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Book review: shared beliefs in a society: social psychological analysis BAR-TAL, D. (2000) Sage

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Shared Beliefs in a Society: Social Psychological Analysis

BAR-TAL, D. (2000)
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Shared Beliefs in a Society: Social Psychological Analysis is an important contribution to current social psychology, still struggling to refocus its gaze on the societal, cultural and institutional levels of psychology. While there has been much debate on the individualising nature of social psychology, there have been too few serious attempts to provide a rigorously *social* focus for the discipline – both in terms of theoretical approaches and the actual content of research projects. Bar-Tal's recent book, which draws together much of his previous work on societal beliefs in Israel, attempts to provide this refocus on a *societal psychology* and so demonstrates the psychological importance of the connections between "individual beliefs and the beliefs that characterise the social system of which the individuals are members" (p. 152).

As Bar-Tal points out, "social psychology 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). His examination of societal beliefs invites us to study precisely such 'real problems' as discrimination, oppression, conflict, economic successes, wars, crimes, political alliances, injustices, rebellions, famine, persecutions, exploitation, unemployment, victories, inequalities and other collective experiences of society members.

The first half of the book lays out his theoretical analysis of societal beliefs, exploring the relationship between beliefs and identities, and beliefs and groups, as well as the consequences, contents, functions, formation, dissemination, maintenance and change of societal beliefs. In addition, he provides a valuable history of the study of societal beliefs, drawing on Asch, Durkheim, LeBon, McDougall, Moscovici, Sherif, Sperber, Tajfel, Vygotsky and Wundt.

In the second half of the book Bar-Tal systematically describes the nature, bases and functions of four key types of societal beliefs – about patriotism, security, siege and de-legitimisation - contained and disseminated through myths, collective memories, symbols, ideologies, self-images, images of other societies, goals, values, and societal aspirations. Both sections are carefully illustrated with examples from around the globe – including Albania, America, Britain, Burma, Germany, Israel, Japan, North Korea, Northern Ireland, Russia and South Africa (through the elaborated examples tend to be drawn from Israel and America).

His analysis of societal beliefs and the value of studying them from a social psychological perspective encourages the (qualitative) analysis of public debates, films, leaders' speeches, books, newspapers, music, works of art, public holidays, plays and educational material. The innovative and informative recent research within social psychology has emerged precisely within these fields, drawing on discourse analysis, media studies and cultural studies. Rather than allow such central issues for a social psychology to drift into other disciplines, Bar-Tal's book could be used as a way of reclaiming such arenas or, at least, giving us as social psychologists the confidence to add our ways of seeing and understanding to these societal processes and societal phenomena. His use of school textbooks as a source and carrier of the

institutionalised societal beliefs and the ethos of a society is particularly interesting. He describes that this is one mechanism by which a "society actively and intentionally strives to pass societal beliefs to the new generation" (p. 67).

However, his analysis of this material, particularly with regard to the dissemination of central societal beliefs, is not wholly adequate. While he recognises that "groups and individuals in the society who have a vested interest in the maintenance of the system and structure make a special effort to disseminate and propagate societal beliefs among society members" (p. 52), questions of power and ideology are left under-theorised and, at times, reveal inconsistencies in the text. For example, he argues that in "egalitarian" societies (as opposed to non-egalitarian societies) "many society members participate in the negotiation" of societal beliefs, though "the elite of the society … have the power, resources, access and means to participate in the negotiation" (p. 64). Yet, in his analysis, the power of the elite appears uncontested as, Bar-Tal claims, "some people perceive as valid any information coming from formal sources", such as government institutions, presidents, prime ministers, ministers, supreme court judges, experts, academic specialists and intellectuals (p. 65). The image of a democratic society where most society members accept the societal beliefs imposed on them by those in positions of power (though Bar-Tal does allow for negotiation) is wholly dissonant with his insightful depiction of our contemporary experiences of conflict, disharmony, cultural exclusion and oppression in so-called "egalitarian" societies.

The omission of a comprehensive analysis of power becomes more worrying in the chapters on societal beliefs about patriotism and societal beliefs about the de-legitimisation of other societies. These beliefs are presented not only as 'normal' social psychological processes, but as essential to the well-being and survival of any society. Bar-Tal asserts that patriotism, for example, "reflects basic human motives" (p. 74) and that societal beliefs about de-legitimisation work to "nourish and maintain a sense of uniformity" which, he maintains, is necessary for social cohesiveness and the survival of the society (p. 136). Simplistically, the argument is that patriotism and the de-legitimisation of other societies are important for a society to exist as a collectivity with positive self-evaluation and a clear sense of identity. From here, it is only a small step back to the social psychology of stereotyping that, inadvertently, worked to justify and normalise discrimination in general and racism in particular. While Bar-Tal also provides a detailed account of the mechanisms of racist beliefs in this chapter, there is also the danger that his theoretical argument could be used to justify and perpetuate discourses that seek to find a psychological basis for racism and other forms of discrimination.

This takes us to another problem with this text: societal beliefs, in general, and ethos, in particular, appear as collective, traditional and relatively uniform. For example, Bar-Tal describes ethos as "the shared mental basis for society membership" (p. 140) providing "a determining influence on the attitudes and behaviours of society members" (p. 141). This echoes Durkheim's conceptualisation of 'social facts' or 'collective representations'. As such it fails to consider how the conditions of late modernity have impacted not only on the contents of societal beliefs, through processes such as globalisation and multiculturalisation, but on the very structure of beliefs themselves, crucially through the collective experiences of ontological insecurity, acute ambivalence and mediated risks. This is particularly apparent in Bar-Tal's account of social identity:

> A society consists of a real collective of people who have a clear sense of common identity. These social collectives endure, evolving a tradition, culture, collective memory, belief systems, social structures, and institutions. … Individuals who have a sense of being society members experience solidarity and a sense of unity. They establish, in essence, a common social identity (p. xvi).

Identity is thus presented as stable and uniform. The possibilities for contested identities, hybrid identities, transnational identities – some of the identities in our era of globalisation, multiculture and diaspora - are therefore closed down. In a text that focuses on societies in conflict, resistant ethic and religious minorities and the social consequences of beliefs, this is a great loss. Where 'new society members' are recognised, their identities and beliefs are discussed in terms of "internalisation" (p. 41), "acculturation" and assimilation (p. 68). The development of hybrid social knowledges, new resilient cultural forms and new ways of belonging are not discussed.

Despite these limitations, I would still recommend this text, particularly to those seeking a social psychology that is applicable and valuable to the social problems we research, observe and experience. Bar-Tal raises many important questions about the adequacy of social psychology to address societal issues and to be relevant to 'real-life' realities. His answer is to develop a sub-discipline of *societal psychology* to "contribute a social-psychological perspective to the study of a wide range of social problems in a society" (p. 163). While, I have highlighted some difficulties in his text and some of the potential dangers, I would still argue that his ideas and his analyses deserve a wider audience. The problems he addresses and debates his book will encourage are precisely what social psychology needs to fulfil its potential and promise of being a psychology of the social.

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