

Abstract

In their insightful and challenging commentaries, Potter, Augoustinos and Jovchelovitch interestingly contributed to the debate we sought to promote. They allowed us to further reflect on our proposal of bringing together some strands of TSR (theory of social representations) and DP (discursive psychology) for forging a stronger social psychology, i.e., one more prepared to understand social change by better comprehending how meaning is constructed and transformed in discourse and communication. Through the present commentary, we attempt to better clarify this proposal in dialogue with their observations.

Potter (2018) opens his commentary, the first of the three, by explaining how TSR let him down back in the 1980s, after failing to help him analyse how the UK crowd disturbances of the time were constructed in texts and talk. In this reply we take the opposite direction, i.e., we will start by stating how the idea that he and others brought to social psychology back in the 1980s – that it could and should analyse discourse - did not fail us. In fact, in our view, this idea made major contributions to the discipline, and we do not intend to give up on it – but we also do not expect it to not need to be complemented by other ideas. However, this idea of analysing discourse for doing social psychology has had since those years many iterations, originating many fragmentations, as Augoustinos, our second commentator, recalls. This means that a stable and fully accepted common denominator and name for those contributions do not exist. This is one first aspect we will approach here, discussing what is in the name of Discursive Psychology (DP). Afterwards, we discuss the fact that across the three comments, and as highlighted by Jovchelovitch, the third commentator, the main aspects of theoretical contention and/or concern seem to (still) regard the relation between action and representation, and the ontological and epistemological status of cognition. Finally, another point of contention regards methods, and specifically the role of the researcher in research. We will now discuss these three points in more detail.

What is DP: A matter of names

In Batel and Castro (2018) we used DP as an umbrella word for the many flavours (Billig, 2009) of a social psychology concerned with language and discourse. It seems, however, as Augoustinos clearly highlights (p.2), that today it is fairer to understand DP as denominating a specific flavour of such a social psychology, one founded by

Edwards and Potter (1992) and “increasingly concerned with the study of social interaction” with a focus on rules in conversation – or conversation analysis (CA) -, and less with the type of discourse and communication we described. Naturally, this does not imply that all social psychologists today interested in discourse practice a form of analysis close to CA. There is then a need, as we argue in the paper, to identify those strands of social-psychological discourse analysis that are more compatible with some strands of TSR, since, as pointed out by Jovchelovitch (2018), we are indeed not concerned with preserving the purity and boundaries of one specific form over another. We are using instead some forms – chosen within certain epistemological criteria and constraints, that we identify - for reflecting on how compatible and useful they are in their articulation with some strands of TSR to enable a better examination of the construction and transformation of meaning in discourse and communication.

All in all, then, this discussion seems to highlight that we would gain in clarity in our article – and perhaps in social psychology as well - if instead of using discursive psychology (DP) as an umbrella term, we were to use instead a different denomination: such as social discursive psychology (SDP). This name would be clearer regarding the target of the focus on discourse - social psychological processes. In fact, it would importantly add the social to the present name. This is hence our suggestion for the future.

Cognition, action and representation: A matter of theory

Historically, one of the main issues of contention between DP and TSR scholars has been the role of cognition within TSR. Augoustinos (2018, p. 2) claims that “from its very beginnings TSR subscribed to a cognitive epistemology – a perceptual-cognitive

metatheory that shares similarities with traditional cognitive approaches” and Potter identifies cognition, action and representation as “seemingly unbridgeable disagreements between SRT and DP” (Potter, 2018, p. 2). These ‘criticisms’ have been disputed by TSR based on the ‘defence of representation’ (Jovchelovitch, 1996) as a meaning resource that mediates between us and the world, with cognition to be seen not as locked in individual heads, but as evolving in interaction, relation and culture, or “as internalised sociality” (Jovchelovitch, 2018, p. 3; also Markova, 2003).

Here, we want to argue instead that for the role of cognition, action and representation within TSR to be discussed, we first need to re-present TSR as, again, a field of research that is multifaceted and porous and has changed over time. One of the major contributions of the various social psychologists discussing – back in the 1980s and early 1990s - how to make social psychology *more social* was to highlight the power of ideas for acting in the world, including Moscovici, Billig, Bruner and others. A clear example is to be found in one of the first research agendas guided by TSR and materialising its potentialities for analysing social change: Jodelet’s (1991) ethnographic work aiming to examine the social representations of madness as enacted by inhabitants of a French village that lodged psychiatric patients during the 1970’s. Some of the main questions that guided Jodelet’s research were (ibid, p. 2) “How do representations function in a confrontation of this type? How are the mentally ill received in the community? How does the relationship to otherness develop?”. In sum, all questions focused on examining and understanding representations of madness as social practices and (inter)actions, not “locked in the head” cognitions. More recently other approaches again distanced themselves from an individualist cognitivism, adopting more dialogical or critical approaches (Batel & Adams, 2016; Howarth, 2006a; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Markovà, 2003). In dialogical and critical approaches to TSR,

representation is action (Howarth, 2006b) and meanings are constructed and negotiated in the interplay between the micro processes of interaction, the “concrete, textual and conversational nature of representations” (Potter, 2018, p.3), and the macro processes of institutional and cultural practices (see Batel et al., 2016; Castro, 2012). This is very clear in the analyses provided in Batel et al., 2015 about the representations of the British countryside, which we were not able to present in full in our paper.

In turn, this discussion around cognition, action and representation highlights the indispensability of acknowledging and examining communication in tandem with discourse –communication as “the focal point to unpack discourse” (Putnam, 2008, p. 343). It is this association of discourse and communication that reminds us that the fundamental psychosocial fact is that we talk to *someone*. Discourse as a notion, if disconnected from communication, can be used in such a way as to neglect the Other as a ‘real’, ‘present’ interlocutor – when for instance certain forms of conversation analysis forget how all discursive interchange happens between people that can – and most often than not do – occupy distinct positions in asymmetric power relations. If such a type of discursive analysis is able to provide a descriptive account of differences in, for instance, breaks and interruptions, it is often unable to move on to linking them to self-other relations and to how they might produce, reproduce and contest hegemony. On the other end of the continuum stretching from “interactional determinism to ideological determinism’ (Gibson, 2015, p. 453)”, the notion of discourse can also neglect the Other as an interlocutor, when the analysis only takes account of ideological structures, reconstructing them without any connection to the ongoing interaction. In both cases, then, the bridge that is missing is that of communication. Linking discourse and communication allows re-presentation to be action: practices enacted through and by relations.

Eliminating the researcher? A matter of methods

Another important issue of contention in the three commentaries to our paper concerns the methods that can be used for conducting ‘proper’ research in social psychology. Potter brings the argument that “although the theory [of social representations] specifies sharing representations, the method involves conversational encounters such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires” (2018, p. 3). This highlights a common misunderstanding about TSR and one already discussed in 1985 in this journal– the shared or consensual dimension of representations (see Potter & Litton, 1985; then Moscovici, 1985). *Consensual* or *shared* does not mean that to explore representations we need to work with a large number of participants, nor that representations can only be identified in naturalistic contexts. To assume so would be to consider that when someone talks about a social object in an interview, focus group or questionnaire, he/she is resorting to some idiosyncratic meaning categories only existent in the research setting. Instead, representations being shared means that their re-presentation in conversation will reveal their non-idiosyncratic nature, i.e., will reveal how they are part of a (shared) historical heritage, part of a (shared) lineage of meaning in culture. It will reveal what Jovchelovitch (2007) identifies as the tripartite nature of re-presentation: how they reveal subjects, objects and (inter-subject) relations. And this is something that happens even when people are alone, for even when alone they construct and negotiate meanings by arguing with present or distant, existent or imagined others (Billig, 1987; Castro & Batel, 2008). This is also a central idea for rhetorical approaches in social psychology (Billig, 1987), in which the centrality offered to the notion of audience is a guarantee that the analysis takes account of how meaning happens in relations.

Additionally, the idea that all research should be non-researcher generated, presupposing that interviews and focus groups are not ‘actual human life or real life’ (Potter, 2018, p.4) seems to us to unfairly dismiss, as Jovchelovitch also highlights, the potential for certain types of focus groups and interviews to act as spaces for communities “to tell their stories and feel that dialogue with researchers is something they would benefit from” (p. 4) and research “an opportunity to build partnerships that enable visibility to their knowledge, experience and way of life” (p. 4). This is evident for instance in TSR research that has used photovoice not only as a method to collect qualitative data, but also as a practice of re-presentation and social solidarity (Kessi, 2011; Kessi & Howarth, 2015). Howarth’s (2004) use of interviews as a “methodology that brought out the rich and diverse voices of all participants”, for examining the racialized patterns of school exclusion in Britain also illustrates that well, as does Caillaud and Kalampalikis’s (2013) use of focus groups to analyse group interactions and dynamics while discussing ecological practices.

The fact that interviews and focus groups can be spaces of actual human real life is also very clear in TSR’s research examining people’s use of polyphasic, contradictory meanings over the same social objects in different contexts, such as beliefs about mental health expressed in private or in public life (Wagner et al., 2000), responses to renewable energy infrastructures in general or in particular places (Batel & Devine-Wright, 2015), or attitudes regarding general laws towards biodiversity conservation or towards its local implementation (Mouro & Castro, 2012). These studies of social representations do employ methodologies and analytical tools that are “sensitive to the flexible and contextually dependent use of the terms” (Potter & Litton, 1985, p.383), or of meanings.

This debate over what methods should be used in social psychology research illustrates then something that we have tried to challenge in our paper – the tendency of most (DP) research to look at epistemologies and methodologies mainly as univocal and hermetic, instead of as multifaceted. Contrarily to those versions of DP only using naturalistic data, we argue that interviews and focus groups are not necessarily cognitivist as it is not data collection techniques that (can) per se “largely presuppose a cognitivist perspective” (Potter, 2018, p.4), but instead the way they are conducted, the goals and questions behind them and the way in which the data they generate is interpreted (Rizzoli et al., 2018; Willig, 2012).

As Potter (2018) pointed out, TSR research – as so many other approaches looking at discourse and communication - has not tended, throughout its history, to acknowledge and discuss the role of the researcher in research. This should change, and is changing (see Batel & Adams, 2016; Howarth, 2002). But the change should not be a step towards eliminating the researcher from research, but a step towards theorising – better theorising – her or his role in research.

A matter of dialogue: Concluding remarks

The comments by Potter, Augoustinos and Jovchelovitch both reflect and allowed us to further illustrate some recent trends. Social psychological research and social sciences’ research, in general, are more open to interdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism (Rizzoli et al., 2018), rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) questions and approaches, and more perspectives are today engaged with issues of power and ideology. However, the concerns with epistemological clarity and solidity are also very much present. The challenge is thus not to conflate or mistake the latter concerns with disciplinary

boundary-policing and the monological purification of theories and methodologies. As with all social change processes, new meanings do not suddenly replace old meanings, but instead co-exist with them for quite long periods of time, during which resistance to new and hybrid practices is still frequently found (Castro & Batel, 2008). Nevertheless, maybe this debate just held in the British Journal of Social Psychology shows that we are now closer to move towards having more mutually engaged and dialogical and thus stronger TSR and SDP communities than we had in the 1980's, during the era that Rijsman and Stroebe (1989) diagnosed as that of a fragmented social psychology.

References

- Augoustinos, M. (2018). Dialoguing the difference: A reply to Batel and Castro's 'Re-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12293>
- Batel, S., & Adams, M. (2016). Ecological crisis, sustainability and social worlds: Developing a critical agenda. *Papers on Social Representations*, 25(1), 1-1.
- Batel, S., & Castro, P. (2018). Re-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology for examining the construction and transformation of meaning in discourse and communication. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12259>
- Batel, S., & Devine-Wright, P. (2015). Towards a better understanding of people's responses to renewable energy technologies: Insights from Social Representations Theory. *Public Understanding of Science*, 24(3), 311-325.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662513514165>
- Batel, S., Castro, P., Devine-Wright, P., & Howarth, C. (2016). Developing a critical agenda to understand pro-environmental actions: contributions from Social Representations and Social Practices Theories. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 7(5), 727-745. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.417>
- Batel, S., Devine-Wright, P., Wold, L., Egeland, H., Jacobsen, G., & Aas, O. (2015). The role of (de-) essentialisation within siting conflicts: An interdisciplinary approach. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 44, 149-159. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2015.10.004>
- Billig, M. (1987). *Arguing and thinking*. Cambridge University Press.

- Caillaud, S., & Kalampalikis, N. (2013). Focus groups and ecological practices: a psychosocial approach. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 10(4), 382-401. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2012.674176>
- Castro, P. (2012). Legal innovation for social change: Exploring change and resistance to different types of sustainability laws. *Political Psychology*, 33(1), 105-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00863.x>
- Castro, P., & Batel, S. (2008). Social representation, change and resistance: On the difficulties of generalizing new norms. *Culture & Psychology*, 14(4), 475-497. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X08096512>
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. Sage.
- Gibson, S. (2015). From representations to representing: On social representations and discursive-rhetorical psychology. *The Cambridge handbook of social representations*, 210-223.
- Howarth, C. (2004). Re-presentation and resistance in the context of school exclusion: reasons to be critical. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 14(5), 356-377. DOI: 10.1002/casp.798
- Howarth, C. (2006a). How social representations of attitudes have informed attitude theories: the consensual and the reified. *Theory & Psychology*, 16(5), 691-714. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354306067443>
- Howarth, C. (2006b). A social representation is not a quiet thing: Exploring the critical potential of social representations theory. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(1), 65-86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016934323227>

- Jodelet, D. (1991). *Madness and social representations*. Transl. by T.Pownall, ed. by G. Duveen. University of California Press.
- Jovchelovitch, S. (1996). In defence of representations. *Journal for the theory of social behaviour*, 26(2), 121-135. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-5914.1996.tb00525.x
- Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). *Knowledge in context: Representations, community and culture*. Routledge.
- Jovchelovitch, S. (2018). Discourse and representation: A comment on Batel and Castro “Re-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology”. *British Journal of Social Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12296>
- Kessi, S. (2011). Photovoice as a practice of re-presentation and social solidarity: Experiences from a youth empowerment project in Dar es Salaam and Soweto. *Papers on Social Representations*, 20(1), 7-1.
- Kessi, S., & Howarth, C. (2015). Social change and social steadiness: Reflective community? In G. Marsico, R. Riggieri, & S. Salvatore (Eds.), *Reflexivity and change in psychology – the yearbook of idiographic science* (Vol. 6; pp. 343–363). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Marková, I. (2003). *Dialogicality and social representations: The dynamics of mind*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moscovici, S. (1985). Comment on Potter & Litton. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 24(2), 91-92. DOI: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.1985.tb00665.x
- Mouro, C., & Castro, P. (2012). Cognitive polyphasia in the reception of legal innovations for biodiversity conservation. *Papers on Social Representations*, 21(1), 1-21.

- Potter, J. (2018). Action and representation – A comment on Batel and Castro Re-opening the dialogue between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology. *British Journal of Social Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12275>
- Potter, J., & Litton, I. (1985). Some problems underlying the theory of social representations. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 24(2), 81-90.
DOI: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.1985.tb00664.x
- Putnam, L. L. (2008). Images of the communication—discourse relationship. *Discourse & Communication*, 2(3), 339-345. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481308091916>
- Rijsman, J., & Stroebe, W. (1989). The two social psychologies or whatever happened to the crisis?. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 19(5), 339-343. DOI:
10.1002/ejsp.2420190502
- Rizzoli, V, Castro, P., Tuzzi, A. & Contarello, A. (2018). Probing the history of social psychology, exploring diversity and views of the social: Publication trends in the European Journal of Social Psychology from 1971 to 2016. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2528
- Wagner, W., Duveen, G., Verma, J., & Themel, M. (2000). ‘I have some faith and at the same time I don't believe’ —cognitive polyphasia and cultural change in India. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 10(4), 301-314.
DOI: 10.1002/1099-1298(200007/08)10:4<301::AID-CASP585>3.0.CO;2-V
- Willig, C. (2012). *Qualitative interpretation and analysis in psychology*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.