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Social Representations and Communication
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Social Representations in Action and Construction
in Media and Society



"Cultural and cross-cultural
approaches to social representations:
The implications of the globalised/localised cultural scenario"

24th - 29th August 2009

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Key Lectures

European Ph.D

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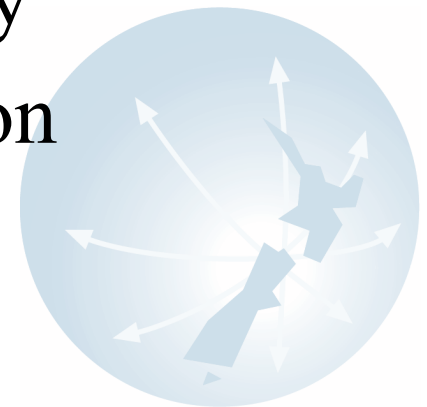
Notes Towards a Theory of Social Representations of History

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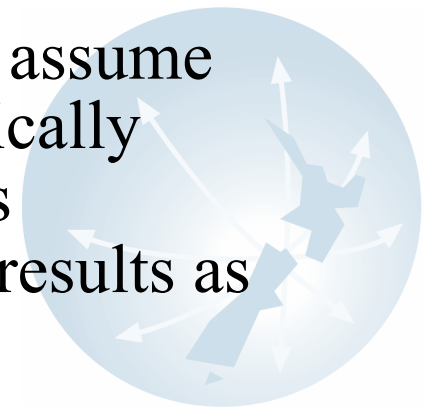
OVERVIEW

- The Historical Contingency of Psychological Phenomena
- Macro- and Micro- Approaches to Social Representations of History
- History as a Moving Feast of Cultural (Group-Based) Symbols
- How History is Narrated or Configured as Historical Charters for Peoples
 - The Normative, Cognitive, and Social Identity Functions of Historical Charters
 - Do's and Don'ts, Be's and Don't Be's



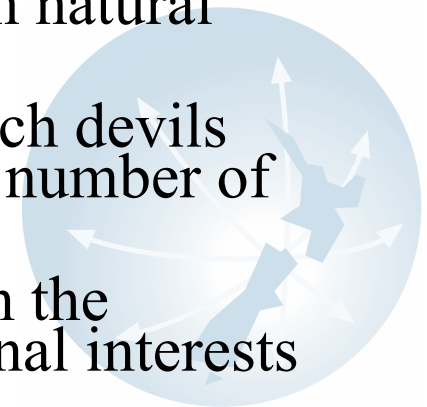
Social Representations a meta-theoretical approach to the Historical Contingency of Psychological Phenomena

- Anglo-Saxon empiricism is strongly resistant to philosophical approaches to psychology. Assumes present day empirical results are the causal function of cognitive, motivational, or emotional functioning at the individual level. Does not allow for the possibility that present-day results are *historically contingent* on the *content* of socially shared representations prevalent in societies and cultures.
- I would argue that it is far more scientific to assume that results are culture specific and/or historically contingent unless proven otherwise, whereas mainstream psychology treats experimental results as universal unless proven otherwise.



The Mentality of 16th Century Europe (at the Birth of modern consciousness)

- Martin Luther harbinger of the Protestant Reformation, which was famous for being LESS superstitious than the Catholicism of the day, wrote that,
- "I myself saw and touched at Dessay, a child of this sort, which had no human parents, but had proceeded from the Devil. He was twelve years old, and, in outward form, exactly resembled ordinary children."
- "I should have no compassion on these witches; I should burn them all."
- "Idiots, the lame, the blind, the dumb, are men in whom the devils have established themselves: and all the physicians who heal these infirmities, as though they proceeded from natural causes, are ignorant blockheads...."
- "In many countries there are particular places to which devils more especially resort. In Prussia there is an infinite number of evil spirits."
- How universal is contemporary psychology based on the assumption that ordinary people calculate their rational interests based on considerations like social exchange?





Mentality of 16th century Europeans in terms of racial prejudice

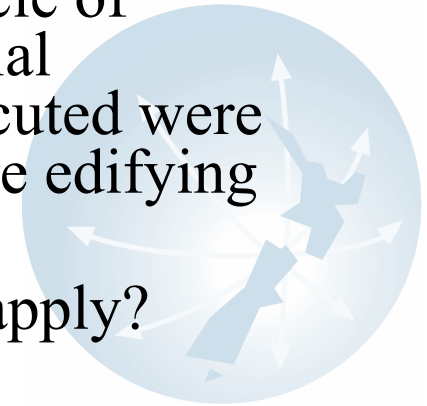
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- Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo (author of *La General y natural historia de las Indias*), asserted that “Indians, the majority of them, are a nation far from capable of understanding the Catholic faith... they do not have heads like everyone else, they have such thick helmet-like skulls, that when Christians fight with them, [they] must be forewarned not to strike them on the head because their swords shatter.”
- Could this type of prejudice be characterized by modern versus old fashioned forms of racism?
- These are the words of educated men in the 16th century, when most people in Europe were illiterate— can we even imagine their mentalities?



Morality of 16th century Europe

- Crimes subject to the death penalty included blasphemy, heresy, bigamy, incest, adultery, rape, bestiality, arson, assault, theft, kidnapping, murder, rebellion, treason, moving signs of property boundaries, using dishonest weights and measures, attempted suicide, converting to Judaism, and sorcery.
- Beheading was the most common form of execution, followed by hanging. Women were often drowned, buried alive, or broken on the wheel.
- Nothing describes the morality of the century more than the fact that taking the family out for the spectacle of public executions was an important form of social excursion. It was assumed that those being executed were in fact criminals, and that public executions were edifying as a morality play.
- Would Kohlberg's theory of levels of morality apply?



SRT as providing a vehicle for considering Historical Contingency

- We are fortunate to live in an era ruled by assumptions of science and reason.
- Moscovici's (1961) Theory of Social Representations was originally formulated to describe the movement and transformation of Freudian ideas & thinking from academic to popular domains. He argues that social rather than collective representations are required because of the pluralism in contemporary society.
- It is extremely difficult for us to imagine thinking in a society when modes of the transmission of ideas were not pluralistic (devoid of propagation and diffusion), but entirely governed by a virulent and total form of propaganda dictated by Catholicism

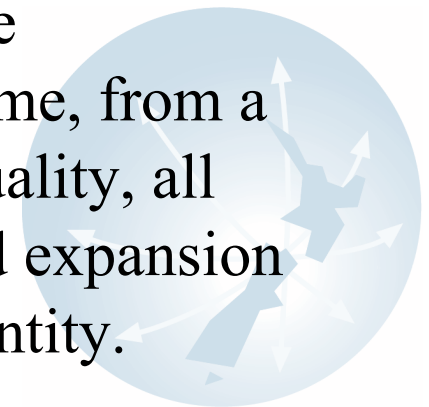




History an essential ingredient in constructing the “imagined community” of nationhood

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- “Peoples”, like ethnic or national groups, seek to establish norms and traditions for governance that allow the maintenance of temporal continuity between past, present, and future. History “confers immortality” to events and people, it weaves them into stories with temporal form referred to by Malinowski (1926) as *narratives of origin*.
- Clifford Geertz (1973) has argued for defining culture through its symbols, and B. Schwartz (1996) has used archival methods to demonstrate how the collective remembering of Abraham Lincoln changed over time, from a symbol of defence of the union to one of racial equality, all within an overall narrative of the rise of liberty and expansion of the franchise that defines American national identity.



History as a Symbolic Reserve

- History is the story of the making of an ingroup. “A group’s representation of its history is *constitutional*: it can serve the function of a foundational myth or “charter” for a society, defining rights and obligations for a group and legitimizing its social and political arrangements... A group’s representation of its history will thus condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be...” (Liu & Hilton, BJSP 2005)
- Historical charters allow a people to maintain cultural continuity while facing new challenges, by viewing contemporary issues through the lenses provided by historical experience, and by providing cultural schemas for collective symbolic coping.



Defining an Historical Charter

- Hilton & Liu (2008) define an historical charter as a “widely shared and iconic representation where selective elements of group history, its causes, and consequences have been elaborated into a quasi-legal form that gives moral and sometimes legal implications for group action”.





Two approaches to defining “historical charters”

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- Wertsch (2002); Liu & Laszlo (2007) theorize one conception of charters as Qualitative Narratives or stories that “grasp together” the meaning of the raw events and figures of history that provides a negotiated “script” for facing challenges of today.
- Social psychology’s contribution is to provide a quantitative, verifiable approach to complement sociology and anthropology’s more qualitative approaches in a more atomistic way. Here, we might consider different normative, cognitive, and motivational functions derived from the operation of historical charters



The Constitutive Elements of National Historical Charters

- *Consensus around Content*: Historical Events and Figures that are widely recognized and agreed upon as important to the history of the nation.
- *Debate around Meaning and Interpretation*: In Cohesive authoritarian states, there might be less visible debate around the Charter, whereas in democracies there will continual political contestation around the implications & meaning of Charter, because it should often be referred to as a warrant of justification in dealing with perennial issues of moment to a society.
- *Sometimes has Legal or Quasi Legal status*: 1689 British Bill of Rights, the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, Treaty of Waitangi



Normative Charter Functions: History as a symbolic resource to confer political legitimacy

- Shared representations of national history accumulate society's wisdom about how it has dealt with issues of concern in the past, and these have legitimate power in debating its future. Each culture has evolved a system of symbols for legitimizing political positions and warranting debate based on its own historical experiences.
- These can be shown to produce “legitimizing ideologies” to justify political actions.
- For instance, Britain's Historical Charter to Combat Tyranny and Assure Rule of Law, France's Charter of universal “Liberty, Equality, & Fraternity” in alternative to Anglo-American hegemony and Germany's Historical Burden of WWII engendered radically different responses to the USA's request for support in Afghanistan after 9-11, even though objective circumstances were similar for the 3. (all NATO allies, all with Muslim minorities etc)



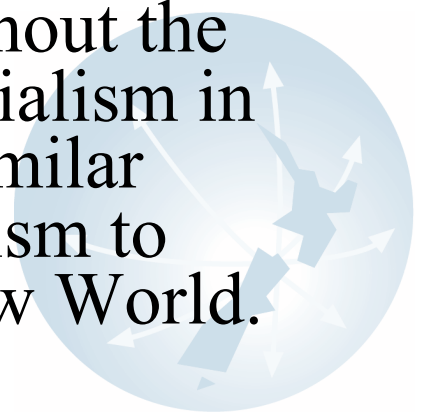
Cognitive Charter Functions: Schema for Analogical Transfer

- WWII provides a schema that has been applied to successive Gulf Wars against Saddam Hussein by the Western powers. Spellman & Holyoak JPSP (1994) showed that the perceived positions of GHW Bush and Saddam could be manipulated by varying schematic features of WWII relationships between Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt.
- The Munich Analogy has been repeatedly used as a template for dealing with contemporary dictators (to warrant the idea of defeating them before they get too strong).



Cognitive Charter Functions: Attributional Schemas

- Most established states have a Foundational Myth that explains how the nation came to be, and this furnishes an attributional schema that can be applied to new situations.
- For instance, the British Charter involves respect for the rule of law and the gradual development of democracy. This was used in the colonial era to explain why the British had a “white man’s burden” to colonize to lesser cultures without the benefit of such traditions. Spanish Imperialism in the 1500-1800s used Catholicism for a similar purpose, again using benevolent paternalism to explain why they should colonize the New World.

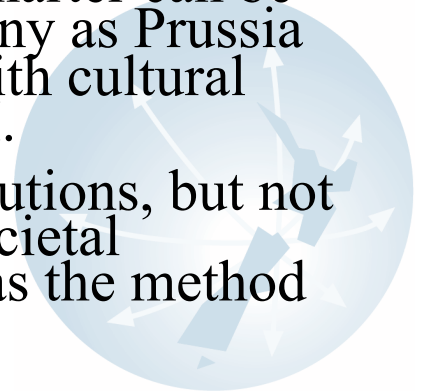




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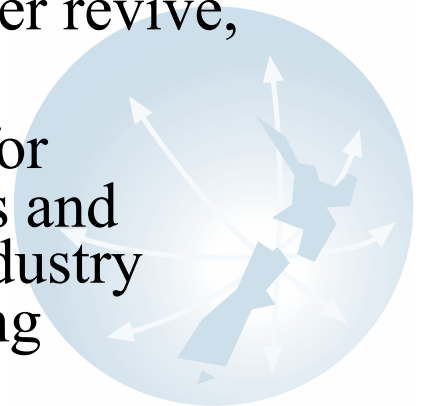
Processes: Charters are negotiated

- Christian Benevolent Paternalism and the White Man's Burden were colonial ideologies and motivated schemata that have had to be renegotiated following WWII. The surrender of Singapore to the Japanese by a numerically superior British garrison, and the moral degradation of colonization demonstrated by Gandhi destroyed the extension of Western historical charters as justificatory schemata for dealing with non-Western peoples
- The constitutive core of Historical Charters are central core elements of SRH (Abric, 1993), whereas many of the ideologies and schemas derived from them are more bounded in time as peripheral elements
- Obama may be a return for the USA to Defender of the Free World rather (reacting against dictators) than Policeman of the World (pre-emptive strikes), Slight change in meaning (typical).
- Occasionally, even the central core of an historical charter can be renegotiated, so that the Historical Charter of Germany as Prussia Writ Large (a militaristic constitutional monarchy with cultural superiority that lasted 75 years) perished after WWII.
- States like Mexico in the 1800s had legalistic constitutions, but not Historical Charters because there was insufficient societal consensus to mandate these, and violent rebellion was the method used for regime change.



Motivational Charter Functions: National Goal-setting

- The Chinese Imperial Historical Charter perished with the Qing dynasty in 1911, and early 20th century Chinese intellectuals and politicians (most famously Sun Yat-Sen) tried to articulate a new Charter based on democratic and scientific ideas. They lacked the military or organizational power to implement their new ideas. so it was Communism that tried to construct a new historical charter for China as a socialist nation based on Marxist historical ideas.
- Mao's doctrine of Cultural Revolution was based on overthrowing the Historical Charter of Imperial China so thoroughly that hierarchical traditions could never revive, even within the Communist Party. This failed.
- Communist China articulates a modern project for "Socialist Scientific Development" that warrants and privileges the agenda of building science and industry under the leadership of the CCP, while eschewing democratic institutions and civil society.



Motivational Charter Functions II: Agenda-driven collective remembering

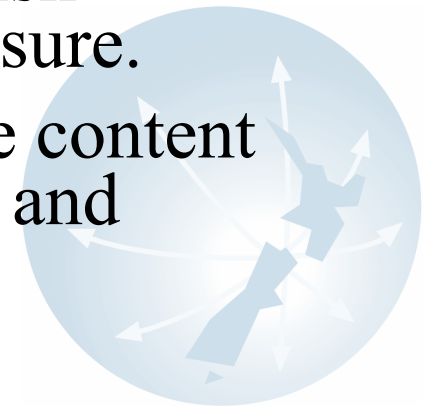
- Current National goals (consistent with the Historical Charter) may then reinforce central features of collective remembering by elevating certain events and features in salience.
- Schuman and Rodgers (2004) found that the 9/11 terror attack increased the American collective remembering of other wars. Thus, events like WWII are refreshed by a new generation of violent challenges.



Cognitive-Motivational Charter

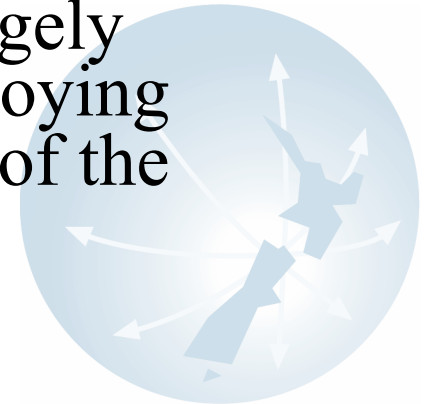
Functions: Building National Identity & Prototypical Traits

- In addition to the Normative Charter functions of do's and don'ts, there are also it also has Social identity functions that prescribe be's and don't be's
- The semi-mythological story of George Washington admitting to chopping down the cherry tree tells Americans to be honest
- The apocryphal tale of Francis Drake finishing his game of bowls before attacking the Spanish armada tells British to be cool under pressure.
- Hence, historical charters may furnish the content of social identities, including social roles and protoypical traits.



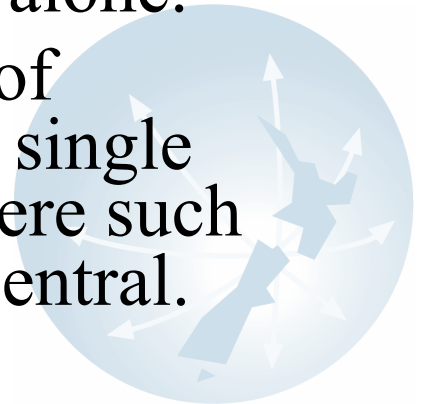
Historical Charters as Schematic Narratives?

- Alternatively, Historical Charters could be conceptualized as schematic narrative templates, as theorized by Wertsch (2002) in his book on *Voices of Collective Remembering*.
- Schematic narrative templates emerge out of repeated use of standard narrative forms produced by history instruction in schools, the popular media, etc. The narrative templates that emerge from this process are effective in shaping what we can say and think because: a) they are largely unnoticed, or “transparent” to those employing them, and b) they are a fundamental part of the identity claims of a group.



The Russian Group Narrative

- Wertsch has identified the following sequence of moves resulting in a schematic narrative template for Russian history: 1. An initial situation in which the Russian people are living in a peaceful setting where they are no threat to others is disrupted by, 2. The initiation of trouble or aggression by alien forces which leads to, 3. A time of crisis and great suffering for the Russian people that is, 4. Overcome by the triumph over the alien force by the Russian people, acting heroically and alone.
- All the different psychological functions of Historical Charters are combined into the single comprehensive approach to narrative, where such features as perspective and empathy are central.



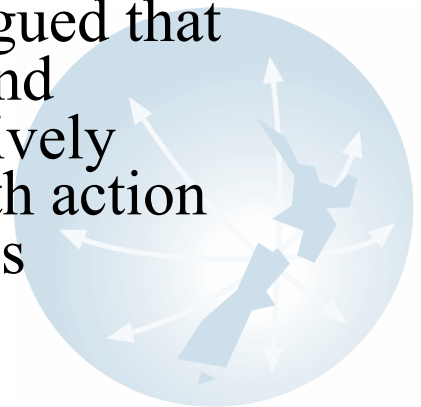
A Narrative Theory of History and Identity by Liu & László (2007)

- What if SRHs and historical charters were considered as a narrative structure with plot, characters, setting, theme and perspective?
- First, certain things should be more memorable in national histories than others: foundational events, critical turning points, and unresolved issues related to a morality tale meaningful to the in-group and contemporary political issues facing society.
- Telling a story about a Nation's History may hence result in a different configuration and enumeration of events and figures than instructions to relate important facts about history



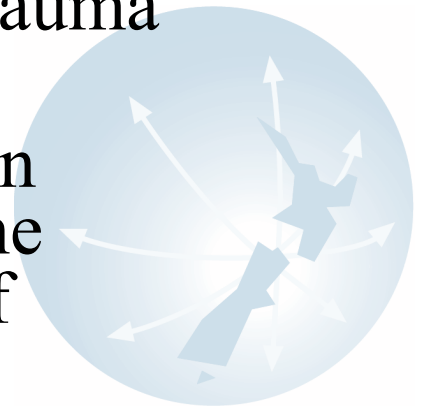
Narrative Perspective influencing Readers

- Narrative perspective establishes a *surface structure empathy hierarchy* (Kuno, 1976) that influences how the reader or listener constructs the meaning of the narrated event and it opens the way for *participatory affective responses* (Gerrig, 1996).
- Tóth, Vincze, and László (2005) compared the depictions of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in contemporary Austrian and Hungarian textbooks. One of the major differences was that the Hungarian texts included more personal agents as opposed to institutional agents, and mental inferences (e.g., knew, thought, felt etc.) as opposed to direct actions or statements. They argued that these narrative devices facilitate interpretation and empathy from a Hungarian point of view, effectively personalizing the events as “living histories” with action implications but did not provide evidence for this assertion.



Narrative Perspective influencing Perceptions of Writers/Speakers

- Polya, László, Forgas (2005) found that narrators using a retrospective perspective to describe autobiographical events were generally judged to be better adjusted, more desirable socially and less anxious than narrators describing the same events in the present tense, as though they were re-experiencing the events. Similar results were obtained by Ehmann, Kis, Naszodi and László (2006) when a linear retrospective time perspective was judged to better reflect trauma elaboration after the event.
- For historical narratives, particularly when relatively recent traumas are narrated, time perspective can be a sensitive indicator of elaboration and coping.



Narrative Empathy

- If Bruner (1986, 1990) is correct in asserting that narrative thinking is driven by a search for plausible, life-like connections between events, establishing verisimilitude rather than truth, then empathy would appear to be the key mediator of narrative impact. The reader, viewer or listener momentarily suspends disbelief and participates vicariously in the narrative to the extent that he or she shows empathy for and is moved by point of view expressed and the characters and situations depicted.
- Alternatively, the audience may find the narrative lacking in coherence and verisimilitude, and fail to relate to it for any number of reasons ranging from aesthetic to political.



Narrative Empathy for Canonical Historical Narratives

- A whole new line of research could be opened up by both documenting the content of & examining reactions to Canonical Historical Narratives from different Nationalities.
- Narratives about WWII would be a good starting point— how many films have portrayed dutiful soldiers following orders from this period sympathetically, versus victims of war for example? Such depictions may well be implicated in contemporary Western society's lack of glorification for war.
- Conversely, reactions to a Nation's Canonical Narratives may be a way to index how far an individual subscribes to the Historical Charter of his or her nation, and be subtle measure of action orientations for national identity.





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Conclusion

- SRHs link individuals to society through a number of psychological devices like attributional schemas & legitimizing ideologies, as well as processes like agenda-driven collective remembering and constructing national agendas.
- The central theoretical idea of an Historical Charter is a focal point for future investigation of National Psychologies

