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A LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL STEREOTYPES RESEARCH AND THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

Ana-Maria Ţepordei

"Al. I. Cuza" University, Iasi, Romania

Ph.D. research trainee in the European Doctorate on

Social Representations and Communication,

"La Sapienza" University, Rome, Italy

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INTRODUCTION

• The main purpose of this brief presentation is to give and discuss two illustrations of the present possible relations between Social Representation Theory (SRT) and social stereotypes research;

• Our personal belief is that these two fields can be easily reconciled if we shift the traditional level of analysis and enlarge our perspective when looking for the answers to the social phenomena;

• This reconciliation should be easier in the European social psychology due to the great influence of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987) in the stereotypes research. This theories could be seen as the alternative for the American more cognitive approach;

INTRODUCTION

- But if we consider some researchers' position, it seems that even in the European field the SRT is not very popular or it has no place in the mainstream research;

- The two books mentioned here are meant to illustrate these two opposite perspective on SRT and its perceived relation to social stereotypes research:

  - the "gap" or the parallelism between them
  - the "link" or their reconciliation;

THE "GAP" (1)

Hewstone, M., Stroebe, W., Jonas, K. (Eds.) (2008). *Introduction to Social Psychology. A European Perspective*

- It is an interesting and useful book, but in the light of our integrative perspective it was also quite an unpleasant surprise: it has 409 pages and not a single reference to the concept of social representation or to the SRT (including the glossary and the subject index);

- Why a surprise and why should one expect to find references to social representations in this book? For several reasons:

    - it is a textbook meant to draw a general picture of the field, trying to cover all the essential research fields, important theories, important works, new approaches and contributions etc.

THE "GAP" (2)

- it is a book on social psychology, not on social cognition or social stereotypes, and it has chapters like *Self and Social Identity*, *Social Influence, The Psychology of Groups* or *Prejudice and Intergroup relations;*

- it presents the European perspective and the European contributions in the social psychology field;

- the first chapter is a historical overview of the field, with subtitles like *Social Psychology in Europe* and *Social Psychology Today.*

- After taking a look at this textbook one would think that SRT is not even worth mentioning (which is worse than saying that it is not a very important theory).

THE "GAP" (3)

- Since qualitative methods are often use in the social representations research, the gap can be again emphasized by this quotation from the 2nd chapter of this textbook, entitled *Research Methods in Social Psychology* :

  "This sort of qualitative approach is not represented in the present volume, where the emphasis is on the strengths of a realist, quantifiable social psychology (…) The role played by qualitative research methods in social psychology largely reflects differences in philosophical belief about the causation of social behavior. For realist social psychologists, social behavior has causes, and the goal of research is to shed light on those causes. For many qualitative researchers, social behavior does not have causes in the same way that, say, an earthquake has causes. (…) From the standpoint of the research represented in the present volume, qualitative research seems to be more focused on description than explanation, and more concerned with how behavior is constructed than with how it is caused" (p. 29)

- So the gap derives from the different perspectives upon the social phenomena (this is understandable), but to define the specificity of social psychology by the methods used is an error. We don't have to forget that the method is only a tool and we can always answer a question in very different ways.

THE "LINK" (1)

Spears, R., Oakes, P.J., Ellemers, N., Haslam, S.A. (Eds.) (1997).
The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life

- This second book is a perfect illustration for the integrative perspective between social stereotypes research and SRT. Needless to say that it was an extremely pleasant surprise;

- In many articles or chapters signed by those working within the Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory one can find many implicit links with the social representations research , but in the pages of this book both the references to and the integration of SRT are very explicit;

THE "LINK" (2)

- The objective of the final chapter of this book (signed by Stangor & Jost) is:

   "to develop the notion that stereotypes can be studied at (at least) three different levels of analysis (*individual level, group level* and the *system level*), that each of these levels provide a partial picture of the overall stereotyping process, and that scientific progress may be made by addressing all of the possible paths among levels. (…) Finally, we discuss some benefits of extending social psychological analysis to the systemic level and of adopting a multi-level approach to the study of stereotyping." (p. 338)

- One must admit that coming from the social stereotypes research this position is much more promising. And equally encouraging is the fact that these authors also acknowledge the possible limitations of their traditional perspective:

   "existing research, from both the social cognition and the social identity traditions, have restricted themselves to the level of the individual and, less frequently, to the level of the group." (p. 339)

THE "LINK" (3)

- Combining the three different levels of analysis and all the interactions among them the authors propose 9 distinct relational paths (Figure 15.1, p. 341);

- This figurative representations of the different levels are similar to the levels of explanation in social psychology proposed by Doise (1986). As the social identity theorists might be tempted to see the "social system" as a merely broader, more inclusive group identification, the authors also emphasize Doise's distinction between group level and systemic level:

" For one thing. A system may be a set of ideas or practices such as capitalism or slavery, and these ideas and practices may be rather different from the ideas or practices of a specific group. And, even more importantly, some beliefs do not refer specifically to a social group, but rather to a set of relationships among groups." (p. 339)

THE "LINK" (4)

- According to the two authors, in terms of stereotyping research the implications of this proposed multi-level approach would be:

    - to investigate how beliefs about social groups are related to and are influenced by beliefs about social systems;

    - to capture the extent to which perceptions of social systems are bound up in everyday life, and the implications of these beliefs for the functioning of individuals, groups and social systems;

    - the recognition that structural and ideological aspects of the social system may lead people to develop favorable or unfavorable attitudes about themselves, their social groups and various social systems;

THE "LINK" (5)

- To conclude, this link is possible and it is made more and more explicit even by some psychologists from the mainstream research field on social stereotypes;

- But, as A. Haslam says in another chapter of this book, it is a long and difficult road to take:

" Moscovici's theory (and the critique of cognitivism it presents) is clearly relevant to the study of social stereotypes. Having said that though, relatively little work has attempted to spell out the implications of this analysis for improving upon work in the mainstream cognitive tradition. This can be attributed to a number of factors including, on the one hand, the theory's inherent vagueness and, on the other, a keenness amongst researchers to distance themselves from practice (experimental research) that they see to be inherently reductionistic." (p. 127)