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Survey research and consensuality: statistical and natural groups (discussion of C. Fraser)

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

SURVEY RESEARCH AND CONSENSUALITY: STATISTICAL AND NATURAL GROUPS

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Central in Colin Fraser's thesis is that there is a social psychologically relevant dimension of beliefs from the "full blown social representation where a population attains near consensus" through consensuality among a number of specified sub-groups to a jumble or 'mishmash' of beliefs. While the jumble and 'mishmash' sounds more like Edward Lear than a new concept for social psychology, I think Colin Fraser means no discernable agreement or consensus at any level of aggregation. In any event it is argued that consensuality is a key indicator of the existence of social representations. Secondly he argues that sample survey research should be adopted, in parallel to qualitative methodologies, in the investigation of social representations defined in his terms on the criterion on consensuality.

I am inclined to agree in broad terms with the second contention about the potential contribution of survey research. Progress in the study of social representations will come from both qualitative and quantitative research. This is a distinction between so-called soft and hard data that has been vested with much irrelevant significance; methods should be selected to suit the research question. There are many notable examples of qualitative approaches in the social representations literature. There are perhaps fewer, but equally valuable, contributions that have been based on survey type methods and multivariate procedures. One thinks of Di Giacomo's (1980) study of a Belgian student protest movement where multivariate analyses of semi-structured interviews yielded a rich interpretation of group allegiances and shared beliefs. A more recent example is the reanalysis of the 1981 European Values Survey by Giorgi and Marsh (1990) in which aspects of Weber's thesis on the Protestant work ethic is empirically investigated. The survey included a number of items on work related attitudes. These were factor analyzed and across all European countries two similar factors were found. The first factor concerned intrinsic aspects of work, the second and less important one in terms of variance explained focused on the extrinsic features.

The authors argued that the first factor could be described as the work ethic - a secularized version of Weber's protestant work ethic. Of particular interest was that, in countries with a protestant tradition, people scored more highly on this factor than did people from Catholic countries. They also found that religious minorities adopted the orientation of the dominant religious culture. This research makes a contribution to the description and elaboration of an important social representation of work in Western European countries. On its own, we might have read the secondary analysis of the survey as an interesting example of data reduction using multivariate techniques. But, importantly, the research was conducted in a context of a considerable body of past theorizing and of new approaches to the evolution of the work ethic. There is a change from the nineteenth century protestant inspired ascetism to the post-war secularized work ethic and on to the emergence of cultural cleavages, exemplified in Inglehart's (1977) post-materialists and Strumpel's (1990) concept of increasing disengagement. The research invites further investigations.

With survey research the pattern of attitudes and belief can be mapped but to explain the evolution over time, the construction and communication of realities, requires other approaches. This might involve the analysis of institutions, of the popular media, of political discourse and of people's explanations themselves. In this latter focus, I imagine that one would not use further survey research with its necessarily surface level measurement of attitudes and opinions but rather in-depth interviews or focus groups to explore deeper levels of consensus concerning underlying self-fulfillment and other common frames of reference; the explanatory structures which, I assume, underlie apparent consensus of verbal reports.

Now whether Giorgi and Marsh would lead one to conclude that the work ethic is near consensual in some protestant cultures is difficult to judge. What constitutes a consensus - 51%, 75%? and at what level of disagreement could one talk of a mishmash. In essence I am not sure that it matters. Survey research identifies only one level of consensuality, there are other deeper levels that must be explored. So I am not persuaded that the finding that 75% of a sample of British adolescents agreed on a number of statements about the harmfulness of hard drugs constitutes necessary evidence of a social representation. A statistical consensus does not necessarily imply agreement at other levels. Without further research this apparent consensus might be due merely to survey methodological issues; adults interviewing children and the social desirability of making "responsible" statements in such a social setting.

Even without evidence of a full-blown consensus, Giorgi and Marsh's analysis is of significance. It suggests that the residues of more religious times are still experienced in contemporary societies. Differences between people in various European countries are, one assumes, not merely cognitive orientations, but are integral aspects of the different cultures reflected in educational practices, systems of organising work and politics and economics. Culture is an unstable edifice; it impinges on people but is also the product of social actors, whose reactions to science and technology, for example, shape the future.

While I agree with Colin Fraser on the opportunities offered by surveys and multivariate analyses to explore social representations, I also have some concerns. The assumption that all such research will yield a rich harvest of insights into other social representatives is questionable. Apart from the issue of level of consensus some surveys might show consensuality, others a 'mishmash'. Data reduction techniques can be blunt instruments, unable to identify subtleties in the views people hold. In the debate on post-materialism, Strumpel argued that there was a significant group in Germany with ambivalent attitudes. As he put it "they want to drive a green Mercedes". On many controversial issues in science, technology and the environment, people identify with both sides of the debate. This is not to say, I believe, that they feel confused or jumbled, but rather that more fundamental explanatory value systems can point them simultaneously towards adoption and resistance to economic progress. To focus only on the groups with consensual beliefs could exclude domains in societal thinking in which the cultural cleavages are most evident, where the opportunities for social psychological analysis are perhaps greatest. The environment and biotechnology are candidates for the big issues of the 1990s but one would not come to such a view by a reliance on consensuality in survey research.

Reliance on sample survey research also introduces another set of problems related to the nature of the group. Survey research normally segments respondents by characteristics that are relevant to the problem focus. Social class is generally associated with political orientation; media exposure and life styles are related to purchase of consumer goods. Education level, region and gender are often pragmatic segmentations. But outside the particular focus of behaviour, voting, purchasing etc are these categories groups in anything

beyond the statistical sense? Are they natural groups in which one might expect to observe shared representations on the kinds of issues in which theorists of social representation have been interested? Some maybe, some maybe not. The question to be established a priori, rather than post hoc, is, in relation to the issue to which the research is directed, do the people in the sample share some affinity? I use the term affinity to cover a wide range of bases of association between people. Members of a nation share a past history and a common institutional, legal and political framework; in an organisation, people share a common physical environment, an organisational structure and an identification with the delivered products and services; members of policital parties share party identification and all that that entails, the 'hosts' of mentally ill people in a village in rural France share common threats from both their guests and from other people in the community. There are many different ways in which a social affinity is created and maintained and equally there are many different relations between social affinity and the nature of issues where such an affinity is of relevance. This is one of the lessons from Moscovici's study of psychoanalysis in France; segmentation by church memberhsip and by trade union was a key feature in understanding the anchoring and emergent representations of psychoanalysis.

While affinity implies a social category, it is intended to be somewhat broader than the self categorization model of John Turner. In self categorization theory it is suggested that one cognitively switches on an appropriate and accessible category to fit the situation. Hence, I am British only to the extent that sometimes I am conscious that I am. Affinity, however, while including self-to-other categorical choices also includes the more subtle, but no less pervasive and influential, other-to-self processes where the `other' might be realised through common culture, organisational membership or similar external criteria.

It is not sufficient to talk of survey research as the solution without addressing the issue of social affinity; a problem that is of equal importance in qualitative studies in the selection of respondents in what is sometimes called purposive sampling. Specifying the nature of affinity also may be of particular relevance to analyses of the media. While the national press and television is the media source of the random sample, it may be of less diagnostic value in the context of more localised or specialised publics. Having defined the basis of group affinity, media analyses might then concentrate upon those sources targeted at the group; environmental writings and newssheets, company bulletins, church and trade union papers and magazines.

In conclusion, while agreeing with the general direction of Colin Fraser's thesis, consensuality and survey research are far from unproblematic concepts and methodologies for the study of widespread beliefs and social representations. They offer opportunities to solve part of the puzzle, but these will be realized only with more sophisticated conceptualization.

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