



## Making the familiar unfamiliar

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## Commentary

**Abstract** New meanings can be produced through messages coming from outside a group (e.g. other cultures, experts and active minorities), but can also be created by creatively using social tools one already possesses by belonging to a society. The two pathways of creativity are related and opposing processes: the former 'makes the unfamiliar *familiar*', whereas the latter 'makes the familiar *unfamiliar*'. Both utilize the existing 'field of representations' as super-ordinate meanings to (re)situate and therefore understand some object, activity or event. Representations are *schematized* in and with a context, through discourse, in such a way that both the representation and the context are transformed.

**Key Words** dynamic schematizing, social creativity, social representations

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## Making the Familiar Unfamiliar

The phrase 'making the unfamiliar familiar' has a long history in psychology. It goes back to at least McDougall's 1908 classic *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908/1926), from which Bartlett (1932) appropriated it to explain the 'conventionalization' of images and stories in perception, imagination and remembering. More recently, the phrase has become something of a slogan for social representations researchers through Moscovici's (2000) emphatic and frequent use of it.

According to these authors, the 'unfamiliar' is encountered when: (1) two different cultures come into contact and elements of both will not be immediately explicable to the other (Bartlett, 1923); (2) experts within a society produce new knowledge, which is then communicated to the public (Moscovici, 1976/2008); and (3) active minorities communicate their perspective to the majority (Moscovici, 1980). In all cases, we have contact of different social groups distinguishable by an inability to communicate with one another without significant transformation of the message.<sup>1</sup>

Magioglou (2008) is right to point out that these approaches sideline the 'social creative' already a part of everyday discourse. Through the tools already available to us as members of society, we generate new meanings for ourselves and in our mundane interactions with others.

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## Culture & Psychology 14(4)

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The process of creative thinking does not require experts, foreign cultures or minorities for its initiation, though these may be catalysts. Alternatively, I might simply resituate the familiar in a new context and in so doing make what was formerly familiar unfamiliar. Understanding the structure of this process and how it is related to its opposite complementary process, making the unfamiliar familiar, is the focus of this article.

### Thinking Culture at Multiple Levels

Objects and events are never isolated from other objects or events within the field of culture. Boesch (2001) gives the example of a broom, which is materially derived from wood and horse hair, is designed to exorcize dirt and pollution, can become a witch's transport, or stand in for a horse in child's play. In particular I want to focus on the general meaning complexes that surround the concrete objects, activities and ideas of our everyday lives. These general meanings complexes—such as *honour, pollution, conspiracy, contagion, etc.*—have been conceptualized as social representations (Moscovici, 2000).

Thinking is hierarchically organized through social representations, which guide interpretation at subordinate levels; in other words, social representations operate on the level of generalized meanings that organize people's concrete encounters with the world (Valsiner, 2003). For example, when *sexuality* is the dominant representation, oblong objects become penises, whereas the world interpreted through a religious representation is filled with God's creations. A thing becomes socially meaningful, a part of culture, when it is *anchored* in 'the field of representations' (Duveen, 2007); the part of the field to which it is attached—e.g. sexuality or religion—will construct the thing in particular directions, e.g. a stick as a penis.

Societies make conventional links between representations and things, which causes inertia within society. In his studies of remembering, Bartlett (1932) found that images easily linkable to representations always tended toward their conventional form. For example, subjects having to reproduce an odd squiggle when they heard the verbal stimulus 'lighting flash' almost always drew a regular zig-zag, as lighting is conventionally represented. In this case there is a set pathway between thing and representation, which is triggered instantaneously and proceeds rapidly. These conventional linkages both disambiguate the world for a group and enable straightforward communication among its members.

## Two Processes of Social Creativity

What happens when the link between thing and representation is not so immediate and intuitive? Answer: the possibilities of creativity open up. Such circumstances require additionally mediational work in order to schematize thing and representation, to create pathways between the two. This situation occurs when (1) something radically new comes into the group from outside, so that we must struggle to find a setting and explanation for this new thing (*making the unfamiliar familiar*), or (2) we take a thing out of its conventional setting and explanation and represent it in a new incongruity context (*making the familiar unfamiliar*). In the first, something new enters a group from outside its field of representations and must be assimilated into the group's existing knowledge; while the second recombines things and representations from within. We will consider first social representations research into the former, then move to explain how the less understood latter process might operate.

For the theory of social representations, social creativity is the ability of groups to elaborate objects coming from outside of what is known and communicated within their group. Moscovici (1976/2008) analyses how psychoanalysis—the invention of a little-known Viennese psychiatrist—is represented within the existing structures of society. Catholics, for example, find something similar in the concept to their own practice of confession but are critical of Freud's dissimilar 'image of man'. At the same time they recognize the possible therapeutic advantages of the new science, so similar to their own 'talking cure', while simultaneously feeling the need clearly to separate the two practices. Furthermore, the distinction between conscious and unconscious becomes a key component of their representation and sexuality drops out altogether. The same process of elaboration occurs when two cultures come into contact, as when a story is passed from one group to another (Bartlett, 1923, 1932) or an activity like Zen Buddhism is practised in Western societies (Saito, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Moscovici's other complementary research programme is his 'theory of innovation' or 'minority influence', whereby the ideas of a minority group are communicated to a majority group in a persistent and consistent way to bring about a change of thinking in the majority group. As with the theory of social representations, the communication is assimilated into the group's pre-existing ways of thinking. Moscovici, Lage and Naffrechoux (1969) comment:

A political party often adopts the ideas or vocabulary of another party or social movement. Yet citizens continue to vote for this same party, to respond

## Culture & Psychology 14(4)

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to this party's slogans. For example, in France the Gaullist government in framing its own education program, adopted part of the rhetoric and the program by student and workers in May 1968. (p. 371)

We see again in this theory how the change of ideas is produced through something coming into the group from outside. Social representations research tends to focus on the digestion of expert knowledge systems (e.g. from scientists) or of pieces of foreign culture as the 'unfamiliar', whereas the 'unfamiliar' in minority influence is the ideas of a sub-cultural group, which are in opposition to one's own. What is left relatively unexplored in this framework is how the minority or scientist could have developed novel ideas in the first place.

The second form of social creativity comes from the group itself. Here, the 'unfamiliar' occurs when we intentionally use a strange representation to understand something. Magioglou (2008) talks about social creativity as bringing together elements normally kept apart. It will be fruitful to compare this idea to Burke's (1935) method of 'perspective by incongruity'. Burke purposively makes unconventional linkages between representations and things in order to reveal unseen aspects. He gives the example of taking a lion out of the conventional cat category and placing it with dogs, with the poetic expression 'that big dog, the lion'. In so doing we learn to see lions in a new, more dog-like fashion. Or we can speak of 'trained incapacity', to take another example from Burke. Normally, we automatically associate training with enablement. With this discursive act we have highlighted the limiting or constraining side of training. In short, by making non-intuitive links between representations and things, a link for which there is no immediately available pathway, we generate new meanings for both representation and thing. In the next section, we will further consider the process of unfamiliarizing the familiar and its relationship to its opposite, in the context of the theory of dynamic schematizing.

### **Dynamic Schematization: Creating Pathways between Representation and Context**

Werner and Kaplan, in their classic book *Symbol Formation* (1963), explain how symbols are generated out of a dynamic schematizing process between *object* and *symbolic vehicle*. For our purposes we can understand the *object* as the generalized meaning complex and the *symbolic vehicle* as the concrete context in which it becomes objectified, though it should be noted that this is an extension of Werner and Kaplan's concepts. According to their theory, any generalized meaning can be represented in and with any context or thing, though, as we

### Wagoner Making the Familiar Unfamiliar

have seen above, conventional relationships are established in society between certain meanings, for example a flag for a nation. Social representations reduce ambiguity and constrain the movement to the future by creating an orientation toward particular patterns of experience and away from others (Valsiner, 2003). We conventionally use the general meaning WAR to schematize our experience of the activity ARGUMENT. We say, 'Your claims are *indefensible*', 'His criticisms were right on *target*', and 'he *shot down* all of my arguments' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). A very different meaning would be produced through the unconventional metaphor ARGUMENT IS DANCE. But in both cases, a generalized meaning from one activity is used to understand another concretely.

It should be pointed out that the relationship is not so easily reversed. We do not use the complex ARGUMENT to understand the concrete activity WAR. In the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, war acts as the super-ordinate meaning, whereas in WAR IS ARGUMENT, argument has that role. In Cambridge, I frequently describe to others the roads running through the centre of town as SERPENTINE STREETS. It is not difficult for my interlocutors to imagine the S-curved shape of a slithering snake as the form of the road. This pathway of schematizing is done by all. However, what if I were to describe the snake that crawled across my path as 'street-like'? What sense would be made of it? My guess is that we would find a much greater diversity in pathways: one interlocutor might visualize the pattern on the snake's back as being similar to the yellow marks on a road, while another might assume I was referring to snake's rather straight shape and/or motion. Certain complexes are more readily linked together than others and the pathways between them are firmly established. We frequently use snakes to describe S shapes and rarely use 'road' as a metaphorical device in this same context of expression.

Democracy has been a powerful social representation in the last hundred years. It was used in radically different ways by Soviet and Western powers to justify their system of government against other alternatives. Magioglou (2008), however, is not concerned with expert influences on innovation, in this case the rhetorical devices utilized by the political elite; instead she explores how normal people in their everyday lives bring representations into new contexts, which might be seen as incongruent from the standpoint of experts, to generate new meanings.

The representation DEMOCRACY has historically been limited to the political context. However, when Magioglou's interviewee Yiannis brings this generalized complex into the context of INTERPERSONAL

## Culture & Psychology 14(4)

RELATIONSHIPS (family, friends, school, the army, etc.), DEMOCRACY becomes a kind of personality trait. A 'democratic person' is one 'who takes into consideration his significant others' opinion before doing something important' (Magioglou, 2008, p. [26file]). Heleni, Magioglou's other case study, schematizes DEMOCRACY to the context of CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY. DEMOCRACY becomes an ideal that individuals can aspire to, something to have personal *faith* in, and not something that can be accessed *en masse*. We see in both these examples dynamic schematizing whereby novel aspects of both context and representation are revealed by bring together fields normally kept apart.

### Conclusion

To be known, a thing has to be situated within the field of representations. Society provides us with conventional linkages between representations and things, which are triggered instantaneously and proceed rapidly along a set pathway when experiencing. With the creative use of discourse we can, however, create novel linkages between things and representations, in order to generate new perspectives and meanings on that thing and elaborate the representation. Novel combinations of things and representations disable automatic pathways in experiencing, forcing us to additional mediational work in order to schematize the two together.

When something comes from outside the field of representations, as when a scientific theory is assimilated by the public, a similar process is at work, forging novel linkages between representations and things. However, with persistent use, novel linkages can become conventional. For example, Moscovici (1976/2008) found that in time 'psychoanalysis', as represented by Communists, began to evoke a whole complex of ready-made meanings—such as bourgeois, American, capitalist, individualist—which at first had to be made explicitly.

The power of representation and of language to create new meanings is infinite, yet at the same time we are constrained by these very same tools. The interplay between constraint (conventional automatic linkages) and creativity (making new linkages out of existing conventions) in everyday thinking opens up a new and exciting field of research, to which Magioglou (2008) is a thoughtful contributor.

### Notes

1. Jodelet's *Madness and Social Representations* (1989/1991), one of the classic texts within the theory, does set out a slightly different research agenda.

## Wagoner Making the Familiar Unfamiliar

Here the mad, who live among villagers, are the 'unfamiliar' requiring explanation.

2. More recent work in social representations theory has concentrated greater attention on everyday discourse and lay thinking as such (see Marková, 2003; Wagner & Hayes, 2005).

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## Culture & Psychology 14(4)

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### Biography

BRADY WAGONER is completing his Ph.D. in social and developmental psychology at the University of Cambridge, with the support of the Gates Cambridge Trust and the ORS award. His main interests are in the sociocultural study of remembering, issues of communication and understanding within a dialogical epistemology, revisiting the history of psychology in search of potentially productive theories and methods, early pragmatism, existential and hermeneutic philosophy, and the absurd pursuit of mountain summits. He is a co-creator of the *F.C. Bartlett Internet Archive* (accessed at: <http://www-bartlett.sps.cam.ac.uk>), and is editor of *Symbolic Transformations: The Mind in Movement through Culture and Society*, to be published by Routledge in 2009. ADDRESS: Brady Wagoner, Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK. [email: [bw249@cam.ac.uk](mailto:bw249@cam.ac.uk)]