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Book summary

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Knowledge in context : representations, community and culture (author summary)

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Knowledge in Context[1]

(About the book)

This book develops a social psychological approach to knowledge, analysing the personal, interpersonal and sociocultural worlds in which it is produced. Sandra Jovchelovitch argues that representation is at the basis of all knowledge. Representation is viewed as the interrelations between self, other and object-world. Understanding its genesis, development and realisation in social life provides the key to explaining what ties knowledge to personal, interpersonal and sociocultural contexts. It is argued that representation explains the diversity of knowledge and opens up the rationality of knowing to symbolic and social logics that go beyond the epistemic.

The idea of knowledge as pure rationality is disputed and an alternative concept of reason introduced: one which is capable of establishing a dialogue with emotional and social logics. The argument is developed through a consideration of key debates and interrelated themes within the social psychology of knowledge. Topics covered include:

the emergence of social representations in debates about knowledge, rationality and social context
the relationship between knowledge, community and public spheres
recognition or denial of diversity in knowledge.

In addition the book covers the implications of the approach presented and how it might translate into an applied research programme in social psychology. Knowledge in Context offers a significant contribution to the field of social psychology and will make essential reading for all those wanting to follow debates on knowledge and representation at the cutting edge of cultural and developmental psychology, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.

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[1] Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). Knowledge in Context: Representations, Community and Culture. London: Routledge.

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Introduction

The problem of knowledge does not go away. It was raised some 2500 years ago by Plato's Socrates and again by Descartes at the beginning of the modern era. It persisted throughout the philosophical development of the modern period and it entrenched itself in the emergence of psychology as a scientific discipline. Indeed, it was through trying to respond to this question that all major psychological systems found an identity and a path of development. It is a question that continues to haunt us today as we try to make sense of the legacy we inherited and confront the new challenges presented by the proliferation of knowledge concerns in the contemporary world. Knowledge societies, knowledge economies, local knowledge, global knowledge, the management of knowledge, the knowledge of the other, self-knowledge; it may well be - as our postmodern colleagues once declared - that the knowledge question does not exist, but it certainly insists. From Plato to Descartes, to the very contemporary discussions about who holds and what is knowledge, the question of what makes knowledge knowledge has never really abandoned us.

Throughout this history there is one theme that matters a great deal to the social psychologist: our dominant conceptions about knowledge are underpinned by an ideal that detaches knowledge from its human sources. We can only reach knowledge if we free it from the illusions of our perceptions, the misunderstandings and biases of our cultures, the interests of our politics and the passions of our emotional lives. To free itself from this human substance seems to be the necessary condition for the emergence of 'true' knowledge: no person, no society, no culture. Knowledge, in order to be recognised as knowledge, must rise beyond the context of its production, free itself from the 'impurities' of its producers, from the interests, the passions and the motives that are linked to a human person, to a human polis, to a human culture. While we know that this project has not evolved without antinomies, the basic paradox that marks our relations with knowledge is still very much with us: despite being a human product, our ideal of true knowledge dehumanises it.

This is not a new question for psychology, and indeed, throughout this book I shall be settling accounts with my own discipline. The struggles between psyche and logos, which are constitutive of both, have been largely obliterated by the gradual consolidation of cognition as information processing, a form of knowing conceived as 'pure' rationality, centred on logos as correspondence between knowledge and the reality of the world. This kind of conceptualisation of the knowing subject has contributed to the development and consolidation of an influential representation of what rational knowledge is, and in consequence of how normality and deviation should be conceived. Even those such as Freud, Piaget and Vygotsky who, as we shall see, helped to undermine this view by establishing the emotional, social and historical genesis of knowledge, remained to the very end committed to the idea that true knowledge involves a gradual process of detachment from person, community and culture. The idea of knowledge remained powerfully linked to the impersonal and detached from subjective value, whereas its emotional and relational dimensions have been linked to distortion, deviation and irrationality. From this perspective, to know is to progress from states of emotional and relational entanglement that threaten the rationality of knowing to a state of cool detachment, where the reality of the world can be appreciated as it is. Free from its emotional and relational components, knowledge is achieved at the end of a long ascending process. There, at the top, it stands: objective, cool and impersonal. Left behind is life: subjective, messy, personal and therefore irrational.

This book is partly an analysis of this separation and partly an attempt to overcome it. My aim is to develop a social psychological approach to knowledge that can retrieve its connection to the personal, interpersonal and sociocultural worlds in which it is produced. Central to this effort is the analysis of representation, understood as a dialogical form generated by the interrelations between self, other and object-world. Representation, I shall try to show, is at the basis of all knowledge systems and understanding its genesis, development and realisation in social life provides the key to understanding the relationship that ties knowledge to persons, communities and lifeworlds. It is through representation that we can understand both the diversity and the expressiveness of all knowledge systems.

In turning to the problem of knowledge, via the analysis of representation, I know I am stepping in mined terrain. The weight of the Cartesian heritage in our understanding of representation cannot be

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easily dismissed and across psychology's many schools and subdisciplinary fields there has been a strong tendency to reduce representation to a purely individual cognitive process deprived of pathos and ethos. Individual mental representations have been theorised as the foundation of knowledge, defined as a quest for certainty and full correspondence between itself and the world outside. This view of representation has held such power that it is to be found not only in the work developed under the umbrella of mainstream cognition but also in the critical work that, under the banner of postmodernism, has dismissed the idea of representation altogether. While I recognise the power of this conception of representation, I do not think that it should dictate how we treat the phenomenon of representation. Disliking a concept can hardly justify declaring the phenomenon to which it refers inexistent, especially if the concept is not the only one available. The theoretical and empirical work of social and developmental psychologists emphasises that the phenomenon of representation is both symbolic and social, going far beyond the idea of a copy produced by a solitary thinker. Representation is social because the human child cannot produce herself as a feeling and thinking self without the participation of other human beings and it is symbolic because it uses arbitrary tokens to invest the object-world with meaning. That the same object can mean different things and represent different aspirations to different people is the simple fact that debunks the idea of representation as copy.

One of my main intentions in this book is to retrieve the dialogical view of representation, reaffirm its symbolic and social character and to connect its dynamics to different forms of knowing. The central argument I shall present is that knowledge must be understood and explained in relation to representational modalities, which in turn relate to the type of public sphere and cultural traditions of a community. The approach I seek to develop is elaborated around three main propositions:

1. Representational processes are both symbolic and social, expressing subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds. They constitute the architecture of all knowledge systems and in order to understand knowledge we need to understand the genesis of representation and the interrelations between self-other-object that make it happen in social life. This involves exploring how the empirical realisation of these interrelations in different public spheres shapes different modalities of representation and the multiple dimensions of representational processes - the 'who', 'how', 'why', 'what' and 'what for' of representation.

2. Different modalities of representation enable different forms of knowledge. Knowledge is a plural, heterogeneous phenomenon that comprises multiple rationalities, whose logics are not defined by a transcendental norm but relate to the pragmatics of contexts. The diversity of knowledge expresses the diversity of subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds represented in its different forms.

3. Understanding the heterogeneity of knowledge involves dismantling the traditional representation that sees knowledge in terms of a progressive scale where superior forms of knowing displace lower forms. Different know ledges coexist, responding to different needs and fulfilling different functions in social life. Diversity in knowledge is an asset of alI human communities and dialogue between different forms of knowing constitutes the difficult but necessary resource that can enlarge the boundaries of all knowledges.

The chapters that follow are an effort, no doubt unfinished and tentative at various places, to explore these propositions and bring them together in a coherent approach. The first three chapters provide the theoretical foundations on representation, the diversity of knowledge and communities and public spheres, while the last three seek to take these foundations further by developing frameworks to capture the forms and functions of knowledge, the social psychology of encounters between different knowledges and a programme of research and intervention in the social psychology of knowledge.

In Chapter 1 I set the stage for the book, discussing the main issues involved in the social psychology of representations and exploring in detail the representational form, its relation to the symbolic function and the production of knowledge. I discuss the making of representation in Cartesian philosophy and articulate the dialogical approach to the study of representation, highlighting the genetic and symbolic processes involved in its development. By retrieving the ontogenesis of representation in the human child, I seek to show that as well as being a cognitive structure referring to the object-world, representation is at the same time entangled in the affective and social dynamics of self-other relations,

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which make it at once a psychological, interrelational and epistemic structure, expressing subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds.

In Chapter 2 I focus on the theory of social representations and its relations to debates, which at the beginning of the twentieth century addressed the problem of knowledge and context, an issue frequently missed in the Anglo-Saxon reception of social representations. This debate coincided in many respects with the very beginnings of the social sciences and it is difficult to separate the psychological, sociological and anthropological arguments, which were produced at a time when disciplinary boundaries mattered much less than today. I trace the origins of social representations, its main presuppositions and the intellectual milieu in which it originated, examining in detail its main ancestors and the legacy they left to the theoretical and empirical programme of the theory. I introduce the concept of cognitive polyphasia and discuss the problem of difference in forms of knowledge and what constitutes human reason. I consider in detail the positions defended by ancestors such as Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl, Piaget, Freud and Vygotsky revisiting assumptions of linear evolutionism and recasting questions related to how comparisons between the knowledge of adults and children, advanced and 'primitive' peoples, scientists and lay people have been established and treated. These issues continue to matter today because defining who holds rational knowledge is both an unresolved theoretical problem and a political act. Its implications for the valuation and ranking of different peoples and ways of life are vast, and can potentially lead to practices of exclusion and devaluation of specific groups and communities.

Chapter 3 expands the discussion about knowledge and context by introducing a social psychology of community and by theorising the relationship between knowledge, community and public spheres. It offers an approach to community that emphasises the perspective of actors and the symbolic processes involved in demarcating community boundaries: the making of social knowledges, the formation of social memory and the construction of narratives that can give communities identity and produce the experience of belonging, connecting individual persons to a community's trajectory in time and space. I draw on the work of Hannah Arendt and Jiirgen Habermas to integrate the conceptualisation of public spheres into a social psychological framework to the study of communities. I review the concept of the public sphere and introduce its social psychology, emphasising the notions of perspective, plurality and dialogue. I then show that there is a relationship between the kind of public sphere of a community and the form of knowing it produces; the analysis of the representational form (self-other-object) is the key conceptual brick for understanding both knowledge and the public sphere of communities. I argue that transformations in contemporary public spheres are related to transformations in social knowledge and while collective representations fitted well in the structure of traditional public spheres, the specific conditions which characterise detraditionalised public spheres today call for new forms of social knowledge, capable of accommodating diversity in perspective and plurality of horizons.

Chapter 4 explores the variation of the representational form and how this variation shapes the form and the function of knowledge. I introduce a framework to study the work of representation that is based on the constituents of the representational process and the intersubjective and interobjective relations that form its basic architecture. These are the actors, the communicative practices, the object, the reasons and the functions of representations, or what I shall call the 'who', the 'how', the 'why', the 'what', and 'what for' of representation. In this framework representation emerges as a social psychological process involving social actors whose identities and emotional lives are co-constitutive of representation, whose interpersonal relations shape what and how they come to know the world, and whose epistemic constructions are intertwined with the logic of self, object and self-other relations. I put emphasis on the 'what for' of representation, identifying five basic functions: identity, community, memory, anticipation and ideology. This framework gives rise to an initial systematisation of how different modalities of representation are related to different forms of knowing. I distinguish two modalities of representation, collective and social, and relate them to different forms of knowing: myth, belief and programmatic ideology, common sense and science. In developing such a framework I am acutely aware of its limitations and difficulties as well as of the fact that I am working with ideal types. My intention, however, is to offer an initial heuristics to consider variation in knowledge and to

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understand the expressiveness of all knowledge systems, including those that might seem absurd and irrational for the observer.

Recognising diversity in knowledge poses questions related to how different knowledges meet, are compared and communicate in public spheres, which is the problem I address in Chapter 5. How do we encounter the knowledge of others, the representations of others, the reasoning of others? Is there a potential for communication between different representations or do we need to reconcile ourselves with the incommunicability of different worldviews? I address these issues by exploring the perennial ambivalence of self-other relations and the deep psychology of reciprocity and domination. Mutual recognition and perspective taking are necessary, I argue, to establish dialogues between different knowledges and worldviews, a dialogue that in my view is not only possible as it is necessary for the consolidation of democratic and liberal public spheres. On this basis, I propose a framework to identify dialogical and non-dialogical encounters between different knowledges and examine two cases - madness and community interventions for development - to exemplify these two types of encounter. Here, I argue that different forms of knowledge can live side by side, cross-fertilising and undergoing productive transformations on the basis of dialogical encounters. This is a resource for both individuals, communities and for the development of all knowledges.

In Chapter 6 I explore how the approach I develop in the book translates into an applied programme of research and intervention in social psychology and beyond. I consider both classical and more contemporary studies in the field of social representations and identify in these projects at least two aspects of the approach to knowledge that I have developed in the book: the first is the idea that all knowledges are expressive, insofar as they seek to represent subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds; and the second is the idea that different forms of knowing can coexist fulfilling different functions and responding to different needs in the life of communities. These two conceptual threads have guided research in social representations and are essential to research and interventions that seek to establish a dialogical relation with the field being approached. Finally, in the last part of the chapter I bring together the issues I have addressed in the book and summarise the main tenets of the approach I propose.

In writing this book I have used the theory of social representations as a platform from which I could develop further concerns that are at the centre of my research and teaching over the last eight years or so. I consider theoretical traditions as potential spaces that can open up horizons and help us to problematise and better understand the immediate concerns of our present. They are not fixed in stone and it is only by treating them with some scepticism and openness that we can contribute to their development in time. Moscovici's work has reconnected social psychology with the social sciences and offered us the tools to understand the relations between psychological and social processes. His social psychology, as I discuss in Chapter 2, is substantively social without losing sight of the individual. Psychologists who seek the social dimension should not need to renounce the study of mind and psychological phenomena. At the same time, following in the steps of sociocultural psychologists, the theory of social representations has llowed the consolidation of a research programme that seeks to address pressing and urgent social issues. What Luria stated in his memoirs many years ago, still resonates today: 'I wanted a psychology that would apply to real people as they live their lives, not an intellectual abstraction in a laboratory. . . . I wanted a psychology that was relevant, that would give some substance to our discussions about building a new life' (1979: 22). All of the above seem to me 'good enough' reasons to take up this platform and work on its development.

In addition to social representations there are many other sources in this book that have been part of my intellectual trajectory and my grounding in the world - Brazil, Latin America, and in the last 15 years the UK. It has been impossible for me to shake off the deep impact Freud had in my training as a psychologist and the presence of Latin American theorists who kept my generation aware of both our responsibilities towards an unequal and unjust society and our marginal position in the world. Freud, Freire and the experience of displacement are certainly present in this book. Being off-centre has helped me to understand better the position of the centre, and the difficulties I still have in communicating with many of my colleagues in the north. It also made me acutely aware of how deep cultural differences are inscribed in our individual psychology; they are not abstractions but have an existential impact at the

level of the subject. In many respects these differences do put people miles apart and prevent them from getting closer to each other. Yet, the recognition of this distance is also a field of possibilities, open to different solutions. One solution is reconciliation with the distance and the experience of solitude; another is the struggle for communication, with all its difficulties and impending obstacles as well as the discoveries and enlargement of horizons it allows. This book makes a clear option for communication and tries to elaborate a model that can both encompass its potentials and understand the obstacles for its realisation.

It was in Europe that I started reading Habermas, and his thought has become a constant reference to my understanding of social psychology and to the approach I have developed in this book. Even if not systematically, there is a clear Habermasian drift in my text. In Habermas I found echoes of Freire and of phenomenological traditions that have put emphasis on the study and recognition of lifeworlds. Ironically, it is precisely where Habermas has been most criticised that my sympathies for him lie. I like Habermas' commitment to the idea of communication, with some ambivalence I like his attempt to recuperate the embattled notion of reason and rescue it through a communicative paradigm, and I like his counter-factual 'idealism', the idea that reaching understanding in an ideal speech situation is at the basis of all human communication. What is called idealism in Habermas for me resonates with the necessity of sustaining a normative and utopian dimension in theoretical constructions, which correspond to the no less necessary emotional experience of hope. What is the point of having theory just to describe what is the case? In this regard I continue to side with the old Marxian view that the task of theory is not only to understand reality but also to transform it. I also think that despite the clear Eurocentric overtones that mark his work and some problems in his readings of Freud and Piaget, Habermas has produced the most comprehensive reassessment of the theoretical traditions that shaped psychology and constructed our views about human consciousness. To read Habermas is imperative for the social psychologist who is interested in pursuing the intersubjective.

Another perspective that is present in this book is the genetic approach to social psychological phenomena, also called developmental or historical. It is a perspective elaborated by psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, who took the development of the human child as an empirical opportunity to observe the historical development of psychological phenomena. In the age of recombinant DNA the term genetic can raise misunderstandings, but in continental psychology it has not needed justification since Piaget spelled out the sense in which he used it: 'genetic psychology tries to explain mental functions by their mode of formation; that is, by their development in the child' (Piaget and Inhelder 1969: viii). I extensively draw on such theories and use the cognitive, emotional and social development of the human child to understand what appear as fully developed phenomena in adult social life. For a long time psychology saw no qualitative change between childhood and adulthood, treating the former as no more than a training ground, a lesser preparatory stage for the real person who emerges in adulthood. That the psychology of adults could ever be considered without recourse to the development of the child is indicative of the difficulties psychology has had to integrate the historical dimension, something convincingly discussed by Vygotsky, Piaget, Winnicott, Erikson and Mead among others. Any analysis of developed forms of behaviour without explaining the genesis of these forms remains partial; this is the main problem I identify in the current cognitive psychology of representation. It will not, and indeed it cannot within the confines of its individualism, explain the genesis of representational phenomena because to explain this genesis would necessarily open representation to its intersubjective and social conditions of realisation. Alternatively, genetic approaches bring to the fore the primacy of intersubjectivity in the constitution of mind, the necessity of dialogue and communication to its development and the redemptive power of both to resolve issues of isolation, domination and exclusion in personal lives and social fields.

In bringing together the sources I mentioned above I have paid little attention to disciplinary boundaries and indeed nurtured the hope that this work can transpose some of the too rigid distinctions that separate them. At the same time my aim has been to highlight the contribution of social psychology to the understanding of issues that constitute a common agenda for the social sciences. Indeed the classical canon of social psychology is not only alive and well but is also being fruitfully used by neighbouring disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have been able to claim

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the insights of Mead, Freud, Winnicott, Piaget and Vygotsky to write about self, identity, community, language, communication, intersubjectivity and successfully connect these constructs with social contexts (see, for instance, Habermas' theory of communicative action (1987, 1991), Giddens' (1991) work on self and modernity, Honneth's work on recognition (1995), Benhabib's (1992, 2002) work on self and multiculturalism and Elliot's (1992) work on subjectivity and the unconscious, amongst others). From the late 1980s onwards social psychologists themselves returned to their classical texts as observers and avid readers of a crop of new work concerned with the subjective and the intersubjective in the social sciences.

Inspired and driven by the central problem of modernity, most of psychology saw the growth and development of knowledge as a victory of reason against the irrational, as the gradual process whereby the human child learns how to renounce centration in perspective, and the narcissistic impulses that go with it, to enter the shared world of reciprocity in perspective and the sublimation of narcissism through work, solidarity and cultural creation. This process is a battle fuelled by the contradictory and ambivalent feelings that sustain the tension between self and other, between individual and society, between drive and civilisation. If psychology has taught us anything, it is that the fully rational person does not exist. The so called sources of irrationality, belief and myth do not go away. They remain with us and to place them exclusively in exotic others, in children, in. women, in lay communities, is nothing more than a precarious and self-deceptive defence. It is not a matter of producing an eulogy of these dimensions nor proposing that we should be ruled by them; it is a matter of recognising the logics they express and the rationality they contain, of being able to deal with them for what they are and accepting that they are both inside and outside all of us. It is only in this way that we might aspire to a wiser reason, one that recognises its internal variety and tries to establish a dialogue with its other.