

SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE, IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

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Abstract: This paper tries to be an analysis of different "forms" of social knowledge and their methodological implications for the study of social representations. In the same way that social cognitive psychologists establish differences between procedural and declarative knowledge, it is assumed that there are forms of social knowledge which do not appear when only using language analyses. There are areas of the social knowledge that are transmitted and "stored" in the ordinary (everyday) structured social practices, and which find a group regulated activity as their most adequate form of expression.

One of the most studied aspects in the social representations' domain is that of the functions they fulfil. This functionalist approach has brought with it different studies orientated towards, for example, the social representations of health and its influence on cognitive and behavioural aspects in both contexts of health and illness (Herzlich, 1973; Echebarría & Páez, 1989; Echebarría, San Juan & Ozamiz, 1992); social representations' function defending social identities in situations of social conflict (Di Giacomo, 1985, 1986; Deschamps & Clémence, 1987, Doise, 1988, 1989; Echebarría, Fernández Guede & González, in press; Echebarría, Fernández Guede, San Juan & Valencia, 1992). These studies analyze social representations which are already organized, trying to see their possible influence.

But on the other hand there are fewer studies interested in the problem of acquisition and maintenance of social representations. In this context, a theoretical study of social representations in so far as a social theory of knowledge (Marková, 1992), would be enriched if it would in some way or another study these following aspects:

- 1) study the origin, ways of transmission and transformation of social knowledge. In this area, a very important aspect would be the study of social memory;
- 2) relationship between social identities, being part of a group and the socialization of the group's social knowledge;
- 3) relationship between social knowledge and the individual reproduction of knowledge.

This paper tries to study the relationships which exists between the acquisition of social identities, the forms in which it is kept (social memories), the way in which social knowledge is transmitted, and the "forms" which this knowledge adopts.

The "Forms" of Social Knowledge

Social cognition has classically established a difference between declarative and procedural knowledge (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1983; Gardner, 1987; Stephan, 1989). The declarative knowledge adopts a semantic structure which may be communicated by means of language, whilst procedural knowledge is a knowledge of "knowing how to do, or how to act", which is basically practical, and very difficult, if not sometimes impossible to

communicate by means of language. It is a type of knowledge communicated by practical actions.

These differences could also be applied to the study of social knowledge. Social knowledge (social representations) would in this way adopt two forms: one which would be communicated in the ordinary linguistic interaction, and which would emerge in different situations, such as when one person is asked about an object by means of a questionnaire or interview, or when there is a situation of debate, in which those involved in the debate must find reasons with which to defend their positions. But there is also another kind of social knowledge which is not linguistically expressed; it adopts as form of expression more or less ritualized everyday practices. In sociology, ritualized action as a form of creation, recreation and retention of social knowledge has been extensively accepted (Durkheim, 1912/1982; Namer, 1983). But in psychology in general, and in social psychology in particular, knowledge emerges as an attribute which is situated "inside the head" of the subjects. This assumption relegates the study of that type of knowledge which is expressed by action.

Nevertheless, this form of social knowledge which is expressed by means of action is very important, as we shall see later, both in the process of development of social identities as in the acquisition of these identities.

The old indo-european axiom which states that we "act as we think" makes action depend on thought, and assumes the existence of a correspondence between them (Joulé & Beauvois, 1987). But we may pose the idea that sometimes: (a) "we think in accordance with our acts"; (b) there is no correspondence between thought and behaviour; and maybe more important still, (c) in many occasions we are not able to linguistically express all the social knowledge, which, on the other hand we are able to communicate in our daily activities.

The function of representations in particular, and social knowledge in general, of justifying previous practices (and so, making action depend on thought) has been amply illustrated in relation to the topic of social discrimination. We may find this idea, for example, in those authors who accept the idea that "gender belief systems" and sexual stereotypes fulfil the function of justifying and legitimating women's historical discrimination in the allot of social, economic and political responsibilities (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Echebarría, in press); or in studies conducted on discriminative practices towards certain social groups (Echebarría, Fernández Guede & González, in press).

The non-correspondence between action and thought is illustrated in studies on cognitive dissonance, in which we find that sometimes behavioural changes are not followed by cognitive changes (Axson & Lawress, 1992). Joulé & Beauvois (1987) show this independence of the behavioural and cognitive aspects in a study on the acceptance of a suggestion to stop smoking using a procedure of masked submission. Although there are no differences in the levels of acceptance, these subjects did differ in the nature of the explanations for their similar behaviours, attributing them to different factors.

Finally, and as we have already stated more important to the aim of this paper, we are not always able to express by means of language the knowledge which we do apply and communicate in our ordinary or daily behaviour. There are ample examples of the non-linguistic expression of this kind of social knowledge. Jodelet (1989) found, in her study on the social representations of madness in the commune of Ainay-Le Château, a conception of contagion and transmission of madness by way of body fluids in general and sweat in particular. This representation draws its origins from past beliefs in the nature of humours or

body fluids. Nevertheless, this social knowledge did not show and was not present in language. The author was only able to accede to this knowledge by observing the routine practices performed in hygienic activities. These representations appeared clearly whilst seeing how the clothes of these "mad people" were washed aside, how their clothes were handled with rubber gloves, and the amount of bleach used on these clothes. Jodelet, (1989, p. 307) states that "there may exist in social representations belief elements which due to their archaic and anisogenic nature, will not be visible if not in the acts which they inspire... some representational dimensions will be perceived or observed in the specific relations and practical ordinary acts, without always having to have a verbal correspondence".

We can find similar studies in the area of the "law of sympathetic magic" (Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff, 1986; Rozin, Markwith & Nemeroff, 1992). This would be basically an old folk idea, already mentioned by Tylor in the nineteenth century, which states that when two things (objects, animals or people) are in contact there is a mutual transference of some properties. This belief with regard to contagion is still present nowadays, and may explain the "panic" which many people, even those who supposedly are "instructed", have to being in contact with seropositive people. But as is the case in Jodelet's study, this social knowledge does not emerge during an interview, it has no verbal expression, it is expressed by means of "the ordinary practical acts"

As Duveen and DeRosa (1992) pointed out, different levels of knowledge could be found depending on the method chosen for approaching social knowledge. These differences are exemplified in their research on social representations and mental illness. The image of madness elicited using a method based on verbal reports (i.e. interviews or questionnaires) tends to be orientated towards models based on scientific knowledge, and has positive connotations, whilst non-verbal measures elicitate more "archaic" and negative representations.

An example of the importance of ordinary social practices, not only as a form of expressing social knowledge, but also as factor which may transform these representations, may be found in the studies on changes of the social representations of hunting as a result of previous changes in hunting practices (Guimelli, 1989; Guimelli & Jacobi, 1990).

This idea of the reproduction and communication of social knowledge by way of practice and everyday actions is not a new one. Gramsci (1977; Echebarría, Páez & Valencia, 1986) already mentioned this fact when analysing social legitimacy. He stated that this legitimacy would in the end adopt the form of a "know how to act" type of knowledge, which would be present in ordinary life in the figure of roles. Each role would be a part of the global "know how to act" type of knowledge, and it would be the act of performing these actions associated with the role which would in the end guarantee the stability of a certain social order (Berger & Luckman, 1979; Gramsci, 1977). The role would lead us to a reified view of the social order. For Berger and Luckman (1979), it is the externalization of the social activity which leads to and produces the objectivation of society.

More recently, and in the field of social psychology, Harré (1981) stated that a great deal of social knowledge is not to be found "inside an individual's head", due to the fact that this knowledge is public and social. The definition of action used by Harré is similar to what we understand as social practices. For Harré (1981, pg. 214): "action draws our attention to the unfolding structured sequence of actions by which the actors, in role, perform the acts called upon by the public demands of the situation and setting in which they are found themselves".

From all that has been said until now, we may assume that the ways of achieving access to social knowledge (social representations) which are normally used (interviews, free association, questionnaires...) are not capable of totally grasping this knowledge, and they are also incapable of showing the non-correspondence between the discursive universe and ordinary practices. The preponderance awarded to the discursive knowledge, especially in view of the rise of various "schools", which could be united under the label of "discursive analyses" has led us to forget this other form of social knowledge. As shown in Jodelet's (1989) study, the analysis of the contents of linguistic discourses could be enriched using other procedures, such as observation, to obtain data.

Of course, we do not want to deny or refuse the possibility of producing contexts which may favour some kind of conscious arising, which might lead as a consequence to the expression in a linguistic fashion of this social knowledge of "knowing how to act". Without trying to extend ourselves too much, we can think of two ways of showing this type of knowledge: (a) going back to social cognition's paradigm, studies on causal attribution have shown that subjects are actively involved in the construction or building up of explanations to unexpected situations which change the "normal" course of ordinary contexts (Pittman & Heller, 1987; Pittman & DeAgostino, 1985). Applying this idea to the theme we are discussing, we could state that changes in the ordinary ritualized contexts, or in Forgas' terms (1981), social episodes, which interfere or interrupt the scripts of previous actions may stimulate this change from "procedural" social knowledge to "declarative" knowledge (using social cognition's terms). Due to these interruptions there is a need to redefine the meaning of the situation in a process of negotiation with the rest of the actors. (b) Another kind of situation which might stimulate our awareness of the significance of social knowledge, is that in which argumentation and social polemic or disputes take place. In these situations, those subjects who are a part of the argumentation recreate portions of the social knowledge as a way of defending their particular positions (Billig, 1987, 1989, 1992).

Social Knowledge and Social Identities

We have already stated that some part of the shared social knowledge may not be directly translated into a linguistic expression. It is communicated through ordinary ritualized practices. In accordance with Gramsci (1977), we have stated that there is a social knowledge of "knowing how to act" which finds its adequate expression in social roles, defining these roles as social practices that take place in situations in which its significance has been negotiated in such a way that the actors already share common expectations with regard to present or future actions. Going a step further, we now state that these consensual and routine social practices not only express a form of social knowledge, but are also very important in the acquisition of the social knowledge and in the development of social identities.

The concept of social identity has been extensively used in social psychology, being associated with the works of Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel, 1978; 1981; 1982; Turner, 1978; 1987; 1988) and their Social Identity Theory. In its original statement, social identity is: "an individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain group together with the emotional and value significance of this membership" (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Forgas, 1981, p 124). In its subsequent development, Turner defined self-concept as: "a cognitive component of the psychological system or process...(it) may be conceptualized in part as a cognitive structure, a cognitive element of the information-processing system... the self concept comprises many

different elements. There are multiple concepts of the self for any individual" (Turner, 1985, p 94). Social identities are just one of these multiple concepts. The form in which these identities are acquired and developed is exactly the same as with personal identities: the result of cognitive processes of categorization and differentiation. This "cognitive information processor" which is the self, applying the adequate algorithm, may extract a group of attributes which best allows us to differentiate clusters of people. The individual will apply to him/herself those attributes which distinguish his/her group from other groups (Turner, 1984; 1985).

As we can see, first of all social identity will eventually be defined as a "cognitive structure" which processes available context data. This identity will also have a cognitive content (group stereotype) and an affective-evaluative one. Finally, we will find ourselves faced with the same problem mentioned by the cognitive perspective whilst studying knowledge: identity appears to be a property which is inside the individual's head. Then, and paraphrasing Forgas (1981), what is social about social identity? We are not saying that social identity does not have any relationship with certain stereotypes which refer to characteristics of the group into which they categorize us, or into which we personally categorize ourselves, or that it does not bring about some affective feelings in the subject. But social identity is more than just this: it is actions and social practices at work. For example, in the area of gender stereotypes, different authors have stated the importance which the social roles play in the definition of male and female (Echebarría, in press). Parsons' structural functionalist approach (Parsons, 1951; Echebarría, 1991) already stated the importance of the social status, and of the roles which depend on them in the definition of identity. Recent examples of this orientation are the studies of McCall (1987), or Wiley & Alexander (1987). For McCall, identity (self) is a compound of a series of role identities which are an image of the social structure. These role identities are "imaginary visions which the individuals have with respect to themselves in terms of how they like to think of themselves as performers of particular roles" (McCall, 1987, pg. 134). Wiley & Alexander (1987) think that when a person is involved in some activities related to a role, he or she is seen as a person who "has" the dispositional dimensions associated with the role. For example, when somebody is seen acting as an executive, it is assumed that he or she "has" the dispositions which define an executive: aggressive, competitive, etc. Nevertheless, although this structural-functionalist approach has the advantage of placing the definition of identity not in an intrapsychic dimension but in that of the social activities performed by the subjects, it has the problem of presenting a static and reified view of the social system. It is because of this that we will approach the definition of identity given by structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1977; 1983a; 1983b; 1987; Stryker & Statham, 1985), which introduces some changes in the classical interactionist perspective. It accepts the existence of some degree of stability in the social organization, and also introduces the idea that the social actors have the capacity of negotiating the social meaning. From this point of view, the self is to some extent a reflection of society. In the degree in which the individual, in the course of his/her socialization, is included in structured clusters of social relations, the self will develop itself in view of the inclusion of the identities associated with the positions which are adopted in these structured contexts (mother/son/daughter, etc.; militant of the political party X; executive of the multinational Y, etc.). But the self is not only this cluster of "role identities" which reflect its social immersion. The self also implies an element of reflection, interpretation, grasping the meaning of the situation. As opposed to structural functionalism, roles are not estatic and rigid, they are open to negotiation (which in turn produces changes in the identities).

The most important point of all which has been said above, is that to some degree, social identification (and as a consequence the development of social identities) implies the exteriorization of a socially regulated activity. Ordinary implications in certain social contexts which regulate social interaction, and the adoption of certain positions in these contexts, lead to a twofold process: first of all, it leads to the acquisition, by means of action, of some social knowledge, and secondly to the development of identities which are fixed to this action. An example of this position, which is specifically applied to the area of acquisition of professional capacities, but which could be easily applied to other areas, is that proposed by Lavé (1991). In this study, Lavé criticizes two perspectives in the study of knowledge acquisition: (a) social cognition's perspective, which reduces activity and social interaction only to the design of the context with the aim of studying its effects on individual cognition, and (b) social constructionism, for whom the social world is reduced to the study of language. Lavé states (p. 148) that both perspectives have in common their "exclusion of the social world as an object of study".

Lavé adopts a model of *situational social practices*. This approach is akin to the interpretative approach in that it accepts the existence of a relational interdependence between the subject and the world, and that significance is negotiated. But it differs from this approach in that it believes that "the acquisition of knowledge, thought and knowledge imply relationships between subjects who are involved in an activity "inside" and "with" a world which is socially and culturally structured" (p 148). The acquisition of social knowledge is a result of a process of adherence to a group which shares common practices. The acquisition of group identity and the acquisition of a certain capacity (practical social knowledge) are two elements of the same process. The first one (social identity) provides the second one with a motivation, an orientation and a meaning. This close relationship between the development of social identities and the acquisition of social knowledge could be seen in those different forms of learning studied by ethnographers. In fact, Lavé exemplifies this process through the studies on the formation of the "magicians or witch doctors" in certain brazilian tribes. This acquisition of knowledge, which is a part of the figure of the "witch doctor", is not done through the processing by the apprentice of some type of content which is either written down or orally transmitted. The evaluation of the process of acquisition of knowledge is not done using external exams. The to-be "magician" acquires the knowledge by means of everyday work. Practice is what allows him to achieve knowledge. He will start to work on some secondary and partial activities, and as time goes by, he will start to participate directly in other more important tasks. In this process where daily work and practice are the important features, the apprentice not only achieves the capacity to do something (knowledge), but also acquires an identity accepted by everyone. This simultaneous process of acquisition of knowledge due to practice, and of an identity, allows the group first of all to survive and secondly to renew itself. Group knowledge is stored and transmitted due to socially regulated practice. For Lavé, one of the reasons of the failure of present day schools is that there is a differentiation between knowledge acquisition of the socially structured practice and the process of development of social identities.

As we have stated, this analysis is exemplified in a case related with the world of some precise kind of professionals, but it could be applied to other areas of society. The definition of what is a group is frequently associated with the acknowledgement of certain structured practices which these members perform, and which distinguish them from other groups. For example, to define oneself as a catholic may mean participating in some characteristic rites (baptism, certain forms of marital ceremonies, mass, going to a certain church...). The

identification of group pertinance rarely appears separately from the perception that he/she who is considered a member of the group performs some rites or activities which are socially structured. Nevertheless, and as we have already said, performing these rites is much more than developing some social identity. These same structured rites and group activities collect (social memory), express, transmit a form of social knowledge which characterizes this group. An example which may prove that practice is very important could be the following: if we ask a catholic what it is to be one, it is very likely that he/she will list in some detail a series of these group practices.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was not that of criticizing those current studies on social representations which apply or use the analysis of linguistic contents to gain access to a group's social knowledge. Our aim was that of remembering that there is another form of "know how to act" knowledge, which frequently does not emerge in everyday language. It tries to claim that the structured social practice is a part of the social knowledge. It also acknowledges the close relationship that exists between social knowledge (structured group practices) and social identities.

The ideas presented in this paper do not intend to be a closed discourse, on the contrary, their aim is that of trying to stimulate future developments on and in the theory of social representations.

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