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Discourse and representation: a comment on Batel and Castro 're-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology'

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Discourse and Representation: A comment on Batel and Castro 'Re-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology

In their informative and thoughtful paper, Batel and Castro (2018) propose to integrate, conceptually and empirically social representations theory (SRT) and discursive psychology (DP), two strands of European social psychology that have had at least until recently, a somehow turbulent and uneasy relationship. I congratulate Batel and Castro's effort, not least because in the last thirty years or so in which discursive psychology and social representational theorists have battled out their differences, psychology and social psychology have become less heterogeneous and less theoretical, much more inclined to rely on short, self-contained empirical studies that address a limited, at times narrow, domain. In this context, it is important to sustain theoretical and methodological debate as well as to find common ground. As the authors argue, a more systematic exchange could lead to an enlargement in the boundaries of both perspectives, offering us a more comprehensive understanding of meaning-making processes and social change.

We have much to learn from DP and SRT. Decades of research in both fields have shown that the operations of discourse and representation are central to understanding human psychology. Humans use language through complex conversational interaction which not only establishes the propositional content that guides action in everyday life, but also modalities of relating and feeling, all integral to the construction and transformation of social representations. Rich analyses of highly relevant and pressing societal issues, from the now canonical work on nationalism (Billig, 1995) and racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) to research on madness (Jodelet, 1991), human rights (Doise, 2002) and psychoanalysis

(Moscovici, 2008) express a much needed psychology that focuses on peoples' interaction as they live their lives (Wiggins and Potter, 2008).

Batel and Castro offer an excellent overview and synthesis of two fields that are neither easy to summarise nor amenable to simple categorisation. They map out sources and are bold in tracing variations, even if challenging the self-interpretation of some exponents (Potter, 2018). For Batel and Castro, as for many researchers working with these shared assumptions, understanding meaning and social change requires a combined analysis of both communication and discourse, with methods focusing simultaneously on content, format and processes (Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016, Gibson, 2015; Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos & Taulke-Johnson, 2018).

I am in general agreement with Batel and Castro's argument not least because contrarian dialogues unsettle comfort zones and push interlocutors into listening to alternative views. I accept the framework through each they assess the history and potential agreement between the approaches and the effort to systematise a pragmatic thematic analysis that investigates both content and format as inroads to discourse and representation.

Importantly, they recover the centrality of communicative interaction as the driving force of social representations, an axiom frequently ignored by both critics and social representations' researchers alike, but fundamental for Moscovici's theory as presented in the second part of his study of psychonalysis (Moscovici, 2008). Going beyond the propositional and semantic dimensions of representation to encompass its relational and discursive dimensions is one distinctive contribution of this paper. The other is to translate this theoretical integration into a detailed methodological approach which brings to fruition

an extensive empirical programme on how communication formats at the individual, relational and societal levels drive representational processes and social change (see also Castro and Batel, 2008; Castro, 2012; Batel and Castro, 2009, Castro and Mouro, 2016). I see in this framework an effort to capture the complexity of meaning in context, compatible with, and indeed requiring, analytical intersections with processes of social identity, collective action, history, power and social change (Batel and Castro, 2015; Drury and Reicher, 2000; Elcheroth, Doise & Reicher, 2011; Howarth, 2006; Liu & Hilton, 2005).

In what follows, I focus on two inter-related issues of theory and method, which continue to generate tensions for social psychologists studying discourse and representations: the status of psychological entities and the methodological toolkit available to the study of meaning in context.

On the Psychological and the Social, Again

Central to a substantive social psychology has been the assumption that psychological constructs are not 'located' in the individual mind but originate instead in communicative action between individuals, groups, institutions and communities. While this tradition has a long history and considerable hold in European social psychology (Israel & Tajfel, 1972; Farr, 1996), it continues to struggle to enter the walls of psychology (Valsiner, 2009). There are historical reasons for this situation, such as the separation between Wundt's first and second psychologies (Cole, 1996), which sharply divided experimental and social psychologies. However, the present conjuncture also plays a part, in particular institutional determinants that privilege the natural sciences and make 'the social' a troubled construct in Western psychology departments. The result is a predominantly individualistic way of

understanding 'the cognitive', depriving it of a developmental history and socio-cultural setting. Locked inside the head of an individual, rather than studied as it evolves in the species, in different cultures and throughout the life course, cognition is equated to the mental as asocial and ahistorical, without any reference to the external world, including the body and action. This conception of cognition is clearly hegemonic in Western psychology. However, it is unfortunate (and somehow ironic) that this dominant and quite limited conception should be taken as an ontological reality that justifies the dismissal of cognitive phenomena. Alternatives to this conception are at the core of socio-cultural traditions in psychology and can be found not only in social psychology but also in many other areas of the discipline (Condor & Figgou, 2012; Leman, 2002; Doise, 2003; Doise, Mugny & Perret-Clermont, 1975; Vygotsky, 1997).

I return to this issue because the ontological status of psychological constructs (or an inner mental life) has been called into sharp question by specific traditions of DP, whose emphasis on action (Potter, 2018, 2010; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) is amenable to be interpreted as rejection of psychological entities (Jovchelovitch, 1996; Van Dijk, 2012). Action is central and in this we are in agreement. However, what is in an action if not the full intentionality and agency of a subject, who knows, feels and understands the object-world cognitively, emotionally and socially? Action without psychological entities can suggest a number of dichotomies of the type inner/outer, mind/behaviour, mental/contextual, cognition/action, linguistic/representational. SRT avoids these dichotomies through a focus on processes of representing and a triangular model of meaning-making in context and time (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999; Castro, 2015; Jovchelovitch, 2007/2019) that goes back to the notion of semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). This insight has been articulated not only in Moscovici

(2000) and Markova's dialogical theory (Marková, 2003; 2016), but to my mind is equally expressed in Billig's exploration of thought as argumentation and the unconscious as conversation (Billig, 1999, 1987). It can be traced back to Vygotsky's genetic law of cultural development, which inscribed the primacy of social interaction in the core of human psychology. From a socio-cultural perspective, cognition and other 'mental', inner psychological entities are internalised sociality (Vygotsky, 1997).

Batel and Castro point to the issue when they refer to work that shows how inner dialogue and argumentation between self, other and mediating parties, be them experts (Castro and Batel, 2008) or third parties (Batel and Castro, 2015) permeate both the life of the self and the structure of representations. The argumentative and rhetorical strategies found in the dialogue between self-other-object are the inter-subjective processes that build representation, and higher psychological functions. They are precisely the locus of individual-environment co-construction, in which inner-outer connect.

What is in a Method?

In proposing a methodological integration of thematic and discourse analysis, Batel and Castro systematise what they argue is already in practice. A new generation of social psychologists is prepared to mix and match concepts and methodologies with creative rigour, without paying too much attention to orthodoxy. 'Undisciplined' is the word retrieved from Billig's work, their very paper an excellent demonstration of this irreverence. They do not seem at all concerned with preserving the 'purity' and focus of methodologies; rather they want to juxtapose a set of relevant theoretical questions to a set of research questions and analytical tools.

This is liberating for a discipline that historically has privileged the evaluation of methods *per se* rather than what is the appropriate fit between method, research question and context at hand. Focus on the fitness of methodology to question and situation enables repositioning methodologies as a function rather than a driver of the research process. It also allows an understanding of the limitations as well as potentials of any one research method; recognising that all share some limitations and adopting a 'one size does not fit all' approach prevents methodological monotheism and enables adjustment to contextual diversity and research questions.

A case in point is the use of interviews, vigorously criticised over the years by Potter and colleagues. One of the merits of this work is to identify the problems that lurk in the methodology, some of them endemic and difficult to correct (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Antaki, 2006). They argue against the excessive use of interviews and propose naturalistic methods of data collection as an alternative. I have no disagreement with the need to identify limitations in methodology and the richness of naturalistic data. Indeed, there is much to gain in working with this type of unobtrusive material (Lee, 2000), which are made widely available today by new technologies. However, as with all methodologies, they do have limitations and do not fit all research situations. First, just as with the outcome of interviews and experiments as soon as they become data, they become a research device, in which researchers are implicated from the start (Devereux, 1967). They are not free from researchers' agendas and we need to work through this implication, recognising that it can both hinder and help the research process.

Second, naturalistic data do not fit all research situations and need to be considered in relation to the pragmatics and contextual demands of the research process. There are instances in which control of the research process is not in the hands of researchers only (Aveling & Jovchelovitch, 2014), a constant and major challenge for those working in hard-to-reach, culturally specific contexts of adversity for instance (Fals-Borda, 1988). Clinical critical interviews (Piaget, 1926) or narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) can work very well when communities want to tell their stories and feel that dialogue with researchers is something they would benefit from (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernandez, 2013). Making sense of the dialogue staged between interviewer and interviewee (Farr, 1990) enables systematising representations, discourses and practices of relevant communities as they live their lives and cope with innovation in the public sphere (Mouro and Castro, 2012). Importantly, this practice of listening to participants matters immensely to those whose voices are marginalised and see research as an opportunity to build partnerships that enable visibility to their knowledge, experience and way of life.

Ultimately, we need to introduce cultural categories in our theoretical and methodological thinking because the manner in which we obtain data is a complex social and psychological negotiation that plays differently in different socio-cultural contexts. Methodological pluralism rather than strict adherence to any one single methodology works best for the study of meaning-making in the context in which people live their lives. Be it recording naturally occurring conversation in a UK helpline, interviewing urban residents and experts in Portugal or children in a favela territory in Brazil, social psychologists can draw on the resources of a plural suite of methodologies that are open to creative use and transformation as they adjust to different research settings. In considering the participation

inherent in all observation, and being fully aware of our own implication in the process, we are in a better position to build an authentic relationship between our agendas as researchers and the research itself.

Conclusion

In bringing together discourse and representation, Batel and Castro illuminate many of the central issues underlying our own representations and practices as researchers operating at a particular and troubled conjuncture. They tackle head on that most elusive of goals, which is the understanding of psychological phenomena as verb and noun, as both emergent property of agentic everyday social interaction and consolidated outcome of historical phenomena of cultural and political spheres. By investigating what is productive in the tensions between theoretical traditions, they disrupt our comfort zones and push self-contained theories and methods in social psychology. As Doise remarked, "...every explanatory model in social psychology is always insufficient on its own and needs the intervention of other explanations to account more fully for the conditions that are necessary for the dynamics described by a model to function" (Doise, 2004, p.176).

I have drawn on socio-cultural traditions of research to reiterate the importance of recognising psychological entities and avoiding dichotomies between inner/outer, mental/social, linguistic/ representational. Following Batel and Castro's methodological integration, I have also suggested a polytheist methodological attitude focusing on the best fit between research questions, context and methods for generating and analysing data. Social psychology can benefit from a dialogue between its theoretical and methodological traditions and contribute to intellectual debates that though currently squeezed out of

psychology have much to say to the discipline as a whole. Let us continue this debate and move forward stronger and less fragmented.

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