed these mistreatments, most people (including members of the elite) presumably shared the point of view that the prisoners were dangerous people who must have committed highly reprehensible acts.

THE SOCIO-DYNAMIC APPROACH

Socio-dynamic
approach

SR

Position
Taking

Identity
related
function

