



Citation for published version:

Breakwell, GM 2011, 'Empirical approaches to social representations and identity processes: 20 years on', *Papers on Social Representations - Special Issue*, vol. 20, pp. 17.1-17.4.

Publication date:
2011

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Empirical Approaches to Social Representations and Identity Processes: 20 Years On

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I feel honoured to have my chapter chosen for reproduction in this special issue commemorating the conception of SRT. The empirical research reported in the article that comments upon my chapter is fascinating and illustrates how tremendously valuable SRT is in interpreting our social world and its history. Of course, in support of my original arguments, it also indicates that identity processes are significant in shaping the way social representations develop and influence action.

In response to the commentary on my original chapter, I want to make two additional points.

The original chapter was situated in a volume that I edited with David Canter that was expressly focussing upon the methods by which social representations could be studied. At the time, it was argued that specifying the methods appropriate for the examination of social representations was difficult because there were complexities and ambiguities in the theory itself. The book explored how different researchers, using a variety of methods, did approach the theory and how each method highlighted a different facet of the concepts that comprise the theory. It argued for the value of a multi-method approach – noting the great value of the work of Jodelet that had done just that. Moreover, it was notable at the time that most researchers focused primarily on the content and structure of specific social representations as naturally-occurring

aspects of social systems. The methods they chose were designed to fit that object. The operation of the systemic processes which the theory suggests underlie social representation (such as anchoring and objectification) had rarely been the object of study. The book called for greater focus on processes and suggested that longitudinal or cross-sectional time-sampling approaches would be needed. Since that time in the early 1990s, an enormous amount of research has been conducted within the SRT tradition. The empirical approaches used have been very varied. The heterogeneity in method has added weight and strength to the impact of SRT. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the emphasis upon the examination of process is still too little. The willingness of a single research team to implement a clearly multi-method approach is still a rarity.

My original chapter was largely concerned with the relationship between the propositions of SRT and the propositions of Social Identity Theory. However, I also argue that psychological states and self-conscious self-definitions shape readiness to expose oneself to, accept, or use a social representation. This was effectively moving away from suggesting that only social identity (derived from group memberships) was salient in understanding social representation processes. It was part of a growing belief on my part that all identity processes were important for social representation. But equally, I believe that social representation processes should be a vital element in any comprehensive theory of identity. Subsequently, I have tried to articulate the relationship between SRT and what is now called Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1999; 2001a; 2010a). I have been particularly interested in the ways in which identity processes will impact upon the social representations of risk and hazards (Breakwell, 1996; 2000; 2001b; 2007; 2010b; Bonaiuto et al, 1996).

There is now a firm tradition within SRT research of including an examination of identity processes. I hope that by reproducing my original chapter, many other researchers may be stimulated to consider or reconsider the relationship between identity processes and social representation. The empirical study described in the commentary on my chapter acts as a nice illustration of the innovative insights that can be achieved when identity processes and social representation are examined in concert.

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