

1 Introduction: social representations in knowledge and language as approaches to a psychology of the social

Uwe Flick

Introduction

If we start from the notion that the psychology of the social is, or should be, the issue for social psychology, then it seems trivial to entitle a book on social psychology *Psychology of the Social*. Yet, a review of the recent history and present state of social psychology gives the impression that the social does not have the status in social psychology that might be expected. Anyone concerned with understanding social problems and ways to tackle them rarely thinks of looking to social psychology for the concepts they need, and social psychological research has found little resonance for its results in public discussions (as in the scientific pages of newspapers). Although social psychology has always dealt with the relations between the individual and society or (in other words) with the subject in its social environment, neither current textbooks nor the discussions in most social psychological journals offer answers to questions such as: What part do social and collective attributions play in everyday life, and how can they be studied psychologically? What social discourses of racism circulate in everyday life? How does social development or the social construction of knowledge proceed? What do we know about everyday knowledge of social systems? Which psychological concepts can explain how ideologies function? Which forms of social memory can be studied in a culture? How do representations of selfhood vary in different cultures? What role does the image of the ‘new man’ play in everyday life, in the media, and in ordinary language? How do new media influence our representations, our image of reality? What is the relevance of everyday knowledge for research in social psychology, and what is the relevance of social psychology for everyday knowledge?

On the one hand, disillusion about social psychology’s contribution to answering these questions may be a consequence of its choice of a more or less closed paradigm to guide and structure its current research, a paradigm which (according to its critics) obscures rather than explains the social. The study of social cognition – the central approach in recent

social psychology – is more or less exclusively concerned with information processing within the individual and with the ways in which social influences disturb these processes¹. On the other hand, social psychology has attracted greater attention for its regular crises than for any results and answers it has produced.

Crises and turns in social psychology

The recent history of social psychology has been marked by various turns or even crises, which, rather than progressing in a linear sequence, have occurred more or less in parallel over the same period of time. These turns will be briefly sketched here before outlining approaches which illustrate alternatives for a psychology of the social capable of responding to the kinds of questions listed above.

The historical turn in social psychology

The beginning of this turn is primarily linked to an article in which Gergen (1973) described social psychology as history rather than as natural science. He argued that the objects of research in social psychology have constantly and decisively changed to a considerable degree. It seems impossible therefore for social psychology to formulate in a positive way any a-historic regularities, that is any psychological laws whose validity could be independent of historical situations. Gergen suggested that to a large extent these changes are determined by the way in which psychological knowledge has itself entered everyday knowledge, so that social actions have already been influenced by psychological theories before they become the objects of study for social psychologists. Following Gergen it is not only the historical relativity of social psychological objects and results which have been discussed, but also their cultural relativity, the sense that both objects and results are shaped by, or depend on, the culture in which they occur (see Oyserman and Markus, chapter 7 this volume).

At the same time as Gergen's article other critical stock-takings of social psychological research mourned its lack of sensitivity for the contexts of research (Israel and Tajfel, 1972), or the loss of society in its perspectives and the theoretical deficits of its research (Moscovici, 1972). There were also demands that social psychology should connect with relevant theoretical developments outside psychology, such as symbolic interactionism (Harré and Secord, 1973). Together with Gergen's critique these arguments initiated a crisis in social psychology which lasted throughout the 1970s and 80s (see Rijsman and Stroebe, 1989). In the

long run this crisis – or at least the discussion about it – led to three consequences:

- A mainstream emerged in social psychology which – while engaged in the other turns described below – is trying to continue the empirical programme of social psychology without being too impressed by the discussion of crisis and relativity. Zajonc (1989) has complained strongly that the discussion inaugurated by Gergen has failed to produce any heuristic consequences for research, but has prevented promising students from entering social psychology and funding agencies from increasing social psychological research budgets.
- Outside the mainstream, however, movements such as Gergen's (1985) social constructionism or the discursive psychology of Harré (see chapter 8 this volume) or Potter and Wetherell (this volume) have emerged from these discussions.
- Lastly, the existence of two social psychologies has sometimes been considered a consequence of this turn. Distinctions have been drawn according to contents (e.g. between mainstream and social constructionism – see Rijsman and Stroebe, 1989), or locality (between American and European social psychology, in particular in the work of Tajfel, Harré and Moscovici – see the 'European' introduction to social psychology by Hewstone *et al.*, 1995, or the *European Journal of Social Psychology*) or by assigning social psychology as a discipline to psychology or to sociology (see Stephan *et al.*, 1991).

The cognitive turn in social psychology

Following the cognitive turn in general psychology, the 1970s and 1980s saw a similar turn in social psychology when the focus of research shifted from the observation of behaviours to the investigation of cognitive processes. As one of the initiators of this turn has recently emphasized, it was an attempt to establish 'meaning' as the central concept in psychology (Bruner, 1990, p. 2), even though he (like Graumann, 1988) has now reached the critical evaluation that it is information processing which is being studied, not meanings. In social psychology the dominant product of the cognitive turn has been social cognition, and in research domains such as the self-concept, attitude, stereotypes or attribution, social cognition has demonstrated the relevance of certain mental schemata for the processing of social information. For its protagonists, indeed, the cognitive turn has led to an 'integration of social psychology in psychology' and one of the leading protagonists of this view has celebrated social

cognition as indicating the 'end of crisis' (Strack, 1988, p.74). Nevertheless, for its critics, the cognitive turn has led to decisive losses for *social* psychology:

- On the one hand, the cognitive turn has produced a cognitivism in social psychology (Graumann, 1988) in which the concept of cognition has been reduced from thinking to information processing, and where the study of the contents of cognition (what people think about or know of social contexts) has been replaced by the study of how information processing functions without social contents.
- On the other hand, the cognitive turn has led to a new individualism in social psychology (Graumann, 1988), in which the focus on the mental processing of information has created an even greater distance from social reality.² Questions of the 'sociality of human existence' have been ignored in psychology or 'passed to the social sciences' (Graumann, 1988, p. 87). The relevance of communication and interaction for social action, and the relevance of social action for knowledge and thinking have been neglected. Finally, information processing models have rarely considered the evaluative aspects of information (Taylor, 1991, p.98).

Through its concentration on information processing, social psychology under the label of social cognition has lost any connection to the big – social – questions, not least because of its own lack of interest.

The linguistic turn in social psychology

A third turn in social psychology, linked to the linguistic turn in the social sciences, has seen a dissociation from cognitivism. Here – mainly in Britain – it is the communicative embedding of cognitive processes in social psychological contexts which has been emphasised. Psychological research has shifted from the experiment to the analysis of discourse and conversation (Harré, see chapter 8 this volume; Potter and Wetherell, see chapter 9 this volume). A parallel development – mainly in the United States – is Gergen's 'social constructionism' which also has recourse to linguistic principles and to Wittgenstein (1953), and is engaged in the study of the social construction of reality from a (social) psychological perspective. Here knowledge is no longer considered as something inside people's heads but as something to be observed in their common practices (Gergen, 1985). Memory is no longer understood and analyzed as an individual cognitive process of retrieving information in the brain, but, rather, as a social or collective process (Middleton and Edwards,

1990b; Echebarria and Castro, see chapter 6 this volume). Researchers from this perspective have been interested in social questions such as racism (Potter and Wetherell, see chapter 9 this volume) or ideology (Billig et al., 1988).

So far, some central developments of social psychology have been outlined which can be summarized as follows: following the cognitive turn, recent years have seen the emergence of social cognition research as the mainstream of social psychology (in both America and Europe); this paradigm has become increasingly restricted to the study of the individual and the ways in which they process information, and has thereby lost touch with the social of psychology. There are parallel approaches trying to reorient social psychology once more to social questions, and to re-establish links to contemporary social issues, which have been missing from the discipline of social psychology for some time. As a nucleus for such a *psychology of the social* there is now a prospect of an integrative basic theory in work on social representations, a theory which has anticipated the turns and developments outlined above and has developed its own research programme.

Social representations theory as a basic theory for the psychology of the social

The theory of social representations, which is central to this volume, has integrated the three turns of social psychology to a programme of theory and research in a specific way: In dealing with knowledge this theory takes the (original) starting point of social psychology after the cognitive turn, returning again to the study of the meanings of objects and processes for subjects and groups, and to the social construction of meanings. In contrast to social cognition research, knowledge is studied as social knowledge. The formal functioning of information processing becomes less interesting than the contents of knowledge and their meaning for the individuals and groups being studied. The theory considers knowledge (both theoretically and empirically) in relation to the local, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is generated and used. Thus it is assumed that social representations as a type of knowledge are specific to modern societies, and are influenced by science as a main source for everyday knowledge (Moscovici, chapter 14 this volume; Flick, chapter 3 this volume). By taking account of the influence of scientific knowledge on everyday perception and thinking, social representations returns to the central theme of the discussions of the historical character of social psychology. Lastly, knowledge is not reduced to a purely cognitive phenomenon, as in information-processing

models of the mind. Rather, knowledge is understood and studied both as the result and the object of interactive processes, and as a cognitive stock. Here we find a combination of the psychologies of knowledge and of language. As the chapters by Harré and Potter and Wetherell in this volume show, rather than presenting a clearly distinct alternative model to social cognition research, discursive psychology should be seen as enlarging and detailing a central aspect of the theory of social representations.

For the three lines of discussion outlined above – social psychology as historical, cognitive, and discursive science – social representations theory offers a model that takes into account the social and communicative character of social psychology as a psychology of the social.

Social representations as a research programme

Moscovici ([1961] 1976) introduced the theory of social representations into social psychology with his study of the appearance and diffusion of psychoanalysis in French public life in the 1950s. The ancestors acknowledged in the formulation of the theory included Durkheim's ([1898]/1974) differentiation between individual and collective representations, Freud's psychoanalysis and Piaget's developmental psychology. Social representations are concerned with knowledge, understood as *social knowledge* which arises from people's membership in social groups. As well as this principle of knowledge being socially embedded, there is also the assumption of a social distribution of knowledge – *what* people know and *how* they know it depends on the social groups to which they belong. Originally, this question was investigated through the example of the emergence of scientific theories into everyday life, whereas later studies have been concerned with the social construction and representation of particular objects (e.g. health, illness, madness).

Definition and function of social representations

A social representation traditionally is understood (see also Moscovici this volume) as

a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii).

According to Moscovici (1984a, p. 24), the aim of every (social) representation is 'to make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar'. Social representations provide an instrument to cope with and classify new phenomena and changes in phenomena that are already known. In the process of social representation, two concepts, *anchoring* and *objectification*, are seen as central.

The first process means 'to anchor strange ideas, to reduce them to ordinary categories and images, to set them in a familiar context' (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 29). A concrete illustration of this process can be outlined with the example of technological change in everyday life (see Flick, 1996). Up to a certain point, the strangeness of new devices and the arrival of new technologies is dealt with by integrating them into the categories and representations already held by the individual – and even more importantly – by his or her social context. By anchoring new objects in existing categories, these categories are modified step-by-step – they are enlarged, differentiated, united, or put in different relations to each other. This process of construction and classification is not limited to and does not take place merely inside the individual, but is embedded in social classifications and constructions. It is a process in which categories and classes available in everyday communications, accepted and conventionalized in the social or cultural context, are used or modified. Anchoring is understood as a social process drawing the individual into his or her social context and into the cultural traditions of his or her group (Billig, 1988, p. 6).

Objectification translates abstract ideas and concepts into a concrete image or links them to concrete objects (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 29). In this translation process a theory is reorganized so that some parts of it are omitted, while others are brought more sharply into focus. Thus, the opposition of the conscious and the unconscious and the process of suppression passed from psychoanalysis as a theory into everyday knowledge, while sexuality and libido, which are central concepts in Freud's theory as well, remained more or less omitted. In everyday expressions active roles are ascribed to the elements of this figurative nucleus – such as the unconscious or suppression – so that, for example, it becomes possible to speak of the unconscious and the conscious as being in conflict with each other.

Main investigations

The social embedding and distribution of knowledge were themes in three paradigmatic investigations in which the theory of social represen-

tations was not only empirically applied and grounded, but also demonstrated through different methodologies.

Moscovici's ([1961] 1976) investigation pursued an analysis of the representation of psychoanalysis through a study of the mass media in France in the 1950s, and a questionnaire survey of over 2,000 respondents from different social classes. Although it was evident that psychoanalytic concepts and ways of thinking had broadly entered everyday life, it was also clear that only some aspects of the theory were retained in these representations, and that the perception of the theory differed from group to group. Finally, the study showed the specific resonance this theory found in the Catholic and Marxist press, i.e. in contexts based on different '*Weltanschauungen*'.

Herzlich (1973) interviewed eighty people from social groups differing in education and profession about their ideas of health and illness. Any claim about the representativeness of this sample was given up in favour of more flexibility and depth in collecting the data through open-ended interviews. Further, the aim of following the passage of one specific theory through society was abandoned. In fact, no *one* theory is used as a starting point, nor is the passage of parts of the theory reconstructed through media analyses. Instead, the study is focused on the subjective aspects of the genesis and meaning of social representations.

Jodelet's ([1989a]1991) study of the social representations of madness has often been discussed as the third paradigmatic example of research in this tradition (for example, chapter 8 by Harré in this volume). It was undertaken in a village in France, where for several generations a large proportion of the population has lodged mentally ill people from a nearby asylum in their own families. The income the villagers receive for taking in these 'lodgers' has become an important element in their domestic economies. Jodelet used participant observations, complementary interviews, and analyses of documents to explore these villagers' concepts of mental illness, madness and the mentally ill, as well as the way these concepts shaped everyday life in the village. She found that the central nucleus of the social representation of mental illness consists of a naive theory of madness, which is dominated by the fear of contagion and the loss of distance from the mentally ill. This structure at the centre of the villagers' representation of madness explained many of social practices she had observed in the village, practices which seemed contradictory in content and effect to the 'official' aim of housing these people. Once again, as with Herzlich, this study is neither focused on a specific theory nor is there a content analysis of the mass media. Jodelet's concern is with the changing discourses of madness and mental illness, which she examines in

relation to the changing ways of dealing with the mentally ill in everyday village life.

The psychology of the social as a framework for other disciplines in psychology

The psychology of the social outlined in this book is not a particular discipline of psychology aiming to promote specific empirical strategies for other psychological disciplines. That seems to be the strategy of social cognition research, which, with its methods and procedures, is striving to approach the methodological and theoretical standards of general psychology, endeavouring thereby to become linked to the cognitive sciences. To make this link it has also had to neglect the typical characteristics which identify a *social* psychology. In this book, social psychology is understood rather as a framework for some other disciplines in psychology, illustrating the social character of their objects. In the psychology of knowledge, for example, social psychology contributes a perspective based on the social distribution and construction of knowledge (see chapters 2 and 3 by von Cranach and Flick respectively) as well as the social construction of memory and remembering (see chapter 6 by Echebarría and Castro) or of everyday patterns of attribution (see chapter 4 by Hewstone and Augoustinos). In developmental psychology, it contributes insights about social influences in the development of children's knowledge and intelligence (see chapter 5 by Doise, Mugny and Pérez) and about the influence of changing scientific ideas of intelligence and children's development on parents' practices (see chapter 11 by Carugati and Selleri). By drawing attention to social and cultural differences in personhood, identity and selfhood (see chapter 7 by Oyserman and Markus), it also contributes to personality psychology. Finally, it offers materials and insights to establish a relationship between the psychology of language and the psychology of knowledge, enabling these disciplines to connect with discussions in the social sciences about the role of language in everyday life and as a medium for the scientific study of everyday lives (see chapter 8 by Harré and chapter 9 by Potter and Wetherell).

The contributions to this volume

This outline of a *psychology of the social*, which begins with the theory of social representations and relates this to social knowledge on the one hand and to language and discourse on the other, provides a framework for organizing the contributions to this volume. The first part deals with

social knowledge in its various forms. *Mario von Cranach* outlines the specific qualities of knowledge of social systems. He uses various examples to explain the functions of such knowledge and of the social processes of remembering for action in different institutions. Social representations as a particular form of knowledge in social systems are juxtaposed to other concepts of knowledge in social psychology in a discussion of their function for individual and social knowledge. Following from this discussion, *Uwe Flick* examines the area of everyday knowledge. He looks first at its role in the research process in social psychology, and then compares different models of everyday knowledge (subjective and naive theories, personal constructs and cultural models) with the ways of understanding everyday knowledge in the theory of social representations. The emphasis is on the general theory of knowledge and the relations among different forms of knowledge as outlined in the theory of social representations. *Miles Hewstone* and *Martha Augoustinos* link attribution theory with the theory of social representations in order to develop an approach to both social knowledge and social attribution. They demonstrate the fruitfulness of their approach with concrete examples of everyday patterns of explanation ranging from health and illness to riots, poverty and unemployment. Social influences on the development of cognitive abilities and of intelligence in children are analysed by *Willem Doise*, *Gabriel Mugny*, and *Juan Pérez*. They show how the social construction of knowledge proceeds through processes of social marking and socio-cognitive conflicts. *Augustin Echebarria* and *José Luis Castro* examine different approaches to the study of social memory (Halbwachs, Durkheim, Vygotsky) to show, how processes of memorizing are influenced by membership in particular social groups, using the (differing) memories of historical and political events in different groups as examples. Finally, *Daphna Oyserman* and *Hazel Markus* pursue the question of how individual selfhood is determined by membership in a specific culture. They use differences between a western and a non-western culture (using the United States and Japan as examples) to show how a culture's dominant social representation of the self develops and differs and how people deal with contradictory representations of the self.

The second part of the book deals with *language and discourses as media of social psychology*. In his theoretical reflections, *Rom Harré* asks about the nature of the social in social representations. Starting from the discursive turn in psychology, he discusses different types and dimensions of social representations and analyses their functions in communicative processes. *Jonathan Potter* and *Margaret Wetherell* continue by comparing their approach of discourse analysis with that of social representa-