

# The Individual and Society in Psychological Theory

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**ABSTRACT.** The first part of this article examines the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of various theories concerned with the interdependence between the individual and society. It shows that the majority of theories, namely those of the 'constructivist turn', tend to reverse to ontologies which separate the individual and society into two independent units. They cannot, therefore, adequately examine the dynamic relationships between the individual and society in terms of their mutual change. The second part of the article draws attention to theories which adopt the ontologies of interdependent oppositions coming from dialectics. It is suggested that dynamic semiotics based on the study of signs and representations provides a plausible theoretical alternative to all areas of psychology concerned with the study of social change.

**KEY WORDS:** atomism, dynamic semiotics, the individual and society, interdependent oppositions, oppositions in tension, postmodernism, social representation

Theories do not appear out of nothing; they are always underlined by some ontological and epistemological presuppositions. It is to these that I address the first part of this paper. Specifically, what ontological and epistemological presuppositions lie beneath theories which are concerned with the interdependence between the individual and society? This question has been in the background of many papers published in *Theory & Psychology* and therefore, by definition, it reflects a highly topical issue. Yet, most such theories, despite their attempt not to do so, tend to split the individual and society into ontologically separate units. In the second part of this paper I argue that the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of *dynamic semiotics* provide the bases for theories which could cope with the conceptual interdependence of the individual and society.

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## **Between the Scylla of Atomism and the Charybdis of Postmodernism**

The major opposing theoretical alternatives presented in this journal during the last decade have been expressed, on the one hand, in a relatively small number of papers based on the Platonic/Cartesian ontology, and, on the other hand, in a majority of papers based on various kinds of constructivism, social constructionism and postmodernism.

As is well known, the Platonic/Cartesian approach, which has dominated psychology—ontologically, epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically—for almost its entire history in modernity, has presupposed not only an atomistic perspective of phenomena but also the immutability of the objects of knowledge. The bases of this ontology are individuals, particles, atoms, substances, entities or elements and, specifically, their unchangeable aspects. True knowledge can only be of phenomena which are certain and immutable. This theory of knowledge aims to discover how the mind internally mirrors the external world. The more accurate the internal representation of the world 'out there', the more accurate the knowledge. Like its underlying ontology, so this foundational epistemology, as it is called, conceives of individuals and of their environment as independent entities.

In contrast, to give a brief account of constructivism, constructionism and postmodernism, the major theoretical approaches in this journal, is much more difficult. There is no unified ontology and epistemology underlying their different versions. Let us consider some of these issues.

During its 100 years or so in the history in psychology, starting from Baldwin, Mead, Vygotsky, Bühler, to more contemporary theories by Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Arbib and Hesse (1986), constructivism, in its different versions, has undergone considerable changes. What distinguishes constructivism of the 'revolutionary turn' from the previous versions is critique as its major goal (Danziger, 1997). Today, postmodernism presents itself as an essential critique not only of foundational psychology but of all psychology which is not postmodern. It emphasizes deconstruction, dispersion and fragmentation as its main philosophy. It is mute to ontology and it adopts profound relativism in epistemology (Gergen, 1994).

Parker (1998) refers to several dangers flowing from postmodernism, such as relativism and uncertainty, amorality, individualism, pessimism, and so on. In other words, according to him, 'the revolutionary turn' results in something which is already quite well known and which even may not be too far away from those issues against which postmodernism fights so vehemently.

The discursive and constructivist approaches to personal agency, too, object to postmodernist 'anarchistic anti-objectivism' (Harré & Krausz, 1996, p. 190). These authors attack various propositions of postmodernism,

like lack of distinction between the 'self' and 'person', as well as the extreme relativism denying personal authenticity and personal responsibility.

### *What is the Role of Psychological Theory?*

An answer to this question in the context of social constructionism and postmodernism is not easy. Consider some issues which have been the subject of theoretical consideration in this journal. Is the notion of the mind a useful or a useless notion? Are people agents or not? What is a proper deconstruction of this or that concept? Is discourse the basis of all human activities and interactions or not? Is all knowledge produced in conversation or not? I have selected these issues with a particular bias in mind because I want to ask the following question: Who is the audience for these theoretical considerations and who will benefit from them? What is their theoretical relevance if, as a matter of fact, ordinary people *believe* that they do have a mind when they fight for their social recognition, are persistent dissidents unshaken by any totalitarian authority and act on their beliefs and passions? When there are public concerns about ethnic cleansing, about education for citizenship, the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, how can our ontological muteness and epistemological relativism provide credibility for our existence as bearers of intellectual light? We cannot avoid asking questions such as *to what* do our theories contribute. If we do not ask them as authors, then our readers will do so. Like other scientists, we have commitments. For example, medicine aims to improve human health; the aim of law is justice; the aim of education is to raise people prepared for the future; the role of ethics is to guard against anything that would interfere with this general aim of improvement of the human condition. So what commitments do psychological theorists have?

The problem as to how we form, maintain and change knowledge still remains. The search for knowledge, understanding, order and prediction is not an abstract and irrelevant artifice of armchair philosophers but seems to be a condition of living. We evaluate selves and others in terms of certainty and stability of behaviour, relationships, interaction and communication. We judge the reliability of knowing something. Knowledge seems to be interlinked with morality. There is something moral about knowing, understanding, about a feeling of being right. Moreover, as the theory of social representations argues, people try to understand the strange by anchoring it to what they know already, and thus they attempt to diminish the margin of non-communication (Moscovici, 1984a). In addition, people are not only certainty-seeking creatures but in their desire for knowledge and understanding they are also self-affirming, self-determining, innovating, imposing their own will on nature and on others; they are freedom seeking. These are

epistemological issues which bring into focus the interdependence between the individual and society.

### *The Individual and Society*

How to conceptualize the interdependence between the individual and society seems to be the nub of the matter. Valsiner and his colleagues (e.g. Dodds, Lawrence, & Valsiner, 1997; Valsiner, 1998; Valsiner & Lawrence, 1996) have raised this question with respect to the simultaneity of the personal and the social. Although the individual has both personal and sociocultural attributes, various theoretical approaches, quite commonly, ontologically deny one or the other. As a result, personal development tends to split the individual from the social. As Dodds et al. (1997) maintain, 'attempted resolutions focus on the constitution of the personal within the social through dialogue, discourse, fusion, joint or mutual activity, narrative or voice' (p. 484). Such accounts experience difficulty in explaining the interdependence between the personal and the social because they conceive them as primarily, that is, ontologically, separate, and only secondarily do they ask the question as to how they are interdependent.

The issue which Valsiner and his colleagues discuss with respect to personal development is central to the very ontology and epistemology of the interdependence between the individual and society. How do people create, maintain and transform knowledge which pertains both to individual cognition and to sociocultural knowing? True, other social science disciplines may also have similar concerns from time to time, but for social psychology the issue is *by definition* focal. To bring the point home, let us see how different theories have dealt with the individual/social at the level of the theory of knowledge.

Lévi-Strauss (1967) replaces individual knowledge by knowledge as relationships. In his theory of knowledge, the idea of reciprocity is the key to the existence of society. It is a relational principle existing prior to any institutional organization. This universal principle, however, is eventually reduced to the social, integrating the individual within its social structure. Thus the individual loses his or her own individuality.

For Gergen (1994, 1997), too, knowledge is based on relationships. The world-structuring process is linguistic rather than cognitive and it is language which creates an imagined ontology and structure for rendering things intelligible. Knowledge is constituted in discursive practices. Since without communication in discourse there is no 'I' to be articulated, the duality of the individual and society, in this case, is ontologically reduced to the social component (cf. Dodds et al., 1997; Valsiner, 1998).

The ontology of Harré (e.g. 1995) is the 'person' as the elementary unit for studying social acts and for their normative constraint. Subjectivity is not

a psychological entity but it is defined in actual conversations in which subjects are engaged. The discursive practices in which people are engaged are structured by 'positions' which arise as dynamic and ever-changing assignments of rights, obligations and duties. Such positions can be challenged, denied, negotiated—in other words, they are contestable. In this way the 'individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one constituted and reconstituted through various discursive practices' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46) in which he or she takes part. It thus appears that, whether one takes Harré's point of view that the ontological unit is 'person' or whether one adopts the view that in Harré's conception the personal agency is effectively eliminated because the person is reduced to discursive practices (Dodds et al., 1997, p. 484), there is a split between the individual and social.

What these examples show is that implicit ontological presuppositions of Platonic/Cartesian philosophy, splitting the individual and society, are so engrained in the researcher's thinking that they can hardly be changed by conscious effort. It appears that even if explicitly stated, exposed and rejected, they seem to return through the back-door and re-establish themselves. As a result, the researcher may think, quite wrongly, that he or she has accomplished 'the revolutionary turn' through a fundamental criticism and through denuding all the presuppositions on which foundational psychology rests and that, therefore, he or she is presenting a genuine alternative.

In contrast, as Dodds et al. (1997) have argued in this journal, for Mead, the individual/society was an ontological unit. Using the presupposition of the interdependence between the individual and society as a starting point, the authors construct an analysis of Mead's notion of the Generalized Other. The implication of considering the individual/social as an ontological unit and presupposing tension within this unit is that Mead could conceptualize the co-development of the individual and society as a mutual adjustment and readjustment. As he says: 'The effect of every adaptation is a new environment which must change with that which responds to it' (Mead, 1908, p. 312; quoted by Dodds et al., 1997, p. 487).

Moscovici's (1976) genetic model of innovation, too, presupposes the pre-eminence of the interdependence of the dyad in tension, in this case that of the majority and the minority. It is through negotiation of conflict and through the consistent behavioural style of the minorities that social change in both the majorities and minorities takes place. However, although minorities and majorities are interdependent, they function as individualities within the social system which they constitute. It is the notion of social recognition and the struggle for it which is one of the essential expressions of the individuality of minorities. The term 'social recognition' comes from Hegel (1807/1977), who explicitly elaborated the thema which had been implicit in European culture since the Renaissance and humanism.

## Psychology as a Dynamic Semiotics

### *An Emergent Alternative?*

So what makes the approaches such as those of Mead (e.g. 1934), Valsiner (1998), Moscovici (1984a, 1984b), Hermans (1995) and Rychlak (1995) different from those of 'the constructivist turn'? In contrast to the approaches of 'the constructivist turn', the former ones can be defined in the following terms:

First, their ontology is that of an interdependent dyad of oppositions, for example individual/society, in an internal tension. Second, internal tension within the dyad of interdependent oppositions logically leads to resolution of the conflict or of tension resulting from discrepancy between the two parties through a triadic movement. Third, in the triadic movement both parties develop and change, being part of the system but not losing their own individuality.

This specification, of course, is a dialectical (or dialogical) point of view which is well known in the history of philosophy and which, in modern philosophy, is particularly associated with Hegelian dialectic. Hegelian oppositions imply continuous and mutual change or development through tension and the strife of forces. This ontology presupposes that all living phenomena involve themselves in an internal tension of contradictory forces, resolving itself in a triadic movement. Without such tension, there would be no life. In concrete terms, the co-presence of different social groups, of various kinds of asymmetric relations, of dominance and power, are not enough on their own to produce social change. Rather, to produce social change, one must presuppose oppositions in tension (Moscovici, 1984b).

So, what is new here? Dialectics has waxed and waned, having been associated not only with Hegel but also with Marxism, with neo-Marxism, some forms of structuralism, and with phenomenology, to name but a few approaches. It would take a longer time and a more in-depth analysis to consider these in detail. So, let us stick to a few points concerning the ontology of interdependent oppositions resolving their tension in a triadic movement.

First, what is important here is that triangularity on its own is not sufficient to conceptualize change or movement. In fact, one can find throughout human history and cultures various kinds of triadic relations explaining relationships and patterns in various kinds of phenomena, ranging from religious and mystical to mathematical and semiotic images of trinities, triangles or triads. Sheer co-presence of three items or relations without tension, however, could be quite static.

Second, all dialectically thinking scholars, whose ontological unit of inquiry is an interdependence of oppositions, express in one way or other this triadic movement. In their models, a triadic relationship is implicated

with respect to specific problems. For instance, Mead (1934) uses this idea in the analysis 'of conversation of gestures', which implies a three-step model (Marková, 1987, 1990). Here there is a triadic relationship, between I, you, and each of our changed states of awareness. In Bühler's (1982, 1990), Peirce's (1931–1934) and Moscovici's (1984b) semiotically based theories of knowledge, the triadic relationship involves I, other, object (or sign, representation or symbol). The 'other' in a triad can represent a group, a subgroup, a culture, and so on. Therefore, one can consider various kinds of a triadic relationship. For example, I–you–object (local situation) vs I–you–object in a cultural context, with the third movement being a newly co-constructed meaning. Such a dynamic triangularity, for instance, corresponds to objectification in the theory of social representations. Therefore, one can represent the whole set of mutually interdependent nested triadic relationships. Valsiner's (e.g. 1998) co-constructive model of personal involvement, Rychlak's (1995) dialectical logic and Hermans' (1995) dialogical self all express similar ideas. When these relations are presented graphically as a triangle, however, their dynamic nature is not quite obvious. In order to express their movement, one needs something like Bühler's (1990) organon model, which also shows the outcome of this triadic relationship.

Third, these semiotically based theories of knowledge involving dynamic triadic relationships reintroduce signs into psychology. By doing this, they bring into focus, once again, the study of values and beliefs in the formation, maintenance and change of representations or symbols. For Saussure (1915/1959), already, signs were relations determining values. Thus he suggested that semiotics should be a science of social psychology. Yet, there is something very important here. Signs as values do not correspond to the concept of values in traditional sociology or in traditional social psychology as simply something 'collective' in society. In semiotic theories of knowledge, values, beliefs and, in general, representations are not only recycled collective values but always re- and co-constructed in dialogical (or discursive) contexts. They are re-created in the dynamic triangle of I, other, object (sign, representation, symbol).

Fourth, the idea of focusing on values in semiotics rather than on attributes, as was the case in traditional cognitive psychology, brings out another theoretical issue. Traditional cognitive psychology, when it studied, say, concept formation or word meanings, assigned all the imagined attributes the same values and it decomposed meanings and objects in terms of these equally weighted attributes. These were defined independently of the knower. Yet, signs, as we have seen above, have values which are defined with respect to the individual and to the other (whoever that 'other' may be, e.g. a group, a culture, etc.) rather than independently of them. If I am a carpenter, I see different things when looking at a tree than, say, a poet or than a painter. Such matters are well known in medical diagnoses. Medical

symptoms are events or entities which sometimes can be deciphered by signs which could be present as scarcely recognizable hints while on other occasions they can be clearly evident. To that extent we exist and live our lives by signs, from which we construct symbols or representations, using our vision and imagery to individualize things, events or persons. Certain groups of signs can be important in one culture but totally insignificant in another. The plurality of these different worlds consists in the fact that they do not have the same values in these different worlds or contexts.

### *The Future of the Theory*

As Jorna and van Heusden (1998) pointed out in the recent special issue of this journal (Jorna & Smythe, 1998), semiotics places the concept of representation at the centre of the discussion in management and in information science. In fact, it places it in the centre of social psychology. It opens up the whole field of issues for theoretical examination. For instance, why do some people conceive something as non-recognition while others do not? Why does 'one and the same thing' lead to different social representations? In what ways, both in the practice of science and in common thinking, are our assumptions about the nature of phenomena predetermined by already accumulated knowledge and to what extent are they co-constructed in social practices? Answers to these questions, to my mind, lie in re-examining the interdependence of the individual and society as a dynamic ontological unit. Moreover, such and similar questions cannot be settled without taking into consideration personal and collective memory and forgetting, personal and collective experience, personal and collective conscious and unconscious. Signs, symbols and representations, however, are interconnected in intricate ways; they are not only based in the past but, importantly, they also direct memory to the future.

Such issues raise many more questions for theoretical psychology. For example, which signs come to the foreground and why? In what ways do they constitute symbols, that is, representations? Which signs do we use to refer to some underlying themata such as social recognition (Marková, 1999)?

Clearly, this journal has presented in the last decade important papers to clarify the positions of social constructivism and its different kinds. Moreover, it also indicates new directions in which the new theories of psychology might emerge. To examine and develop these will be a challenge for dynamic semiotics and for its central concept of the social representation.

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