

“We are in the same boat”. The dialogue between identification and dis-identification underlying individual and group positioning

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Abstract

Kadianaki in this Special Issue offers an interesting conceptualization of the process whereby macro-societal drives organize the dynamic of inter-individual communication with a specific focus on power asymmetries among researcher and researched. The author bridges the notions of identity and power through the theory of social representations inviting scholars to consider the social and cultural context within which research encounters take place. Starting from the “conceptual methodology” posited by Kadianaki, I suggest to go one step further towards a dialogical conceptualization of *positionality* discussing the key notion of positioning and the articulation between hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations. In particular, the focus on the dynamic nature of consensus, underlying the production of social knowledge, entails to address a societal understanding of the complex dynamics of identification and dis-identification that feed the processes of self-construction and self-placing with both of them meant as a function of inter-group relations of power. Furthermore, some considerations are expanded with concern to the migration field of study. In particular, results from the study of Kadianaki stimulates reflections on the dynamics of resistance towards coercive self-categorization in search for a common identification that may reduce the power asymmetries among native and immigrant groups.

Keywords

Social representations, positioning, hegemonic/emancipated/polemic representations, identification/dis-identification, immigration

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Introduction

Kadianaki (2014) provides an intriguing and fertile conceptual apparatus for understanding the power asymmetries that characterizes the micro-genetic dynamic of communication between researchers and participants within the space of qualitative research. The author offers useful heuristic lens for comprehending the role of macro-social drivers in the production and construction/analysis of qualitative data. In particular, the “conceptual methodology” designed by Kadianaki integrates the key notions of identity and power by means of the theory of social representations with the ultimate goal to cultivate a real dynamic conceptualization of *positionality* of researchers and researched a part of any binary insider–outsider dichotomy. In fact, as the author elucidates, such a complex relationship has been articulated above all at the micro-level of inter-individual interactions with less consideration for the role of the macro-social forces that are responsible for the dynamics of interpersonal relations.

Conversely, the interrelation between the notions of power and identity not only permits to dismantle the essentialist conception of positions that researchers and participants hold within the research framework but it also contributes in shedding light on the fact that the *self-places* of both these social actors are actively negotiated through living communication, the ones towards the others.

Specifically, Kadianaki focuses on the process by means of which researchers and participants construe meaningful understanding of each other’s acknowledging that the contents of “contextual identities” drawn on existing social representations at the individual/social interface (Andreouli & Chrysochoou, forthcoming). On the one side, this is not completely new, as scholars have already recognized that the contents of identity “is constructed through social representations” (Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002; Jovchelovitch, 2007). However, on the other side, such an issue demands for further serious consideration at least as the commonsensical nature of social representations “occludes how the content of identity is forged and permeated by societal relationships. And, as argued by Marková (1996), it is only when we are called to consciously engage with this reality that this can be realized” (Moloney & Walker, 2007, p.3).

In this view, by affording a “conceptual methodology” to inspect the researcher–researched communicative exchanges and the process of data construction within the research encounters, Kadianaki provides a starting point for *consciously* engaging with the relationship of social representations to identity thus foregrounding an understanding of the way power asymmetries shape the process of data construction.

Following this route, I here propose to go one step further in expanding such a *conscious* engagement and to incorporate two more notions from the theory of social representations into the “conceptual methodology” conceived by Kadianaki. Attention is devoted to the key notion of positioning and the three types of social representations (i.e., hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic) (Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abram, 2002; Moscovici, 1988) in line with the perspective that

privileges the intersection between micro-genesis – precisely, the level of actual interaction in research encounters – and macro-genesis – exactly, the level of social drives and cultural forces – in examining identity construction and power dynamics.

In particular, spotlighting the variability of group and individual positioning entails to elucidate the dynamic nature of consensus underlying the production of social knowledge thus better clarifying “how the content of identity is forged and permeated by societal relationships” and societal power asymmetries with the corollary of renewing the concept of *positionality*. In addition, although in Kadianaki’s article the issues of multiculturalism and ethno-cultural diversity remain in the background as these serve the primary scope to illustrate the dynamic of identity positioning throughout the flowing of *powerful* communication among research and researched, intriguing ideas transpire with concern to this precise domain.

Specifically, fascinations from the ontogenesis of social representations (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990) induce to look immigration as it was a sort of new birth “into a world already structured by social representations” (Duveen, 1993). In fact, immigration can bring along the challenging task of restructuring identities through a social process integration which grows up within the relationship between self and collectivity and leads to feeling of group belonging and group identification. From this point of view, understanding identity in relation to immigration prescribes more than ascertaining to what extent immigrants categorize themselves in relation to their native country or to the foreign country of settlement (Deaux & Wiley, 2007). “Rather, it also depends on the meaning of each, as well as the meaning of the existing categories they encounter in the new country, often unfamiliar and in need of explication” (p. 10) including the societal relations of power which immigrant may resist and contest.

At the same time, immigration requires also members of the host society to confront the increasing cultural diversity of the social environment (Berry, 2008), so as it may activate a process of symbolic negotiation, re-organization or transformation of self (Andreouli, 2013) eventually preserving or unsettling the systems of inclusion and exclusion resting on societal power asymmetries that contour identification processes.

Ultimately, the focus on both the micro- and the macro-stages of positioning, together with the trifurcation of representational types, entails to expand the comprehension of the way the former may vary as a function of identification with certain groups (Deaux & Wiley, 2007) offering some causes for reflection with concern to both the researcher–researched and the native–immigrant relations.

Lighting the consensual nature of “contextual identities”: Individual and group positioning

Psaltis (2010) argues that there are at least two modes of approaching social representations. Precisely, on the one side, acting through social representations in an

unreflective way and, on the other side, cogitating on a social representation thus implementing a reflective usage of symbolic resources. In both the cases, unreflective action and reflective discerning rest on

- (1) the level of the underlying ground-rules of social representation formation, which make understanding possible . . . and possess a consensual dimension, and
- (2) the level of immediate social interaction which involves disagreement and argumentation (Rose et al., 1995).

The shift from unreflective to reflective stages precisely stake on an idea of consensus that does not rely on uncontested conformity towards the same opinion in everyday talk but rather on a degree of *sharedness* that “provides a common basis upon which people discuss, compete or argue” (p. 152).

The socially derived nature of a social representation presupposes some forms of consensus “otherwise the collectively concerted understandings that constitute a social representation would not exist” (Moloney, Hall, & Walker, 2005). A central feature of social representations is that these are communally forged and socially shared (Ben-Asher, 2003). However, the consensus on a shared frame of references representing a social object (Doise, Spini, & Clémence, 1999) goes hand in hand with the emergence of subjective outlooks towards realities that are socially represented (Sammot & Gaskell, 2009). The notion of positioning (Doise, 2003) precisely accounts for the differences existing amongst individuals and groups who participate in the social creation of a given object and sheds light on the dynamic nature of consensus that characterizes the production of social knowledge. In particular, the dynamic quality of consensus underlying social representations acquires sense in the light of the “cognitive processes triggered by social regulations function within representations” (Rateau, 2004, p. 44).

The actual organization of a social representation is interrelated with the intergroup dynamics reflecting the actual and symbolic social placing which characterizes a given social field (Doise, 1992), so that individuals cognitively adjust the elements that form a social representation in accordance with the positions they hold in their relational context (Viaux, 2000). Consensual and intersubjective realities concerning a relevant social issue provide people for means to discuss and negotiate understandable meanings without implying that they hold the same views. Despite of the essential common understanding, individuals are daily engaged in discussion that involve other viewpoints (Rose et al., 1995), so that social representations might be taken into account with particular reference to the way people employ consensual principles, shared norms, and conventional ideas whenever they are requested to position themselves towards others in given situations.

At the crossroads between the knowledge function and the identity function of social representations, social actors appropriate, incorporate, and integrate *newness* into a “coherent fashion” in relation to their socio-cognitive and symbolic system of pre-existing knowledge. By such a way, social representations provide people

with means to situate themselves into the social field thus feeding the process of identification with groups (Walmsley, 2004). The macro-social rootedness of individual positioning accounts for the anchoring of subjective outlooks within the symbolic social milieu in accordance with the societal plot of groups placing. A way to delve into such an individual-group positioning conjunction is offered by the three modes whereby social representations are shared with all of them being consistent with a dynamic notion of consensus, they are hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations (Moscovici, 1988).

Hegemonic representations draw the consensual reality about a given social object, are unquestionable and well-established within a given society characterized by a low degree of inter-group conflict. Emancipated representations parallel complementary positionings of diverse groups revealing a certain degree of autonomy in respect of hegemonic representations as the former give voice to different and interacting worldviews in “integrated segments of society” (Liu, 2004), thus unveiling complementary versions of the same reality.

Polemic representations express the competing positions of given social groups whenever they actively disagree about established representations of an object. Accordingly, polemic representations are bonded to given groups holding opposite visions and, instead of being consensually shared by the whole society, these characterize competing and even conflicting groups’ outlooks configuring a texture of asymmetric societal relationships.

Hegemonic representations can *invade* the reality of individuals as both the former are rooted in systems of power and diverse groups have diverse access to the construction of reality within the public sphere (Howarth, 2006). Consequently, polemic representations can result from inter-group conflicts at least to the extent to which these are instantiated into more or less socially legitimized power asymmetries. Whereas hegemonic representations support a particular worldview and version of social order, protecting “particular interests over others... [polemic] representations contest these versions” (p. 90).

The micro-genetic process of actual interaction and communication is precisely constrained or enabled by situational and macro-societal drives (Psaltis, 2010) that may linger unquestionable (i.e., hegemonic) or be polemically challenged at inter-individual levels. In this view, subjective positioning reflects a way to organize experience whereby a process of self-definition and self-location into the collective world (Duveen, 1993). Correspondingly, societal partitions and categorizations are not merely attached to self but rather are constantly negotiated, challenged, and contested by people in the effort to appropriate symbolic resources in a constant dialogue between diverse *I*-positioning and *G*-positioning (i.e., group). Such an idea serves as a theoretical basis for the concept of “contextual identities” introduced by Kadianaki. Basically, instead of conceptualizing different identities being “switched on” at different circumstances, the focus is on different identity dimensions that intertwine, merge, reinforce, and conflict between each other’s (Howarth, 2002). In fact, identity is not only a process of self-construction but it is also a process of being constructed by others so as

positioning necessarily presupposes identification with certain groups as well as dis-identification with other groups. “Questions of identity...are complex since identity refers both to the process of identifying oneself as well as of being recognized by others, that is it refers to both a process of identification and of being identified” (Psaltis & Duveen, 2006, p. 424).

The threefold level of consensus outlining hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations fits into the “conceptual methodology” elaborated by Kadianaki at least to the extent to which it provides for a societal structure of inter-group power asymmetries understood in terms of *degrees of sharedness* towards a common reality. In particular, in the light of the dynamic conceptualization of consensus by virtue of which even in the occurrence of divergence, social actors “know what they are talking about” (Rose et al., 1995), the individual positioning of participants reflects the societal asset of group positioning in the enlarged social context through the dialectics between hegemonic and polemic social representations towards the same reality. In fact, such a positioning rests on an apparently unsolved contraposition between subjective standpoints that in turn reflect the dynamics of identification and dis-identification, meant in the two-fold sense of identifying oneself with others and being identified by others (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010).

Therefore, if social actors define themselves as members of a social category, other than in terms of personal identities, “as a function of... goals, expectations, background theories, knowledge and ideologies” (Turner, 2005, p. 15) a key issue revolves around the commonsensical nature of such an identification, with consensus understood in the sense clarified above. In fact, identification relates to the dynamics between imposition and resistance with the latter being “the point where an identity refuses to accept what is proposed by a communicative act, that is, it refuses to accept an attempt at influence” (Duveen, 2001, p. 269). Therefore, the focus is precisely on the participants’ perception that any source is trying to categorize/persuade them on the basis of “a common identity, values and interests... or not?”

“We are on the same boat”: Positionality and positioning in the field of migration research

The complexity of the interplay between *identifications* is of enormous value to grasp the complexity of immigration-related phenomena where immigrants face with an imperative *obligation* to re-construct their identities as settling into a new country requires immigrants to contract “into a particular representational field” (Duveen, 1993). Broader, because of massive migration phenomena, nowadays people – they are both native and immigrants – are persistently compelled to re-examine their identities at least to the extent to which they have to face with the others’ representations of their own identities. Such a demanding task includes mutual recognition in the ground of ethno-cultural difference and reflects a dynamic of reciprocal positioning according to which self-categorization can be understood as a process of meaning-construction.

With specific focus on immigration-related phenomena, social representations of ethno-cultural groups transmit not only knowledge about given social objects but they also assign power to some groups instead to some others and, therefore, the degree of sharedness of a representation reflect the power distribution among social groups in the enlarged social context (Deaux & Wiley, 2007). Furthermore, power is related to groups' identity (Turner, 2005) and diverse forms of influence process can originate from such a *kinship*. In fact, whereas "the persuasive power of the group and of individuals within it are a function of *group identity* and *consensus* [my italics]" (p. 10), coercive power endeavors to exercise a control over *others* against their will. Such a dynamic is taken to the extreme whenever power serves as basis for prejudice, as explained by Turner (2005) who affirms that

... coercion can therefore only be exercised by a dominant group without undermining its own power by negatively categorizing and stereotyping the target as different from the group as a whole, to break down and prevent any identification with the former by the latter. (p. 17)

Such control can be exerted precisely by imposing to a target person a meaningful self-categorization constricting his or her agency of developing autonomous sense of self and so forcing an individual positioning that reflect societal power asymmetries. As already noticed, "contextual identities" articulate, at an individual and micro-level, "the way society is regulated" (Andreouli & Chrysoschoou, forthcoming, p. 5).

The results from Kadianaki's study offer an insight into the way society is regulated focusing on individual reactions towards unwilling (i.e., coercive) categorization indicating that stereotypical representations of self-categories are imposed to immigrants who are not free to being from themselves a part of their *hegemonic* being for others.

One of the most interesting outcome emerging from the analysis of Kadianaki is exactly that participants belonging to ethno-cultural minorities reject coercive categorization and challenge stereotypical and hegemonic representations, whereby inter-group relations are regulated at social level, overpassing the identification barriers in search for a counterbalance of societal power asymmetries. Along this route, I suggest that the excerpts from Kadianaki indicate that the power of the dominant group (i.e., Greek) is somehow undermined whereby an attempt of identifying themselves and the target group on a common basis that exceeds ethno-cultural differences. Exactly, other than counter stigmatizing Greek women as well as Greek population in general through a reversal of positions, it is here advised that interviewees try to undermine the authority of the coercive stigma, reducing the difference among the ethno-cultural groups on the basis of a communal self- and other- categorization. Indeed, by comparing and confronting themselves with other Greek women, the interviewees are acting through the negative hegemonic representations of their ethno-cultural belongingness in the effort to reach a higher

and more inclusive level of shared identification where the negative *otherising* can be to some extent overpassed. In fact, notoriously “stigmatisation poses a barrier to engaging with alternative representations by *otherising* the groups that construct these representations” (Andreouli, 2010). In the same vein, I advance that participants in Kadianaki’s study resist the stigmatic representations in the sense that they refuse to adhere to the coercive categorization developed by *others* trying to disrupting at micro-level of research encounters the dis-identification dynamics that sustain societal divisions at macro levels.

Ultimately, it emerges that the social distance and the dis-identification among the source (i.e., the dominant/native group) and the target (i.e., the immigrant/dominated group) are somehow shortened to the extent to which the “socially sanctioned value judgments” (Howarth, 2002) cover both of them. In other words, the demolition of stigma is pursued not only contesting the dynamics of identification but also reversing the dynamics of dis-identification among groups that in turn sustain power asymmetries.

This idea sounds consistent with the postulate according to which to change one’s belief is to change one’s identity (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). More precisely, such an assumption can be interpreted in the sense that the change of one’s beliefs, as well as the overcoming of the contraposition between hegemonic and groups’ polemic representations, calls for stimulating reciprocal identification of a given source with a given target (Turner, 2005).

Conclusion

Power is “a basic force in social relationships” (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003, p. 265), so as in the research encounters, and the focus on it precisely lights up the subjectivity of knowledge production (Madge et al., 1997; Rose, 1997) and the significance of reflection at all points of data collection and data analysis. In fact, there is little doubt that researchers and participants are equally implicated in the production of data (Geertz, 1993) and diverse arrays of social categories – such as for example ethnicity, race, and gender – intertwine within the inter-individual space of research interactions. In this vein, the integration of identity and power into the theory of social representations brightens the macro-social rootedness of the micro dynamics of power asymmetries.

Precisely, the question at the very core of the theory of social representations revolves around “the relation between society in general, or social relations in particular, and psychological function” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 3). The genesis of social representations inherits the comprehension of the way social regulations enters in the organization of psychological functioning. In fact, social representations lay at the interface between the individual and the social and, in this sense, they conglobate both enduring and extremely dynamic contents with the latter reflecting cultural codes and “world views” bearing specific social structures, and the former opening up to renovation and change (Paris Spink, 1993).

At the same time, social representations are at the interface of content and process and these are inter-linked so as there is concern not only with social representations as socially structured phenomena but also with the processes by means of which these contents are shaped (Joffe, 1998) and function as macro-cultural organizers of individual psychic realities and inter-personal dynamics. Precisely, the focus on the notion of positioning and the three types of representations somehow sides with the invitation from Kadianaki to situate the researcher encounters, and more in general the interactional dynamics, into precise socio-historical contexts. In particular, a contemplation of the field of inter-group societal relationships conglobes the way representations, understood “as world views”, are shared and communicated. The basic idea is that hegemonic, emancipated, and polemic social representations to some extent provides the underlying dialogical structure, understood as “dynamic and socially co-constructed” (Markova, 2000), of the multiple *voices* present in a given social milieu, thus contributing to the understanding of the micro-encounters in terms of power asymmetries enacted into subjective positioning. Additionally, the different types of social representations orchestrate a dynamic asset of macro-social and cultural conditions understood in terms of the degree of *sharedness* around a consensual, even contested, reality.

Furthermore, the concept of positioning fits at best the notion of “contextual identity” as it both encompasses a stabilizing strength, since it is a function of groups’ identification, and is featured by dynamicity resting on the actual enactment of the societal systems of belongings within definite networks of relations or particular social encounters.

Along this route, the static view of *positionality* can be turned into the more dynamic and interrelational notion of positioning according to which “contextual identity” is an active process of self-positioning and resistance towards other’s hegemonic social representations resting on asymmetric relationships of power. Exactly, the micro- and macro-analysis described by Kadianaki reinforces the idea according to which identity conglobes social and cultural drives that contribute in shaping its contents not *per se* but rather in meaningful forms that participants and researchers negotiate to position themselves the ones towards the others. In this view, Kadianaki moves in the direction of micro- and macro-genetic process analytic perspectives (Valsiner, 2013) as she detects beliefs-identity patterns in research encounters thus charting out of the process mechanisms that hierarchically regulate the flow of [identity] meaning construction. Precisely, “contextual identities” can be conceived as intersubjective forms of social knowledge that are deep-seated and construed, negotiated and re-negotiated through communicative processes and dynamics of social influence (Chrysochoou, 2003).

Finally, the focus on the dynamic notion of positioning at the crossroads between micro- (i.e., individual) and macro- (i.e., group) process of identification and dis-identification with the latter understood as basis of influence and power entails to introduce a *dialogical* conceptualization of the notion of *positionality*. In particular, it posits that “the self has been characterized as a continuous dialogue and interplay between different I-positions, each are having a specific voice”,

(Salgado & Hermans, 2005, p. 3). Establishing a dialogical conceptualization of *positionality* assumes the social and cultural situativity of data/knowledge production and the self-other interdependence and mutual recognition. Therefore, after postulating “that cognition can be nothing else than dialogical cognition” (Markova, 2000) and that the self is involved in a constant dialogue between different *I-Other* positionings since thinking is always concerned with other *social beings*, there would be no more sense to challenge the dynamic nature of self-categorization. On the contrary, this would permit to escape *once for all* any rigid and elementaristic view of positions that researchers and researched hold within the research encounters merely based on a fixed idea of status categories.

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