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Social Representations and Discursive Psychology: From Cognition to Action

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COMMENTARY

Abstract This article compares and contrasts the way a set of fundamental issues are treated in social representations theory and discursive psychology. These are: action, representation, communication, cognition, construction, epistemology and method. In each case we indicate arguments for the discursive psychological treatment. These arguments are then developed and illustrated through a discussion of Wagner, Duveen, Themel and Verma (1999) which highlights in particular the way the analysis fails to address the *activities* done by people when they are producing representations, and the *epistemological troubles* that arise from failing to address the role of the researcher's own representations.

Key Words action, construction, discourse, discursive psychology, social representations

Over the past 15 years discourse and rhetorical analysts and discursive psychologists have developed a connected set of critiques of social representations theory (Billig, 1988, 1993; Litton & Potter, 1985;

McKinlay & Potter, 1987; McKinlay, Potter, & Wetherell, 1993; Potter, 1996a, 1996b; Potter & Billig, 1992; Potter & Litton, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1998). This critical work has appreciated the aims, scope and sophistication of social representations theory while disagreeing with a number of its theoretical and analytic assumptions. While we are impressed by Wolfgang Wagner, Gerard Duveen, Matthias Themel and Jyoti Verma's (1999) study, and interested by its findings, we believe it continues to display the fundamental flaws in the current version of social representations theory.

In this commentary we will first overview general problems with social representations theory (SRT) as identified by discursive psychology (DP) and then highlight the way these problems are displayed in Wagner et al.'s paper. We will highlight a range of fundamental differences in an attempt to counter the increasingly common view that DP is merely 'enlarging and detailing' or 'complementing and deepening/ central aspects of SRT (Flick, 1998, p. 6; Moscovici, 1998, p. 246). We believe contrasting rather than merging the perspectives will lead to more clarity in theory and analysis.

Some Problems with Social Representations Theory

Perhaps the dearest way to overview problems with social representations theory is to list a set of basic concepts where there are disagreements with discursive psychology, and indicate the arguments for the discursive psychological approach.

1. Action. One of the primary differences between SRT and DP lies in the way they characterize action, and in the relative importance they place on it. In DP, action is conceptualized in terms of the enormous range of practical, technical and interpersonal tasks that people

perform while living their relationships, doing their jobs, and engaging in varied cultural domains. Action (practices, getting stuff done-the precise term is not meant to carry weight here) is central to people's lives, and therefore central to understanding those lives. We are not the first to observe that SRT does not provide any elaborate account of action (cf. Wagner, 1998). This failure to theorize action is at the heart of a range of problems; in particular, it leads to methodological blind-spots, it encourages the drift towards cognitive reductionism, and it places crucial limitations on the way the central concept of representation is theorized.

2. *Representation.* Representation is an important notion in both SRT and DP. However, it has almost the opposite role in each perspective. In SRT, representations are primarily cognitive phenomena (although they are sometimes considered as cultural objects) which enable people to make sense of the world. The collective nature of this sense-making is taken to enable intra-group communication and to provide a technical definition of the boundaries of social groups. In DP, representations are discursive objects which people construct in talk and texts. Analysis has concentrated not on the sense-making role of representations (although this is not excluded in principle), but on the way the representations are constructed as solid and factual, and on their use in, and orientation to, actions (assigning blame, eliciting invitations, etc.). Representations are treated as produced, performed and constructed in precisely the way that they are for their role in activities. For this reason, discursive psychologists treat understanding activity as the key to understanding representations (Potter, 1996a).

3. *Communication.* In SRT, one of the primary roles of social representations is to facilitate intra-group communication. In DP, the communication metaphor is rejected as inadequate for dealing with the

complexities of action and interaction¹ We doubt that SRT researchers would have much success if they attempted to make sense of a transcript of conversational interaction, say, if they try to discern 'messages' and places where they are 'transferred' from speaker to speaker² Indeed, SRT researchers have simply avoided that problem by ignoring interaction and disparaging conversation as 'babble' (Moscovici, 1985). Conversation thus has the anomalous position of being at the heart of SRT as the engine for the generation and refinement of representations, and yet being a topic which has received no analytic attention, and where the relevant literature in conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Sacks, 1992) has been ignored.

4. *Cognition.* One of the features of SRT which has attracted mainstream social cognition workers has been its retention of central elements of perceptual-cognitivism. Perceptual-cognitivism treats people as perceivers of incoming perceptual information which they process in various ways (Edwards & Potter, 1992). In SRT, representations are, mostly, treated as cognitive structures or grids which make sense of information, particularly about unfamiliar social objects. DP rejects perceptual-cognitivism in favour of a systematic reformulation of cognition as a feature of participants' practices, where it is constructed, described and oriented to as people perform activities. Cognition is thereby moved from being an explanatory resource to a

¹ It is not merely the term 'communication' itself. Moscovici draws on the entire tropology of communication terminology when characterizing SRT. Consider the following, where Moscovici (1994) is offering reasons for looking beyond 'linguistic forms': "The richness and originality of meanings, this is indeed what we try to communicate to one another. But in this communication linguistic forms are not enough to explain how the communicated message is received and then understood. Why? Because we perform many more practical operations on it before transmitting it or in order to receive it.... Too often the communication of a message does not coincide with linguistic communication properly speaking" (pp. 164-165).

² The difficulty in providing a clear specification of even such an apparently straightforward notion as 'conversational topic' illustrates this (Jefferson, 1993).

topic of study. This facilitates the study of practices and avoids a range of confusions that arise from the cognitive analysis of talk and texts (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1998a).

5. *Construction.* it is commonplace now to characterize both SRT and DP as constructionist. Social representations are not treated simply as devices for people to perceive (or misperceive) their social worlds—they construct the nature and value of those worlds. Where SRT and DP sharply differ, however, is in the nature and scope of this construction. While in SRT it is primarily a perceptual-cognitive process (involving the mechanisms of anchoring and objectification), in DP construction is done in talk and texts as specific versions of the world are developed and rhetorically undermined. In DP, then, construction is more analytically tractable, because the way representations are constructed, established and undermined can be studied using a set of materials.³

6. *Epistemology.* SRT has been developed as a theory of knowledge, including an account of differences between the consensual and reified universes (roughly common sense vs scientific knowledge). DP has not developed a theory of knowledge as such; rather it has developed a relativistic and reflexive approach to knowledge, where what counts as

3

Recent SRT commentators have suggested that the strong constructionism, and relativism of discursive psychology is self-refuting and allows no possibility for political commitment (Moscovici & Markova, 1998; Wagner, 1998). There is not space to tackle these points in full here. Suffice it to say that we view both of these claims as mistaken. Weak constructionism, with its islands of epistemic privilege, is less coherent in our view; and political commitment follows no more obviously from realism or weak

knowledge in different social and cultural settings is part of what is at stake in discourse practices. Particularly striking here is the wide range of recent, and not so recent, work in the sociology of scientific knowledge which makes problematic the distinction between the reified and consensual universe (e.g. Ashmore, 1989; Knorr Cetina, 1999; Latour, 1987). At another level, whereas discursive psychologists have attended to the reflexive relationship between their own categories, claims and textual forms, and those of their participants (Ashmore, Myers, & Potter, 1995; Edwards, 1997; Mulkay, 1985), social representations theorists have not concerned themselves with the status of their own representational practices. Problems arising from this inattention have been highlighted in a number of DP discussions of SRT (e.g. McKinlay et al., 1993; Potter, 1996a).

7. *Method.* SRT research has utilized a range of different social science methods, including surveys, interviews, experiments and ethnography. However, the major point of conflict with DP is not over the selection of a *particular* method, but in SRT's failure to conceptualize the activities that are being done, and oriented to, when participants develop representations in their talk or texts in *any* of these methods. The action orientation of accounts, descriptions and versions is systematically overlooked in the attempt to use social science methods to reach hypothetical underlying, yet shared, cognitive representations. This may be the reason why SRT researchers have shied away from critical work on method in sociology and anthropology which problematizes language use and representation (e.g. Atkinson, 1990; Cicourel, 1974). Most importantly, SRT is overwhelmingly perceptual-cognitive in its theorizing, while its analytic materials are overwhelmingly discursive.

These points are linked together around SRT's perceptual-cognitivism with its sense-making account of representations, which provide a code for communication, and construct mental version of the world, and can be researched using a range of social science methods. The DP alternative takes a systematically contrastive position for the reasons indicated above. These reasons can be fleshed out through considering Wagner et al.'s (1999) article on different notions of madness in Indian discourse.

Madness and Indian Social Representations

Wagner et al. concern themselves with representations of madness, in the standard SRT manner, as mentally encoded templates for sense-making. They do not ask the kinds of questions that discursive psychologists might ask, such as how particular descriptions of 'madness' are used to do particular things. They are not concerned with the way a construction of madness might be used as part of a relationship conflict, when accounting for absence from work, or in criticizing the behaviour of a neighbour. Not only do they not address these questions, their methodology makes it very hard to address them; for it provides participants with only a pre-formed vignette in⁴ which madness is a textual *fait accompli*. Moreover, participants are recruited to act as quasi-psychologists, theorizing about how they *might* act or *might* think in a generic situation in which they have no stake or interest. Thus, despite the use of qualitative, conversational interviews, the materials are dealt with using the epistemological frame of traditional social cognition⁵

⁴ Contrast this to Smith (1978) and Palmer (1998), in which the category 'madness' and how it is made objective is analytically topicalized.

⁵ Discursive psychologists are not critical of research methods because they involve experimentation, manipulation or some other technique. The critique is specifically directed against the (largely inexplicit) theory of discourse that is used in many research

What the authors do not study is the way descriptions, avowals, accounts and explanations of and using 'madness' might figure in their participants' everyday discursive practices. What kind of cultural ecology are we dealing with? We don't know, and can't know from this study, how these people speak about madness in their families, with doctors and healers, when gossiping with their friends, and so on. The method separates participants from such an ecology, and what may be locally organized, action-oriented descriptions are forced into participants' heads as cognitive objects.

Even using interviews, Wagner et al. could have considered the way description production is related to particular activities. Instead, the participants are treated in the traditional manner as disinterested people doing their best to answer questions. There is no sense of interview talk as an arena where a range of issues to do with stake, identity, justification, morality, and so on, can and do become relevant (see Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). This is shown most simply in the way the talk is overwhelmingly treated as owned by, and inferable back to the interviewee, rather than a *co-construction* of both parties. In the majority of cases the interviewer's question is not quoted; instead we are given segments of participants' talk isolated from what might have occasioned them, with little choice but to interpret them as free-standing participants' views.

This stripping off of the action orientation of talk is reinforced by presenting it in cleaned-up 'playscript' form which systematically removes action indicative features of delivery such as stress, intonation, delay, pace and volume.

and analytic methods. (For further discussion of this point, see Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1997.)

Another way in which Wagner et al. disattend to the action orientation of their materials is a consequence of their failure to theorize their specifically 'interview' nature; that is, the way that the participants 'do' interview talk, and what they are accomplishing when they speak in such a **way**⁶. The mixture of social representations 'expressed' in the interview may reflect the participants' sensitivity to the interviewer's concerns, as they talk to people from a very topic-relevant university based domain of psychological science. Moreover, when the researchers emphasize that they are 'not interested in factual or school knowledge, but in whatever the interviewee believed' (p. 423), they are providing the participants with a criterion for how to speak which embodies the very dichotomy that they then discover in their materials.

Interactional dynamics of this kind, which are grist to the mill of DP, make it difficult to accept participants' talk as an expression of largely ready-made, all-purpose views of life.

From the point of view of DP, then, the treatment of representations in terms of cognitive sense-making, rather than activities, is accomplished by analytic fiat. Cognitive sense-making is not *discovered in* the materials, it is *defined* into them. Conversely, the absence of action is not *discovered* in the materials, it is *gerrymandered out* of them, by the methods of data collection and analysis.

The SRT distinction, between the *expression of* the representation in talk and its *existence* in some mental space, provides considerable analytic elasticity and makes it difficult to assess the adequacy of particular claims. It discourages the researcher from attending to the precise details of the talk which might be of interest in a DP analysis with its action focus. For example, the term 'adjust` is discussed (p. 428), and it is noted that the use of English rather than Hindi by participants might signal a critical view towards 'adjustment' among westernized middle-class respondents. Yet the one extract that is quoted does not provide evidence of this 'critical view' (the

⁶ See, for example, Heritage & Greatbatch (1991) on some of the 'institutional' features

speaker claims that they would 'adjust' if appropriate without constructing it as an accountable matter), but it does indicate the way that the notion of 'adjustment' might be used to assign blame. The woman described in the narrative is treated as having the problem of 'adjustment'; the battering husband is not treated as at fault.

The Wagner et al. study illustrates some of the reflexive and epistemological troubles that are characteristic of SRT research. At its simplest, the issue is this: what is the representation-free framework through which participants' representations can be understood?

Or, more pithily, whose representations are privileged, the researchers' or the participants'?'⁷

The trouble becomes most acute with respect to the distinction between 'traditional healing' and 'modern psychiatry'. Is this distinction found in the material by the analyst identifying utterances as traditional or modern, using his or her own judgement on these matters? Or is it a dichotomy that is demonstrably relevant for the participants themselves? In other words, as well as moving between what the analyst judges to be different kinds of social representations, do the participants display a concern for that difference, an *orientation* to it? Do they, for instance, treat the invocation of traditional ideas, when talking to a psychologist-interviewer, as accountable (requiring justification etc.)? In fact, the data and analysis includes both kinds of observations (analysts' categorizations and participants' orientations), but both are treated in the same way. Indeed, participants' orientations to the analytic framework may even be suppressed. Note the way on page 427, where the respondent says, 'Now we have modern times. Initially in our society the interviewer interrupts with 'You are slightly deviating...'

of the interview talk

⁷ For a highly pertinent debate on this topic (which ought to be of interest to all cultural psychologists), see Schegloff (1997, 1998) and Wetherell (1998).

This discursive distinction between 'traditional healing' and 'modern psychiatry' is treated as a surface manifestation of two cognitive representations underlying the discourse. The analysis does not attend to any business that might be being done by this *specific* formulation in the discourse. For example, we can imagine it being used by a psychiatrist in Patna to encourage a client to act in particular ways-to take medication, to resist certain sorts of advice, and so on. After all, the epithet 'modern' can be a powerful rhetorical device (for analysis of 'modern' in persuasive political discourse, see Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Moreover, the assumption made in Wagner et al.'s analysis is that ('modern') 'western' psychiatry is unified and scientific. This is not *discovered* in the interviewee's representations, but assumed as an analytic presupposition.

These points, while being generically at issue for SRT, are, of course, especially pertinent for the current study as it claims to address differences in cultural representations. The risk is that Wagner et al. start with (a version of) western psychiatry and then understand Indian cultural practices in western psychiatry's basic terms.

The authors gloss their study as discovering 'the way in which a particular reality is simultaneously represented in two fundamentally different ways' (p. 439). However, this plays down how these different kinds of representations may 'constitute their objects' very differently. What is this 'particular reality' that exists outside of representational practices? Do traditional and modern (etc.) representations cover, and restrict themselves to, the same phenomena? Surely not. They collect different things together, and place them under different descriptions and categorizations and contrasts. The assumption, that what the traditional representations are representations of is basically the collection of things studied by 'modern psychiatry', is at least a partial alignment with one of the representations under investigation. It begs the deepest cultural psychological questions. For DP these questions will require serious analytic attention to the situated practices which such questions relate to.

Social Representations or Discursive Psychology

Moscovici (1998) has recently responded to DP criticisms of SRT by suggesting that to ask 'whether language or representation is the better model can have no more psychological meaning than asking the question: "Does a man walk with the help of his left leg or his right leg?"' (p. 246). We agree that it is misleading to make an opposition between language and representation. However, we have argued that an adequate study of representation (either in talk or cognition) *requires* attention to situated discourse practices. SRT research continues to fail to do this, and continues to be flawed as a consequence.

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