

COMMENT ON THE PAPER: "A PROPOS DE LA STRUCTURE DES REPRESENTATIONS SOCIALES" BY CHR. GUIMELLI

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This is a very interesting paper which gives us some new informations about the relationship between the structure of social representations and their functions for action. On the other hand, it shares some weaknesses and ambiguities with the kind of discussion which dominates the field. Since my commentary must be short, it concentrates on the weak and does not appropriately appreciate the strong points. Therefore I should like to state very explicitly here that I learned a lot from Guimelli's article.

My first critic concerns unclarities in the distinction of social levels. In his paper, and especially in the paragraph "1. Les conditions de la transformation des representations sociales" the author treats, quite in line with the definition of social representations, the "group" as the carrier system of the representation, and consequently as its locus of change and transformation. In his empirical work in the later sections, it seem however that it are the individuals, in particular the young nurses which make decisions on the basis of their (individual) social representations. The functions of social representations for social systems and for their members are not necessarily identical. In the present case, we come to the somewhat puzzling conclusion that the concentration on the social representation's central idea, the "role propre", leads to a split of the system into two, those who work in the public or in the liberal sector respectively. Can we conceive of a social system's social representation, the function of which is the systems dissolution? We understand what the "role propre" means to the individuals; it would be helpful to know also what it means for the social systems of nurses as a whole. The negligence of the problem of *levels of carrier systems* is a general weakness of the present theory of social representation (compare also v. Cranach. 1992).

My second critic refers to the concept of behavior which is used in the paper. Behavior is of course a very unprecise concept and the term "pratique social" which is often used in the social representation literature seems to be even worse if that is possible; to my knowledge, it conceals the fact that on the behavioral side there are processes the organization of which is not less complicated than those of the underlying knowledge structure which we study in our research about social representations. Efforts to study these processes, the way in which cognitions and emotions energize and steer behavior, have been made in the various action theories and the related empirical research (you see, I am riding my hobby horses). The least we can say is that actions, of whatever type they are, are very complex processes which possess sequential and hierarchical orders. The professional decisions of the nurses in Guimelli's research perform at least what we might call a *mental act* which is somehow embedded within a *long-term project*. Its organization must be complex, and the social representation's impact by no means is a simple and trivial event. Guimelli's results show us *that* the decision is influenced by the social representation's central system, but not *how* that happens.

This leads to my last remark, which goes beyond the present discussion. I am willing to believe that it is useful to conceive of the structure of social representation in the way Guimelli proposes; on the other hand I know something about the structure of action. How can we bring the two together? The first obstacle is a terminological one: what is for example, the "noyau central" in a given act, and how can we describe it in the terms of action theory? Does it relate to, or is it even identical with the "goal " which some researches see as the essence of action: or with the "decision", as others do, or what else? We have tried to find preliminary answers in our studies (Thommen, v. Cranach & Ammann, 1992), and these are of course only the beginnings.

So, what I demand from the investigators of social representation is to pay more respect to the carrier systems of social representation, and to the action side of human existence, both on the level of the individuals and on that of the social systems. But I should like to go further. During the last decade, I have been coming out of my mountain-chains of action- and social systems-theory to explore the hills and plains of social representations, where I feel somewhat at home now: I should like to invite their inhabitants for a return visit or even a longer stay in my territory.

References

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