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Resisting Representations and Identity Processes

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In his chapter for the Deaux and Philogene book on social representations in 2001 (Duveen, 2001) Gerard Duveen set out his theoretical orientation with respect to identity in his first paragraph: “social identity appears as a function of representations themselves”. Among other propositions, he suggests that “identity is as much concerned with the process of being identified as with making identifications”, that “identities can be construed as points or positions within the symbolic field of culture, in other words, identities are constructed externally and not simply elaborated internally”, that “representations always imply a process of identity formation in which identities are internalized and which results in the emergence of social actors or agents”, and that “identities provide ways of organizing meanings so as to sustain a sense of stability”. In some respects this is a classical social psychological position, echoing William James and George Herbert Mead, though it is more sophisticated in its analysis of the ways “the other” structures the conceptualisation and the practical realisation of the “self”.

In using the construct of identity, Duveen needed to lay out his propositions because identity is one of those theoretical concepts that shifts not just its definition but its underlying meaning across theories. He particularly needed to be clear that his model of identity was different from that commonly used in social psychology, which, following Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; 1981) and subsequently Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) (Turner, 1985) tended to simplify the construct – treating it as a product of category memberships and the evaluations attached to them. Though, as Duveen would have readily admitted, Tajfel – the originator of SIT - would himself have been the last person to

deliberately simplify the concept of identity. Duveen and I shared the concern to describe the social processes that shape identity, particularly social representations processes.

In my own work, I have struggled to find a way of articulating the dimensions of identity. I have tried to describe the complex dynamic process of personhood that incorporates the personal and the social – the active, subjective, conscious self and the objectified, known self. Duveen was similarly engaged. Interestingly, we studied together for our MSc degrees under the supervision of Gustav Jahoda and Rudolf Schaffer – both great social and developmental psychologists. My own perspective was certainly influenced by the broad European social developmental tradition in psychology that Jahoda and Schaffer represented.

However, I went to work with Henri Tajfel in Bristol for my PhD and for his Gerard went to Sussex to work with Barbara Lloyd. I was immersed in the development of SIT and started to question the “black box” notion of social identity that SIT incorporated. In the early Tajfelian version of SIT social identity is a “black box” in the sense that it is merely assumed that individuals seek to achieve a positive social identity and, since social identity is defined in the theory as being derived from group memberships, this leads to attempts to differentiate between groups in such a way as to enhance the value derived from those groups to which we belong. This is not a theory of identity – despite the name given to the theory – it was always a theory of intergroup discrimination and conflict. The need for a positive identity was simply asserted to be a basic motive and was then used to explain discriminatory behaviour.

I wanted to work out what really constituted the “black box” – the social, cognitive, conative and oretic processes that comprised identity. I observed that Gerard, working with children and studying the processes leading to the development of gender identities also wanted to unpack the “black box” – though he always articulated that intention with greater sophistication and style! Both of us were essentially interested in the substance of identity. If there is a difference, it is perhaps that I was, and still am, even more interested in modelling the psychological and social processes that bring into being that substance.

My analysis of the enormous body of literature from psychology but also from other disciplines led me to conclude that a key to understanding the processes that drive identity development and expression lies in understanding how individuals respond when their identity is threatened (Breakwell, 1978, 1979, 1983). Interestingly, Duveen also used the analysis of what happens when identities are threatened (in his work on the way dominant representations of gender may work to threaten girls’ identities). As a result of my own

examinations of reactions to threat, with my collaborators over many years, I developed Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986, 1988, 1992a and 1992b, 2001b; Breakwell & Lyons, 1996; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Vignoles, Chryssochoou & Breakwell, 2000; 2002a and 2002b)

IPT proposes that the individual's identity is a dynamic social product of the interaction of the capacities for memory, consciousness and organised construal with the physical and societal structures and influence processes which constitute the social context. IPT proposes that identity resides in psychological processes but is manifested through thought, action and affect. Identity can be described in terms of both its structure and in terms of its processes. People are normally self-aware and actively monitor the status of their identity. The levels of self-monitoring may differ across the lifespan and it is considered possible that they may vary across different cultures.

The structure of identity can be described along two planes: the content dimension and the value dimension. The content dimension consists of the characteristics which define identity: the properties which, taken as a constellation, mark the individual as unique. It encompasses both those characteristics previously considered the domain of social identity (group memberships, roles, social category labels, etc.) and of personal identity (values, attitudes, cognitive style, etc.). The distinction between social and personal identity is not used in IPT because seen across the biography, social identity is seen to become personal identity: the dichotomy is purely a temporal artefact.

The content dimension of identity is organised. The organisation can be characterised in terms of (i) the degree of centrality, (ii) the hierarchical arrangements of elements and (iii) the relative salience of components. The organisation is not, however, static and is responsive to changes in inputs and demands from the social context besides purposive reconstruction initiated by the individual.

Each element in the content dimension has a positive or negative value/affect appended to it; taken together these values constitute the value/affective dimension of identity. The value/affective dimension of identity is constantly subject to revision: the value of each element is open to reappraisal as a consequence of changes in social value systems and modifications in the individual's position in relation to such social value systems.

In IPT, the structure of identity is postulated to be regulated by the dynamic processes of accommodation/assimilation and evaluation which are deemed to be universal psychological processes. Assimilation and accommodation are two components of one

process. Assimilation refers to the absorption of new components into the identity structure; accommodation refers to the adjustment which occurs in the existing structure in order to find a place for new elements⁽¹⁾. In IPT accommodation-assimilation can be conceptualized as a memory system and subject to biases in retention and recall. These biases are said to be predictable since identity change is guided by certain “identity principles”. The process of evaluation entails the allocation of meaning and value/affect to identity contents, new and old. The two processes interact to determine the changing content and value of identity over time; with changing patterns of assimilation requiring changes in evaluation and vice versa.

These two identity processes are guided in their operation by principles which define desirable states for the structure of identity. The actual end states considered desirable, and consequently the guidance principles, are possibly temporally and culturally specific. Currently in Western post-industrial cultures the four prime guidance principles discernible are desire for continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. These four principles vary in their relative and absolute salience over time and across situations. There is evidence that their salience also varies developmentally across the lifespan.

IPT recognizes that identity is created within a particular social context that is within a specific historical period. The social context can be schematically represented along two dimensions concerning, in turn, structure and process. At its simplest, structurally, the social context is comprised of interpersonal networks, group and social-category memberships, and intergroup relationships. The content of identity is assimilated from these structures which generate roles to be adopted and beliefs or values to be accepted. The second dimension consists of social influence processes which conspire to create the multifaceted ideological milieu for identity. Social influence processes (education, rhetoric, propaganda, polemic, persuasion, etc.) establish systems of value and beliefs, reified in social representations, social norms, and social attributions, which specify an arena in which both the content and value of individual identities are constructed.

In reading again the Duveen and Lloyd (1986, 1990, 1992) work on gender identities and education and Howarth’s (2010) representation of it, I realize that many of the arguments made in IPT about the role of social context were integral to their analysis. They examined how norms and expectations about gender are transmitted through a diverse array of communicative practices. The richness of input offered to children about what identity constituents are appropriate for their gender is quite astonishing. Their work emphasizes how complex the processes of assimilation and accommodation must be. It also illustrates how

comprehensive the social templates for the process of evaluation actually are.

IPT does not suggest that identity is totally determined by its social context – and neither did Duveen. There are contradictions and conflicts within the ideological milieu, generated by intergroup power struggles, which permit the individual some freedom of choice in formulating the identity structure. Changes in identity are therefore normally purposive. The person has agency in creating identity. Furthermore, the limitations of the cognitive information processing system (primarily those associated with memory) themselves impose some constraints upon identity development. At the most basic level, for instance, the inability to retrieve self-relevant material from memory may restrict identity modification even if such change would apparently be inevitable given the individual's social position and experiences.

Changes in the structure or processes of the social context will call forth changes in identity varying in extent according to: (i) their personal relevance; (ii) the immediacy of involvement in them; (iii) the amount of change demanded; and, (iv) how negative the change is deemed to be. Movement of the individual from one position in the social matrix to another will bring pressure to bear for a change in identity since this is likely to introduce a changed pattern of social influences and restrictions. A threat to identity occurs when the processes of assimilation-accommodation are unable, for some reason, to comply with the principles of continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Threats are aversive and the individual will seek to reinstitute the principled operation of the identity processes. For a threat to evoke action, it must gain access to consciousness. It is therefore possible to distinguish between occupying a threatening position and experiencing threat. Some coping strategies will deny the existence of the threatening position and may mean that threat is not subjectively experienced. If in essence, coping strategies are effective, occupancy of a threatening position may lose its power to threaten.

Any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity can be regarded as a coping strategy. Coping strategies can be pitched at a number of different levels: the intra-psychic, interpersonal and group/intergroup. The nature of these coping strategies are outlined in detail in Breakwell (1986). Essentially, the choice of coping strategy is determined by an interaction between the type of threat involved, the salient parameters of the social context, the prior identity structure and the cognitive and emotional capacities available to the individual.

For IPT to be a useful model of the creation and dynamic evolution of identity, it needed to be linked to a theory which explained the way social knowledge and values are generated and transformed. Moscovici's theory of social representations (SRT) offered this vital link. The IPT approach to identity emphasises the vital role of social representational processes in shaping identity but also suggests that identity processes may be significant in determining the evolution of social representations (Breakwell and Canter, 1993). In developing this argument it is important to remember that we are not merely referring to social identity (that part of identity derived from group memberships) but to the total constellation of characteristics which comprise the whole identity (including those which might be considered psychological attributes, for example personality traits or cognitive capacities, that is, aspects of the person which are long-lived and, though differentially manifest across situations, relate to behaviour in a systematic manner).

All aspects of identity (not just those derived from group memberships) are very important determinants of the individual's participation in the production, transformation and use of social representations. Both personality traits and group memberships affect exposure to social representations and their acceptance and use. Traits as psychological or cognitive states shape the individual's exposure to, acceptance of, and use of a social representation. Moscovici argues that social representations are a product of inter-individual communication/interaction and many traits would recognizably influence the course of such interaction (e.g. shyness or curiosity). Similarly, group membership will first affect exposure to particular aspects of a social representation, as well as to the target of the representation itself. Groups ensure that members are informed about, or engaged with, social representations which are central to group objectives and definition. Out-groups ensure that members are presented with other aspects of social representations which may be rather less in keeping with the in-group's interests. Memberships will also affect individual acceptance (or rejection) of the social representation. They do this sometimes by establishing the extent of the credibility of the source of the social representation, or at other times by explicit commentaries on the representation. Furthermore, memberships will affect the extent to which the social representation is used. Definition of 'use' in this context is difficult but would include: the frequency with which the social representation is reproduced (that is, communicated to others) and addressed (that is, used as a point of reference in making decisions, assimilating new information, and evaluating a situation).

Like Gerard Duveen, I found SRT a fertile source of explanation of the identity phenomena that I was describing. Social representations theory struck me as an elegant framework for understanding the creation of social meaning and values, allowing an active role for the individual identity. It particularly allowed me to examine how social, scientific and technical change through evolving social representations could be translated into threats to identity and how coping strategies developed to deal with those threats could in turn initiate new beliefs and modify behaviour (Breakwell, 1990, 1993, 1996, 2001a & c, 2004, 2007; Breakwell & Barnett, 2000; Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, & Breakwell, 2003). Like Gerard, I was encouraged to seek out the ways in which our understanding of identity processes could be brought together with our understanding of social representational processes.

At some point in theorising the relationship between identity and social representations, it becomes clear that an identity is not always shaped by its social representational milieu. Gerard (Duveen, 2001) accepted that “representations precede identities” because identities take shape through the engage of the individual in the world of representations. But Gerard also argued that the identities which emerge in the course of development constrain the representations which individuals or group might accept. In this Gerard and I were in total agreement. Gerard suggested (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990) the concept of “resistance” to signify the point where an individual refuses to accept an attempt to influence their identity that has emerged from the communication of current social representations. In some respects this notion echoes the proposition in IPT that social representations that threatened esteem, efficacy, distinctiveness or continuity will trigger coping strategies that will reduce the threat. I would see resistance as one form of coping strategy.

It strikes me now, looking back over the last 30 years of work on identity and social representations, that much of the activity and progress has been engendered because Serge Moscovici had the wisdom, foresight and courage needed to resist the temptation to impose an orthodoxy on the theory of social representations – despite suggestions from some that a definitive doctrine should be established (Breakwell & Lyons, 1993). In fact, Moscovici’s stance has been quintessentially anti-orthodoxy. He has never drawn tight boundaries around the theory. He has never sought to eradicate divergent views. He has never silenced criticism. In fact, he has encouraged innovation in and renovation of the theory. This ensures that the theory continues to develop. And this willingness to encompass the novel extends to methodological diversity. There is no “approved” method in social representations research –

as Gerard emphasised in his writings (Duveen and Lloyd, 1993). Quantitative and qualitative approaches co-exist amicably within SRT's domain. This is enormously liberating for the researcher and theorist. It means that everyone has the scope to make a serious contribution to the evolution of the theory. Perhaps it was this scope for personal contribution that attracted Gerard Duveen to social representations theory. I know that it was what attracted me and keeps me engaged still. Reflecting now on my own formulation of IPT, I suspect that I fell into the trap of the over-specification that is often associated with the inculcation of orthodoxy. Gerard in his work on identity did not fall into that trap. His descriptions of identity processes are rich and elaborated and offer the foundation for considerable further interpretation and insight. His is a body of work to be proud of.

Notes

(1) Duveen did not theorise the structural properties of identity. He was however concerned to explain how identities change. He employed the concepts of objectification and anchoring to explain how identities change. Of course, objectification and anchoring are used in social representations theory to describe the processes whereby novelty is made intelligible. Objectification entails translating something that is abstract into something which is almost concrete, gaining a density of meaning which ultimately makes it a common and "natural" part of thinking about the object. Anchoring entails categorising a new object into pre-existing cognitive frameworks in order to render them familiar -reducing the strange and unfamiliar object to the level of an ordinary object set in a familiar context. It is easy to see that both processes could be argued to explain what happens when an individual is facing new experiences that have a bearing on their identity. However, in IPT accommodation and assimilation are notions derived from the Piagetian theory of cognitive development. The focus is upon the way that the existing structure of identity adapts to incorporate new elements – or resist their incorporation. The identity principles hypothesised to guide the processes of assimilation/accommodation are meant to explain why some adaptations are made and others resisted.

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