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"A social representation is not a quiet thing":

Exploring the critical potential of social representations theory

Caroline Howarth (LSE)

Abstract

Following Moscovici (1972), this paper addresses the questions: *What is the aim of research within a social representations perspective? Is it to support or to criticise the social order? Is it to consolidate or transform it?* After a brief overview of social representations theory, I argue that while the theory appears to have the conceptual tools to begin this critical task, there are serious criticisms and points of underdevelopment that need addressing. In order for social representations theory to develop into a rigorously critical theory there are three controversial issues that require clarification. These are a) the relationship between psychological processes and social practices, b) the reification and legitimisation of different knowledge systems and c) agency and resistance in the co-construction of self-identity. After discussing each issue in turn, with illustrations from research on racialising representations, I conclude the paper with a discussion of the role of representations in the ideological construction and contestation of reality.

"A social representation is not a quiet thing"[1]:

Exploring the critical potential of social representations theory

> **We must ask what is the aim of the scientific community. Is it to support or to criticize the social order? Is it to consolidate it or transform it?**
>
> Moscovici, 1972, p. 23.

Over thirty years after Serge Moscovici, the founder of social representations theory, made this statement it is time to turn these questions to research carried out within a social representations perspective. We must take seriously the political and theoretical implications embedded within Moscovici's general critique and ask: *What is the aim of research within a social representations perspective? Is it to support or to criticise the social order? Is it to consolidate or transform it?*

More recently Moscovici has stated that social representations theory "hopes to elucidate the links which unite human psychology with contemporary social and cultural questions" (1998, p.241). We need to ask how far has social representations research progressed in this direction. As has been discussed elsewhere (Jovchelovitch, 1997; Orfali, 2002; Roiser, 1997) social representations theory has the potential at least to address contemporary social problems and so invite "practical engagement" (Moscovici, in dialogue with Marková, 1998, p. 405) and intervention (de-Graft Aikins, 2002; Krause, 2002). While there has been some debate over these issues in relation to education and both a) gendered identities (Duveen, 2001) and b) racialised differences (Howarth, 2002a; Howarth, 2004), and in relation to health and community development (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000; Howarth, Foster and

[1] The quotation in the title of my paper - "a social representation is not a quiet thing" is from Moscovici (in discussion with Marková, 1998). This is discussed in detail below.

Dorrer, 2004; Murray, 2002; Wagner, Duveen, Verma and Themel, 2000), there has been little application of social representations theory within other societal domains. As Bar-Tal (2000) has pointed out, social psychology as a whole "cannot escape from dealing with larger societal systems if it desires to be *social* in the broad meaning of the term and to be relevant to real problems that preoccupy people in their social life" (p. 156, italics in original). If social representations theorists also desire this significance and relevance for their work, they need to consider applications of the theory within a broader array of social arenas and develop a critical perspective on how we can use such applications to confront and address the social inequalities we research and experience.

This is the purpose of my paper: after giving a brief overview of the theory, I shall discuss controversial aspects of the theory which should make it particularly appropriate for critical research. I shall illustrate this with examples from my own research on racialising representations in a stigmatised community (Howarth, 2002b) and racialising representations in the context of school exclusion (Howarth, 2004) and some reference to central empirical work within the field, such as Duveen (2000), Jodelet (1991) and Joffe (2002). While this demonstrates that social representations theory appears to have the conceptual tools to criticise the social order, there are few studies that have demonstrated this potential empirically. This calls for further development and analysis in at least three key areas. These are the issues I address in this paper:

a) the relationship between psychological processes and social practices
b) the reification and legitimisation of different knowledge systems
c) agency and resistance in the co-construction of self-identity

In applying social representations theory to these issues, do we simply describe what is happening in the social world and so, as Moscovici put it, ‘support’ and ‘consolidate’ the structures and processes that maintain uneven social patterns and inequalities? Or can we develop a more critical and so potentially transformative account? There is an urgent need to tackle these questions directly. Until this is achieved, one may be left with descriptions of representations, no means of evaluating them and therefore no substantive critique. Moreover, such research will achieve little more than detailing and so consolidating the divisive practices that we describe. We will then be guilty of the claim that we, as social psychologists “calmly ignore social inequalities, political violence, wars, underdevelopment or racial conflict” (Moscovici, 1972, p. 21; Reicher, 1997). For this reason, I argue, social representations theory needs to become critical.

What do social representations ‘do’?

Social representations is a growing field that has continued to attract new researchers across Europe, South America, Australasia and even the US over the last 40 years. There is a now a journal of *Papers in Social Representations,* a PhD programme on social representations and communication, and a vast international network[2]. There has been an extensive range of topics researched, from Moscovici’s seminal study of psychoanalysis (1961/1976) to the public understanding of science and new technology (e.g., Bauer and Gaskell, 1999; Gaskell, Bauer, Durant and Allum, 1999;

[2] This comes a surprise to some British and American colleagues; the mainstreaming of cognitive and individualising psychologies within Britain and America has marginalised the impact of more explicitly social theories such as Social Representations (Farr, 1996; Moscovici and Markova, 1998). In addition to this, delays in translating the original French texts on social representations into English (Räty and Snellman, 1992) and continuing misunderstandings of the theory in the British context (Markova, 2000) has meant that British social psychologists lag behind colleagues elsewhere in their uptake of the theory.

Wagner and Kronberger, 2001), popular ideas of health and illness (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000; Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998; Herzlich, 1973; Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 2002), constructions of identities (Breakwell, 2001; Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002a) and human rights (Doise, 2001; Doise, Staerklé, Clémence and Savory, 1998; Doise, Clémence and Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Le Duc, 2001), to mention but a few. At the same time, the theory has its critics – particularly within the context of British social psychology. Many of the criticisms deserve serious consideration: particularly important are the claims that social representations theory has yet to fully conceptualise the relationship between representations and a) social practices and b) power.

Firstly, as always, there is the question of definition. It is indeed a difficult task to define social representations as many see the actual phenomena as too elaborate to capture its entirety (Marková, 2000) and the history of the concept too rich to be easily compressed into a single definition (Moscovici, 1988). Others see this as a precondition for further development and elaboration (Valsiner, 1998; Wagner, 1994). However, its critics have argued that a clear definition is unattainable because the theory is unclear (Jahoda, 1988), inconsistent (Potter, 1996a), fragmented (McKinlay and Potter, 1987) and confused (Billig, 1988; 1998) or that its research too divergent (Fife-Shaw, 1997; Parker, 1987). In fact there are clear definitions to be found in the literature. Take this one provided by Jodelet (1991):

> Social representations are images that condense manifold meanings that allow people to interpret what is happening; categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we deal, theories which permit us to establish facts about them. When we consider social representations embedded in the concrete reality of our social life, they are all the above together.

Many questions arise from this. How do these images and categories come into our interpretations? Why do we use some representations instead of others? Is it possible to have conflicting representations? Do some people have more power to impose 'their' representations onto others? If so, can these representations be resisted? What is the relationship between representation and "the concrete reality"? What is the relationship between representations and the social order? Can representations be used to defend or challenge the social order? And so one could go on.

One of the critical questions, it seems to me, is what do social representations actually *do*? This appears to be the main criticism that is often made of social representations theory (Litton and Potter, 1985; Potter and Edwards, 1999; Wagner, 1998). Potter and Litton (1985) and Potter and Wetherell (1987), for example, ask what is the difference between 'using' and 'mentioning' a representation? That is, what is the difference between reflecting on or knowing about a body of knowledge on the one hand and acting as if this knowledge is 'true' or 'real' on the other? That is, when are we critically aware of significant social representations in our encounters and practices (and so possibly come to develop these, transform or reject these) and when do we act within a representational field as our accepted construction of reality? Within research on school exclusion (Howarth, 2004), for example, young black pupils detailed dominant representations of 'troublesome black youth' that marginalize their position and restrict their potential at school. This does not mean that they claim any veracity for such representations. Rather they recognise and describe how these representations are institutionalised within the material and symbolic curricula at school. That is, they see how particular knowledge systems are legitimised and reified at school. They describe how representations inform the realities they experience; at

the same time, some of these pupils find ways to resist and reject such representations or ‘versions’ of themselves and their position at school.

This demonstrates that we do have multiple representations of the same social objects, here the social category ‘black pupil’, that are manipulated to achieve different ends. Hence representations have to be seen as alive and dynamic - existing *only* in the relational encounter, in the inbetween space we create in dialogue and negotiation with others. They are not static templates that we pull out of our cognitive schemas, as Potter (1996a) suggests. Following Jodelet (1989), we can say that a representation can be “used for acting in the world and on others” (p. 44, translated by Gerard Duveen) as well as for re-acting, rejecting or re-forming a presentation of the world that conflicts with one’s stake, position and so self-identity. Perhaps we could say that representations can be ‘used’ to defend and so sustain a particular construction of reality or ‘mentioned’ in resistance to another version of reality. So Potter, Litton and Wetherell raise a good point in asking about the difference between ‘using’ and ‘mentioning’ a representation.

Indeed, the plurality or hybridity of social representations has always been at the heart of the theory (Moscovici, 1998; Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998). In fact in Moscovici’s early work (1961/1976) the concept of ‘*le polyphasie cognitive*’ (p. 286) acknowledges both the dialogic and polyphasic nature of knowledge (see also Moscovici’s discussion with Marková, 1998, p. 385; Marková, 2000; Wagner, *et al*, 2000). This helps address the question: what do social representations ‘do’? The multiplicity and tension within any representation presents possibilities for communication, negotiation, resistance, innovation and transformation. The claim that

"social representations theorists have not studied what representations are used to do" (Potter, 1996a, p. 168) is somewhat overstated. In looking at some of the research within this field we can see that this appears to be the central issue for many social representations researchers. For example:

Examples of what social representations 'do'?		
Jodelet (1991)	Social representations of 'madness'	Protect community identities against the threat of madness and therefore otherness. This serves to exclude 'the mad'.
Duveen (2000)	Social representations of gender	Reproduce gendered identities and gendered relations. This serves to maintain and defend gendered differences in the social order.
Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998)	Social representations of health	Enables a community to sustain and defend its cultural identity. This serves to strengthen possibilities for multicultural communities.
Farr and Marková (1995)	Social representations of disability	Elaborate and develop images of 'the disabled' in ways that elicit pity. This serves to maintain social inequalities.
Joffe (2002)	Social representations of AIDS	Reduce the threat of HIV/AIDS by relating this to 'othered' groups. Serves as a means for resistance for those implicated or othered.
Howarth (2002b)	Social representations of a community (Brixton)	Portray people from the area as criminal, deviant and threatening. Serves to maintain social exclusion across communities

Social re-presentation[3], as a socio-cognitive practice (Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 1984), is something we *do* in order to understand the worlds in which we live and, in doing so, we convert these social representations into a particular social reality, for others and for ourselves (Philogéne and Deaux, 2001). As we can see from the table above, this has clear consequences for the social order. Let me explain in more detail: in learning about the world in which we live we take on particular 'presentations' of that world and re-interpret them to fit with what we know 'already'. That is, we take on 'presentations' and re-present them. In this process the social representation may be confirmed or perhaps re-articulated or re-enacted in various ways. Social representations, therefore, come to constitute our realities (Foster, 2003a; Moscovici, 2000). Social re-presentation gives us a way of making sense of and so constituting socially significant phenomena. It is not that social representations simply reflect or inform our reality, but that in doing so they become what reality is intersubjectively agreed to be. What is critically significant here is that different representations compete in their claims to reality, and so defend, limit and exclude other realities. Therefore there is much at stake in the practice of representation. Take this example from my study of social representations of Brixton, South London (for details on methodology and analysis see Howarth, 2000, 2002c); this is from a focus group with teenage girls who live in the general area of Brixton. Aimee and Tara[4], both 14 years old, define themselves as 'mixed' (heritage), while Assia, 15 years old, defines herself as Muslim.

[3] I use a hyphen when discussing the practice of social re-presentation to highlight the fact that representations are constantly re-interpreted, re-thought, re-presented (Valsinser, 2003).
[4] All names used are pseudonyms – some of which participants have chosen for themselves.

Aimee: One of my friends, he was mistaken and what happened, right, was that the Triads *(apparently a London-Chinese gang)* went to his school, and he was actually mistaken for another person and he actually got chopped on his hand with a machete.

Assia: See! Don't these things scare you? Like these things that come to mind. If that's happened there, then why would I want to go there?

All talking at once (very heated)

Assia: I know Brixton, and it's not that dangerous, I mean, it can be and it can't be, but another person –

Tara: Are you scared at the moment? Tell me the truth! I don't want to know about the Triads, just be honest, are you saying -

All talking at once (very heated)

Caroline: Just listen!

Asssia: But when this is going on so close, you know? I live in Norwood and it's just happening across a couple of miles away, and it also makes me think: for another person who does not know this place, never been there, why would they want to go there when they have heard these things? And they have heard all these rapes, murders, shootings, you know, on the news, why would they –

All talking at once (very heated)

For me, this example shows the tension and conflict within social re-presentation, the role of stigma in representations that otherise, and the possibilities for resistance. What these young people recognise is that there is a representation of Brixton as dangerous salient in the media; what they argue over is the veracity and consequence of this. It appears that Aimee has presented an example of such danger in terms of a friend who was mistakenly attacked. Assia, who defines herself as an outsider, from a nearby area (Norwood), uses this as evidence that Brixton 'is' indeed dangerous and so 'why would she want to go there'. Accepting the representation, and embellishing it with Aimee's story, then succeeds in maintaining the negative image of Brixton and, importantly, sets up a binary division, as Bakhtin (1981/1935) would recognise,

between danger and safety, criminality and community and, for Assia, 'them' and 'us'. Tara and others in the group, by contrast, angrily reject this binary opposition that implicates her and her friends – who position themselves as insiders: if Brixton is dangerous, so is she and Assia would then feel scared of her and the other insiders. Understandably Tara finds this deeply upsetting and challenges Assia. Assia can see that she is being positioned as a fearful and prejudiced outsider. She then manipulates the representation to depersonalise the association by locating the representation as an external construction of the media, held by "people who don't know the area". Shifting from a particular incident (allegedly involving a London-wide 'gang'), to "all these rapes, murders, shootings …on the news" she presents the representation as 'what is generally known' ("you know" asserting that we all share this knowledge). Thus she protects herself against any claim she may be ignorant or prejudiced in her views. More crucially this sidesteps the unspoken racialised dynamics to this argument. Six of the eight girls in the group, including Aimee and Tara, define themselves as 'black' or 'mixed'. A white girl problematises her whiteness through her relationship with her black step-father and wider family. Hence Assia appears as the only member of the group with no familial association with black culture. The representation of Brixton as dangerous is related to representations of blackness as danger, criminal and other (Scarman, 1982; Sharpe, 1965). Hence Assia has to navigate the quiet implication that her views and fear are based on racism.

We can see here that supporting or rejecting this representation of Brixton is more than describing a place: one's perspective on Brixton reveals one's affiliation, loyalty and identity as experienced within particular encounters and contexts. Thus the problem of defining what is real relates to our ongoing and contested identities,

interests and hopes (Godelier, 1986). Everyone plays a part in staking a claim to knowing what is real. This is a key role of the labour of representation – to establish what is real. Representations do not simply equate to reality, as Hall (1997) has pointed out, but, at the same time, they cannot be severed from reality, as the extract above demonstrates. What I hope this emphasises, is that there is struggle, conflict and resistance at the heart of practices of re-presentation.

As Moscovici has discussed, "in the process of formation of a representation there is always both conflict and cooperation" (in discussion with Marková, 1998, p. 377). The cooperation gives social agents a common code to discuss, debate and so constitute social realities (Moscovici, 1961/1976; Wagner, *et al,* 2000), while the conflict gives them something to debate about as different interests and relations of power compete. In many ways, it is the dialectic of cooperation and conflict that differentiates social representations from Durkheim's (1898) notions of 'collective' and 'individual' representations. For Durkheim a collective representation is a "social fact" which is imposed on us, difficult to challenge, static and uniform in its effects. Individual representations are the personal interpretations of distinct individuals. Moscovici has argued that collective representations are more common in so-called traditional societies, where there is comparative uniformity in belief and knowledge.[5] For in these societies there is "less scope for individuality – for original, unique, or creative thinking and behaviour" (Mead, 1972, p.221) and therefore less opportunity of competing knowledge systems to develop. In contemporary society different

[5] We could describe present-day collective representations as 'hegemonic representations' (Moscovici, 1988) which are those all-pervasive representations rooted in systems of power. Whether one calls them 'collective' or 'hegemonic' there are clearly today still particular broad-ranging and resistant representations. Individualism, both a cause and consequence of the diversity and fragmentation evident in late modernity, is one of our most dominant representations (Farr, 1991). Other hegemonic representations include representations of 'race' (Augoutinos, Tuffin and Rapley, 1999), gender (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992) and Islam (Imtiaz, 2002).

sciences, different religions and different knowledge systems compete for followers from around the globe. As a result there is more critique, argument and debate and so less stability in knowledge systems (Giddens, 1992; Billig, 1987). Most collective representations have now fragmented under these pressures, giving birth to more dynamic and fluid representational fields (Moloney and Walker, 2002). It is such "variation and diversity of collective ideas in modern societies" that so interested Moscovici, Duveen (2000, p. 8) has explained. Duveen continues "this diversity itself reflects the lack of homogeneity within modern societies, in which differences reflect an unequal distribution of power" (*ibid*). Under the pressures of globalisation, therefore, meanings become highly contested and negotiated, as Lewis (1994) recognises:

> Meanings becomes a battleground between and among folk cultures, class subcultures, ethnic cultures, and national cultures; different communications media, the home, and the school; churches and advertising agencies; and different versions of history and political ideologies. The sign is no longer inscribed within a fixed cultural order. The meaning of things seems less predictable and less certain. (p.25).

Or as Moscovici put it - "there is a kind of ideological battle, a battle of ideas" (Moscovici, 1998, p. 403). This is precisely what social representations theory seeks to address: how are different meanings asserted and contested? How do different versions of the same phenomenon, same encounter or same event co-exist? What are the consequences of 'using' or resisting these different versions? How do we cope with the unpredictability and uncertainty of such diverse and mobile knowledge systems? Most importantly, for this paper, how are different meanings fought over? What resources do people bring to these battles? Who are the winners and losers in the battleground of social re-presentation?

As such, social representations theory is a modern theory of *social change* (Philogéne, 2001; Wagner, Duveen, Themel and Verma, 1999) as well as a theory of social knowledge (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990; Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 2001). Hence, it would, one may think, provide a way to criticise the social order and so provide an explicitly critical account of unequal social relations. That is to say, one would hope to find a social psychology of power at the heart of social representations theory. Unfortunately, at present, one would be much disappointed. This is not to say that a theory of power is not *implicit* within social representations research or that such studies have failed to address these issues. There are some robust examples from social representations research that have indeed progressed an analysis of the role of power in the process and practice of social re-presentation (e.g., Jovchelovitch, 1996). To my mind, there are at least three aspects of the theory that make it particularly ripe of the critical investigation of power and resistance in social psychology. These are the controversial aspects of theory, outlined above, that need to be developed in order for social representations theory to become a more rigorously critical theory:

a) the relationship between psychological processes and social practices
b) the reification and legitimisation of different knowledge systems
c) agency and resistance in the co-construction of self-identity

I shall address each of these three points, before returning to the question of power and resistance more generally.

a) <u>The relationship between psychological processes and social practices</u>

This is one of the controversial aspects of the theory that has brought many debates and disagreements over *how far* social representations may constitute our realities or

'partial realities' (Jovchelovitch, 2001; Moloney and Walker, 2002; Potter, 1996b; Valsiner, 1998). For example, Gervias (2002) has discussed the different versions of social constructionism embedded in different social representations research projects. However, there is a more basic issue at stake: some critics are under the (false) impression that representations have *no* constitutive role at play as representations are depicted solely as cognitive phenomena (Marková, 2000). For example, Potter (1996a) has claimed that "social representations are ways of understanding the world which *influence* action, but are not themselves parts of action" (p. 168, italics in original). This interpretation must be challenged. Social representations are often *only* apparent in action. Social representations do influence our actions, particularly how we may explain our actions or the actions of others, but they are also contained within and developed through our social actions (Moscovici, 1988), or more properly our social practices (Marková, 2000).[6] Take this example from my research on black pupils' experiences at school in Britain (Howarth, 2004). This quote comes from Chantelle (a pseudonym), a 15 year old Black British woman who was formally excluded from school.

> My teachers said that I cannot walk about the playground with my friends. They said we were a 'gang' that intimidated the other children. But it's okay for the white girls to hang out with their friends – even if there were 10 or 20 of them!! There's only 5 of us. … But, you know, in the classroom, it was like the teachers could not even see us. When I put up my hand they would just look straight through me. …. As soon as there's some noise, yeah, *then* the teachers look at the black girls.

We can see that Chantelle believes that a stigmatising representation of black youth guides or influences the actions of her teachers (the process described by Potter,

[6] I prefer to use the concept 'social practice' as it enables the analysis of the role of culture, history and ideology in what we 'do' as *social* beings. The concept 'action' is often imprecise, sometimes very loosely defined as, for example "getting stuff done" (Potter and Edwards, 1999, p. 448). More problematically, in a European context, 'action' may invite more individualistic constructions than the concept of social practices.

1996a). However, we can also see that in the experience of 'being told off', 'not being seen' and 'being seen' this representation of black youth is *only* apparent in the actions or practices of the teachers (for Chantelle at least). That is, the representation of black youth is in fact the practice of looking or not looking. The sense that is made of such encounters does not reside simply in Chantelle's head, but is embedded within wider social and ideological knowledge systems and practices that inform racialised encounters. This point has been made very powerfully by Biko (1979), Fanon (1952) and Hall (1997). In order to understand Chantelle's experience we have to acknowledge the weight of the history of racism in such encounters at school. As in the racialised dynamics of the focus group with Assia and Tara – nothing may be explicitly said about "race" or racialised differences, but the ideological construction of "race" is apparent and is felt in the dynamics of white gaze. The meanings of such, we can see here, are relational, contextual and historical as they are co-constructed within social encounters, draw on the archives of racism and need to be understood in terms of their consequence – what they 'do'. Hence, we must see social representations as both influencing and constituting social practices. With reference to Hall's theory of representation, Fiske (1996) explains: "To the extent that representations are real in their effects, they produce what passes for real in any particular conditions" (p.214). Again, this is something Moscovici discussed in his early work:

> Social representations are almost tangible entities. In our daily life they ceaselessly circulate, intersect and crystalise about a word, gesture, an encounter. The majority of established social relations, objects produced or consumed, communications exchanged, are impregnated with them. We know that they correspond in part to the symbolic substance which enters their elaboration and in part to the practice which produces this substance, just as science or myths correspond to a scientific or mythical practice.
>
> Moscovici, 1961/1976, p. 40; translated by Gerard Duveen.

Many other studies within social representations have highlighted *re-presentation as practice*. For this reason, many social representations researchers use a methodology that enables them to actually witness or even *experience* the social representations operating in particular contexts or encounters. Good examples are those where the researchers become participant observers in order to witness and experience the enactment and contestation of social representations embedded in practice (e.g. Bradbury, 2000, on death and Gervias, 1997, on nature). Most significantly the work of Denise Jodelet (1991) on social representations of 'madness' and Hélène Joffe (1997, 1999) on social representations of AIDS has highlighted how representations pervade particular social practices in establishing and defending identities against the threat of 'the other'. These studies demonstrate how marginal others are positioned as different and potentially dangerous through the establishment and maintenance of certain institutionalised practices. Jodelet's study, for example, gives rich ethnographic detail of how the social practices of eating, washing and bodily contact are regulated through the social re-presentation of madness as contagion. These practices convey aspects of the representation that are only visible in these encounters.

It is therefore vital that social representations are not simply considered to be "linguistically based apparatus for actively making sense of the social world" (Potter and Litton, 1985, p. 82), "mental schemas" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 138) or "cognitive structures or grids which make sense of information" (Potter and Edwards, 1999, p. 449). The consequences of social representations go far beyond the cognitive as they can be "extremely real and concrete" (Jovchelovitch, 2001, p. 177). As Moscovici (1998) put it, "shared representations, their language, penetrate so

profoundly into all the interstices of what we call reality, that we can say that they constitute it" (p. 245). Hence we must emphasise the point that representations not only influence people's daily practices – but *constitute* these practices.

b) The reification and legitimisation of different knowledge systems

What I have discussed above is the role of social representations in the process *and practice* of the social construction (and contestation) of meaning. Another controversial aspect of this is the co-existence of different knowledge systems that compete in the struggle over meaning (Gervais, 2002; Moloney and Walker, 2002). This is contentious as it brings in questions about the reification and legitimisation of different knowledge systems in the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 2001). Hence in developing a critical analysis of the 'battleground' of meanings, as Lewis (1994) described it, or the (re)negotiation of intersubjectively agreed realities (Crossley, 1996), we have to examine the processes by which knowledge systems become reified and so legitimised in different contexts and encounters (Wagner, *et al,* 1999).

Let me give an example. One of the issues often discussed in research into the production of racialised differences at school is the marginalisation of 'black history' in the taught curriculum. For example, in the school exclusion study (Howarth, 2004), Winston, a black British teenager said:

> Winston: I kept asking the teacher about that, - you know, 'when will we do black history?'. He always said he doesn't know, maybe next year. Then next year, it was just the same.

For Winston and many others in the research, white perspectives and narratives were privileged as the legitimate version of British history taught at school, "beyond a fleeting reference to slavery in the Caribbean and starvation in Africa" as one of the

parents put it. This indicates how particular representations, which support particular interests and identities, come to be legitimised and reified at school. However, views of teachers from the Brixton study (Howarth, 2002b) demonstrate that in particular contexts and relationships there are possibilities for alternative accounts that expose the oppressive fictions of dominant histories. These contrasting extracts are taken from two separate interviews with history teachers in different schools in Brixton. Both schools have a majority black British population. Teacher 1 is white English. Teacher 2 is dual heritage (English/Jamaican). Both are women.

Teacher 1: But you see there are some things, I mean, which we can't… Though we try to address as much as possible. Even when I was teaching a Year 8 group, after about a term they said 'When are we going to do any black history, Miss?' I mean, you know, there are certain things that we just cannot change because it's all to do with the curriculum. … Cos we are told what books to teach them, and blah, blah, blah. So it is a problem.

Teacher 2: You look for ways through the National Curriculum. There is so much wealth in the National Curriculum if you bother to actually work at it. Even History. English is so easy. History – we had people here from Kings College (*University of London*): classics students who helped our girls do a project on blacks in Roman history. It's easy, well not that easy, you just have to be creative.

The different experiences and identities of these women may tell us something about why it is that Teacher 1 maintains a dominant version of history that excludes 'black' experiences and narratives, while Teacher 2 is active in finding points of connection between so-called black and white histories. I would argue that the different institutional contexts played an important role in this – enabling or closing down the possibilities of resistance against reified versions of history. This illustrates how representations may play a constitutive role in the social construction of history and

so reality, and that there are spaces and opportunities for the delegitimisation of reified representations.

Through quoting Lewin, Moscovici has argued that “reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality” (Lewin, 1948, p. 57). Moscovici also recognized that this leads to constant (re)negotiation as to what is accepted as reality in any given moment and, due to power differences in the social order, this then provokes conflict and dispute. Certain groups have different degrees of access to the public sphere and have different means with which to present and/or contest particular claims to ‘the real’, as we have seen. Those who ‘win’ the battle over meaning and so the social construction of reality (for the moment – as meanings are constantly re-negotiated) are those whose versions of reality are, or come to be, reified and legitimized as what is socially accepted as ‘reality’. The reified universe of Western science, for example, is generally accepted to be closer to any objectively definable ‘truth’ than myth, ‘primitive thought’ or story-telling (Comaroff, 1982). Hence, between the ‘reified’ world of science and the ‘consensual’ world of common sense there is conflict and argumentation. However, the tensions within this process and the dynamics of imposing one’s own representations over others and silencing oppositional representations have yet to receive meaningful attention within the field.

Within social representations research ‘science’ and ‘medicine’, for example, are often presented as clear examples of the reified universe of knowledge that can be familiarised into the consensual universe (Wagner, *et al*, 1999). Less often do social representations researchers explore how science can be seen as common sense made unfamiliar, or, more critically, how dominant social representations penetrate the

structures and content of science (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990; Potter and Edwards, 1999). What studies do examine the transition of knowledge from common sense to science, such as those of Foster (2003b) and Morant (1998), allow for more critical questions about the marginalisation of particular representations or versions of reality. Further work in this direction would allow us to develop a more critical analysis of ‘expert knowledge’ and so consider whose interests are at stake in the reification of such claims to authority or ‘truth’.

Such theoretical development could to be seen to contradict Moscovici’s descriptions of social representations as the transformation of *scientific* knowledge into our common-sense understandings, from the reified universe of science to the consensual universe of everyday, common sense (Moscovici, 1984).[7] Indeed, Moscovici’s own primary text on social representations (1961/1976) was the study of how psychoanalysis had diffused throughout Parisian society and so became a part of that society, i.e., the movement of psychoanalytic concepts from the reified to the consensual universe.

Purkhardt (1993) discusses this point in detail. She claims that Moscovici did not “push his social thesis of knowledge to its logical conclusion” (p.83). She suggests he is wrong to see social representations as solely a diffusion of scientific knowledge into the consensual world of understanding. The point is that all knowledge, not only common-sense knowledge, is socially constructed. She describes the formation and

[7]This is an area in the theory which is somewhat confusing. Farr (1987), Foster (2003b), Joffe (2002), McKinlay and Potter (1987) and Wells (1987) all have made the point that it may not be easy to distinguish between the reified and the consensual universes as Moscovici suggests. Knowledge, Moscovici argues, is socially constructed. Is this knowledge concerning the distinction between reified and consenual universes also constructed? I would argue that it has to be; that is, it is a social construction in itself.

transformation of representations as occurring both from the reified universe of science (the sphere of claims to objective truth and certainty) to the consensual universe of common-sense (the everyday sphere of symbolism and context-dependent meaning) and *vice versa.* Thus scientific knowledge can be, and is, influenced by common sense (Herzlich and Pierret, 1989; Holton, 1978; Joffe, 1999). The construction of knowledge, therefore, is more of a two-way process. Augoustinos and Walker (1995) recognise:

> This implies that scientists too must rely on social representations to construct reality and to imbue their activities with meaning. They, therefore, must inevitably draw upon social representations when engaged in scientific work.
>
> Augoustinos and Walker (1995, p. 161).

I would propose that Augoustinous, Walker and Purkhardt are right to illuminate this aspect of social representations. All knowledge, including science, is influenced by social re-presentation. However, I think Purkhardt is wrong in saying that Moscovici did not allow for this. He does claim that in traditional societies the transformation of knowledge was more from the consensual to the reified, and that in modern societies common sense is science made common. I understand this as a description of a common trend, not an uniform structure. What is missing in Moscovici's account, in my view, is a thorough exploration of the role of power in the reification and legitimisation of 'expert' knowledge systems.

One of the characteristics of modernity, we have already discussed, is "diverse centres of power which claim authority and legitimacy" (Duveen, 2000, p. 9); hence legitimacy "becomes part of a more complex and contested social dynamic in which representations of different groups in society seek to establish a hegemony" (*ibid*).

Clearly this has to be applied to the social representations held by potentially powerful groups (Augoustinos, 2001) – such as scientists or theorists of all kinds – scientific experts, medical experts, education experts, and so forth. Indeed, we can even begin to consider what social representations pervade social psychology itself (Potter and Edwards, 1999; Howarth, under review), in a similar way to Iccheiser's (1949) discussion of the impact of the ideology of individualism within the discipline (see Farr, 1996, for a discussion), or debates over racism in psychology (Henwood, 1994; Howitt and Owusu, 1994). Knowledge, even, social psychological knowledge, is never disinterested. Hence, as critical social psychologists such as Parker (1991, 1999), Rosier (1997) and Tolman (1994) have already done, we need to develop a more comprehensive approach to the reification and legitimisation of knowledge – including scientific knowledge and including the knowledge we ourselves produce. This would invite a thorough analysis into the politics at play in hegemonic and oppositional constructions of reality across the so-called reified and consensual universes. This will be a crucial part of asking "w*hat is the aim of research within a social representations perspective? Is it to support or to criticise the social order? Is it to consolidate or transform it?*'

c) agency and resistance in the co-construction of self-identity

What the previous section has established is that knowledge is never disinterested: it is always actively constructed by social agents who speak from different positions and who have different 'social stakes' (Mugny and Carugati, 1989) in maintaining and/or challenging the hegemonic social representations that invade their realities. Different social groups have more and less access to the (co)construction of social reality within the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 1997) and so to the reification and legitimisation of

knowledge systems, and therefore experience different levels of social inclusion-exclusion (Howarth, 2001). This is well-established in social science as a whole (Bakhtin, 1981/1935; Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1984). What a social psychological perspective can, and should, offer is the recognition that resistance is simultaneously a social and a psychological possibility. It is through the very process of social re-presentation that meanings become ambiguous, hybrid and contested. This then presents the possibilities of dialogue, debate and conflict.

Again, this brings in a controversial aspect of social representations theory that has attracted the criticism that social representations research ignores or underplays the role of conflict in social psychological phenomena (Billig, 1998) and "does not address the idea that representations can provide an arena for dispute" (Potter and Billig, 1992, p. 18). However we have already seen that Moscovici *does* in fact recognise that, "in the process of formation of a representation there is always both conflict and cooperation" (in discussion with Marková, 1998, p. 377). Hence, in the act of taking on a social representation there is always the possibility of re-interpretation, re-evaluation and debate (Moloney and Walker, 2002). This conception of active agents in the social construction of reality is evident in Moscovici's early work:

> Not to recognise the creative power of objects and events, of our representative (i.e. representing) activity is equivalent to thinking that there is no rapport between our 'resevoir' of images and our capacity to combine them, to draw them into new and surprising combinations.
> Moscovici, 1961/1976, p. 44, translated by Gerard Duveen.

This elaboration is useful as it allows for the possibility of agency and resistance as re-presentation becomes a potential space for meanings to be contested, negated and

transformed. This means that the intersubjective practice of re-presentation itself invites dialogic reflection and critique (Howarth, *et al,* 2004). Crucially, such debate and transformation needs to be developed within a community of others (Batznitzky, 2000; Philogéne, 2001). Meanings can only be relational – and therefore the contestation of meaning can only occur in relationship. Joffe (1998) has pointed out, within a social representations framework “lay people are not seen as ‘victims’ of dominant ideas, but as active agents” (p. 29) who may come together in social groups and community networks to develop strategies that challenge the “dehumanising aggression” of stigmatising and otherising representations (Friere, 1970).

There have been important studies that show how social representations can be transformed to empower groups and individuals and so oppose hegemonic representations that would otherwise threaten their identities and potential futures (Marková and Wilkie, 1987; Murray, 2002; Philogéne, 2001). Joffe’s (2003) research, for example, highlights the agency and resistance of those objectified by stigmatising representations of people with HIV/AIDS. Joffe so demonstrates that collaborative resistance to stigmatising representations is an important part of the articulation of identities. Because resistance is a part of identity and because identity is inherently social - resistance has to develop in a community of others and can *only* be a collective practice (Freire, 1970). Questions concerning resistance, therefore, underline the co-construction of self-identity as a central aspect of social re-presentation. Without an understanding of identity we could not explain why and how different people use representations to different ends – to legitimize, to contest, to negate, to transform. Hence, studies into the dialectic between social representations

and social identities (e.g. Breakwell, 2001; Lloyd and Duveen, 1992) implicitly at least address the question '*What do social representations 'do'?*

As a whole this research demonstrates that we use representations to position ourselves, to claim common identities and to defend ourselves against stigmatizing or marginalizing practices. We have already seen this happen in the practice of talk in the extracts given above. Here is another example from the research in Brixton (Howarth, 2002b) which examined the impact of denigrating representations on young people's identities. Consider this extract from Tara (introduced above) – a 14 year old Black British woman from Brixton:

Tara: Listen to this. I went to France, and they have some public toilets, right? And there was a man right, sitting there, checking the queue, right. Like we went with the church, so we were like, most, there was three white girls, five black kids, and two Asians, and there was a woman, and the man goes "you lot be quiet". He was English. "You lot be quiet". And he says to the woman "Where are you from?" And she goes "Oh, we are from Brixton". And he goes "Figures - errr, thought so". It's like, excuse me! "Why do you think we come from Brixton?" "No reason, just thought so". She started an argument with the man. But she probably knew that he thinks that everybody rowdy, everybody this, they must come from Brixton, they are loud, they must come from Brixton. If you are *bad*, if you cause trouble, if you are in trouble with the police, you must come from Brixton!

This text is a meeting and clashing of different representations – which are then transformed in the process. Again, it is not that the representations of Brixton we see here exist in some kind of cognitive space for Tara to pluck out and 'use' in different ways to do different things – as Potter and colleagues may assert, but Tara has taken on, developed and resisted competing representations. In articulating others' representations of Brixton – Tara is critically aware of such stigma and thereby invites conflicting (and more affirming) representations of Brixton to emerge.

As a whole this research shows that when others' representations of us are negative – perhaps positioning us as dangerous, deviant and 'other', we find strategies that resist and reject such representations and so protect our sense of self. This brings to light the creative ways people use social representations in order to challenge and resist the racist ideologies and racist practices that invade our social relationships and co-constructions of self-identity. Consequently the act of re-presenting the social world carries with it the possibility for critique and resistance.

I have discussed here that social representations theory provides the tools with which to broach the possibilities of resistance, particularly in the context of the co-construction of self-identity. However, I would agree with Billig, Moloney and Walker in so far as the conditions of resistance within social re-presentation need to be further articulated. In order to do this, we need to turn to the role of social representations in the *ideological* construction of social realities for we cannot present a comprehensive understanding of social reality without the recognition of the political.

"A social representation is not a quiet thing"

We have seen, thus far, that social representations are more than social psychological tools that orient our understanding of the worlds we live. In supporting a particular version of the social order they protect particular interests over others. Hegemonic representations pervade the dominant social construction of reality; oppositional representations contest these versions. But it is not the case that some social representations are more or less ideological than others, as Scarborough (1990) has

suggested. Instead, as with both Eagleton's (1991) and Thompson's (1990) contextual analysis of the operation of ideology, it is more useful to examine how both hegemonic and oppositional representations can, in particular circumstances, be used ideologically to uphold the social order, to defend particular identities and to limit the interests of others. Social representations should be seen as both contestory and ideological forms (Augoustinos, 2001).

I would argue that the reproduction of power relations depends on the continuous and creative (ab)use of representations that mystify, naturalise and legitimate access to power. Social representations embody and define the experience of reality, determining its boundaries, its significance and its relationships (Moscovici, 1990; Purkhardt, 1993). Different representations speak to different interests and so silence, or at least muffle, others. They both extend and limit possibilities. Representations therefore support existing institutionalised relationships and so maintain relations of power in the social order (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). They are drawn on both to naturalise and legitimise exclusion and othering as well as to critique and challenge such stereotypes and marginalizing practices. To understand this fully we need to put the theory of social representations into an ideological framework.

Many have recognised that ideology "is indeed a system of representations" imposed onto us (Althusser, 1969; Fiske, 1996; Hall, 1997). This echoes Moscovici's view that social representations "impose themselves upon us with irresistible force. This force is a combination of a structure which is present before we have even begun to think, and of a tradition which decrees *what* we should think" (1984, p. 9). Hence representations may not only influence how we structure and make sense of the world,

but also how the world constructs us. As Oktar (2001) has discussed in depth, "ideologies are representations of who we are, what we stand for, what our values are and what our relationships with others are" (p. 314). However, as we have already discussed in depth, representations cannot be seen as a way of imprinting meaning as static and consensual on to us (Rose, Efraim, Joffe, Jovchelovitch and Marant, 1995). Re-presentation carries the possibilities of the hybridity and polyphasia of meaning, and so demands dialogue, debate and sometimes resistance in the ideological construction of realities. As Veron (1969) and Heck (1980) have discussed ideology needs to be understood as a means of *coding* reality, not of *coded* reality. This resonates with the classic definition of social representations, given by Moscovici:

> Social representations are systems of values, ideas and practices which … enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.
>
> (Moscovici, 1973, p.xiii).

Representations therefore carry traces and echoes of our individual and collective histories, as we have seen here in reference to the complex history of racism. We can see how representations work to code reality, and I have suggested that we need to look at whose interests and identities are at stake in the social psychological business of coding. One point to take up from this quote is the idea that this 'coding' may be 'unambiguous'. Again, we have seen that there are many occasions when it is not. When perspectives clash, when dominant interests exclude and mis-represent others, when the oppressive fictions of racism divide and dehumanise us all, representations are far from unambiguous. As Hall (1997) would point out, such tension and conflict provides opportunities for *decoding* and *transcoding,* for deconstructing and re-constituting the significance of dominant representations and so disrupting their

relationship to power. Hence, I would suggest that we explore the ambiguity, tension and dispute within both salient social representations in specific encounters and relationships as well as within the general practice of social re-presentation itself. I fully concur with Moloney and Walker who propose that social representations theorists follow Billig's (1988) advice that we re-conceptualise Moscovici's 'thinking society' as an 'arguing society' "so that the voices of dispute and controversy are heard in the endless babble" of social representations (Moloney and Walker, 2002, p. 314).

This type of analysis would promote study into the role of conflict and dispute in social re-presentation, the social and political consequences of different representations and the relationship between representation and the social order. This would enable knowledge to be theorized as legitimate or illegitimate in intersubjectively negotiated realities in terms of sustaining or contesting particular relations of power (Foucault, 1980). This would demand the recognition of the reproduction of power in the reification and legitimisation of social representations, as well as in the collaborative struggle for recognition and in possibilities for resistance and transformation. This would expose the dialectics of coding and transcoding, consensus and dispute, cooperation and conflict, imposition and resistance at the heart of all meaning, practice and communication. Without these tensions, representations would stagnate.

I started this paper with these questions: *What is the aim of research within a social representations perspective? Is it to support or to criticise the social order? Is it to consolidate or transform it?* There are good reasons to ask these questions, as I hope I

have already demonstrated. Social representations theory provides many valuable tools with which to prise open the dialectic of psychological processes and social practices and so examine the legitimisation of different knowledge systems and the possibilities for resistance. As such, it goes some way to providing a critical analysis of the social relationships and inequalities we live and research. However, these areas of the theory are in need of development if it is going to live up to the political challenges raised by Serge Moscovici over 30 years ago. More recently Moscovici has stated that "a social representation is not a quiet thing" (in discussion with Marková, 1998) – I suggest that we need to pay more attention to the noise and conflict inherent in social re-presentation.

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