Social Representations and Social Cognition: A Convergence of Different Traditions

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Abstract

This thesis explores the possibility of forging links between Moscovici’s theory of social representations and theoretical models which have achieved contemporary dominance in social cognition research. The first part of the thesis attempts a theoretical and empirical integration of social representations theory and social schema models. The results of two empirical studies suggest the utility of reconciling these approaches. These studies investigate the development of internalised representations of Australian society. A multidimensional scaling (MDS) procedure was used in which 12 social groups which characterise Australian society were rated for their similarity. In the first study, this procedure was carried out by two samples: a sample of 13 to 14 year old secondary school students and a sample of university students. The resultant ‘spatial maps’ from this procedure suggested qualitative and developmental differences in the perception of the social group structure of Australian society by the two samples. An analysis of the degree of individual differences in similarity ratings within and between the two samples indicated that such variation decreased considerably with age. This finding suggests that societal representations become more consensual in nature during adolescent social development. The notion of consensus is central to social representations theory, but has received little attention in social schema research.

A second MDS study investigating representations of Australian society provided further support for the above findings. In addition, it revealed important socioeconomic group differences in societal representations. Unlike social representations research, schema research has not explored possible social group differences in social knowledge domains.

The second part of the thesis explores the interconnections between social representations theory and attribution theory. It argues that social representations theory can provide a theoretical context for determining the social origins of attributions. This is discussed with particular reference to individualism as a dominant and widespread (consensual) value and belief system within western industrialised societies.
The dominance of individualism as a belief system is explored empirically by asking secondary school students from two different schools to make attributions for success and failure of examination candidates from different social backgrounds. It was expected and found that individualist (internal) explanations are preferred over external attributions for success and failure. This individualist preference increased with age. This finding is consistent with the social representations literature which argues that the preference for internal attributions in western societies reflects an underlying representation of the person as being a primary causative agent in all behavioural outcomes.

The third part of the thesis extends the analysis of representations of Australian society and its constituent social groups, but in a methodologically contrasting way. It investigates the objective and subjective impressions of an advertisement ('Celebration of a Nation') which was made specifically to encourage Australians to celebrate Australia's Bicentenial birthday in 1988. Subjective responses from a sample of university students indicated that the advertisement evoked predominantly positive emotions. Open-ended responses indicated that one of the dominant themes contained in the advertisement was the unity and togetherness of the Australian people. This was often coupled with the imagery of the social diversity of Australian society. These contradictory elements are explored in terms of their relevance for ideas about the structure and internal organisation of social representations.

The concluding chapter argues that all of the theoretical and empirical investigations within this thesis can be extended by considering social identity processes as important mediating and/or explanatory constructs. Suggestions for further empirical work are presented from within the social identity perspective.