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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

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"Are you crazy?"

Social Representations, Conformism and Behaviour

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RUNNING HEAD: Representations, Conformism and Behaviour

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Social Representations, Conformism and Behaviour

At first sight norms are volatile and adaptive bundles of action preferences that are statistically conspicuous. Persons often use such perceived regularities in others' behaviour to shape their own behaviour. This special issue collects a number of contributions that deal with the role and functions of descriptive norms—that is the perceived common behaviours of others—in social life and how they determine the perceivers' behaviours. In other words, research on descriptive norms is basically on the norms-behaviour link, a link that also has been called conformism. But there is much more to say about the embedding of norms in social life and their transmission.

Dreaming of 'Perchten'

For a beginning imagine this situation: Neighbours of yours have been planning to buy a car. The plan has occupied their mind for months, and they have talked about it each time you have met on the street. Being polite neighbours, you often have short chats. For the last weeks, a used but well looking car has caught your neighbour's attention. They have contacted the seller, they have tried the car out, and yesterday they were supposed to sign the contract. Today you run into them again and polite as you are, you inquire about their purchase. "So you're the happy car-owner now?" you ask. But to your surprise, you see your neighbour shaking head. No, they say, I didn't even go there. Meeting your surprised look, they feel compelled to offer an explanation.

Now imagine two scenarios. (a) In one case, the neighbour tells that on the night before, they dreamt of a 'Percht' who recommended not to buy the car because not only was the seller a crook, but the car was in fact inhabited by evil spirits. This requires some explanation: 'Perchten' (plural) are demonic, often dreadful characters of Austro-Bavarian lore that are thought to rule in the cold nights of January. Assuming that you, the reader, are not extremely well versed with Austro-Bavarian lore, you are taken aback by your neighbour's story, and you may even question your neighbour's sanity.

(b) In the second scenario your neighbour tells that they talked with friends about the brands of cars that are popular among their acquaintances and that their chosen car is not among them. This created the prospect of potentially losing status and they postponed the whole thing.

How do you react? "I understand" you will think in scenario (b) and you are unlikely to harbour second thoughts because you are well acquainted with the phenomena of peer-pressure and 'descriptive norms', particularly in car brands.

How does situation (a) differ from (b)? The superficial difference is the lack of an accepted grounding of 'getting recommendations while dreaming particularly about evil spirits' and, second of a 'Percht', a personage you didn't know before and, hence, didn't understand your neighbour's account.

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Grounding a norm

The contributions assembled in this special issue consider communication 'grounding' to consist in clarifying the meaning of a word or set of words akin to the communicators subscribing to the same lexical entry of a word. But there is more to it: Words are not only embedded in a context of pragmatic uses but in a network of meanings, everyday theories, and series of actions. In other words, a word is not understood without knowing the socially constructed representation of an issue against which the word has a 'metric' and meaning (Wagner, Hansen, & Kronberger, 2014). And this applies to norms as well (Staerklé, Clémence, & Spini, 2011).

We argue that the force of descriptive norms on influencing behaviour depends on the shared grounding of the frame, supporting ideas and everyday theories that is the comprehensive representational field by which a norm is being defined. Consider the example of 'being influenced by a Percht in a dream': Agreeing to this idea means not only to know the literal meaning of a 'Percht'—like checking a dictionary—(as alluded by Gao, Qiu, Chiu, & Yang, forthcoming, p.4f), but at least also to know what the background folklore is, why they appear in the cold nights of January, and that in dreams one can 'receive' advice from others. This latter part has a long tradition in several religious mythologies and was reconstructed in Freud's well-known 'Traumdeutung' (Freud, 1900). So, in a way, accepting your neighbour's surprising account presupposes a well-developed representation of European culture. Without this background, the neighbour just appears 'crazy'.

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In case (b), your neighbour offers an explanation that refers to the norm of conformism and status. Existence of such practices is part of everyday knowledge in these societies. This account appeals to conformism and has a place in a culture where conformism is valued. There are, however, also cultures where non-conformism is valued. By being conformist in such a culture, your neighbour would violate the over-arching norm of non-conformism, a conundrum.

Summarising, social norms only make sense against a background of a representation that embraces the respective behaviour, and the explanation respectively justification of that behaviour (cf. Moscovici, 2008, p.8; Wagner, 2015). The isolated norm does not make much sense outside of this contextual behaviour-justification system and will even be unintelligible to the un-initialized and it doesn't come into being 'just so' (e.g. Morris & Liu, forthcoming). This goes as far as making conformism—which is implied in the norm-behaviour link—an issue that is a culturally relative norm that respects veridicality before norm adherence (Hodges & Geyer, 2006; see also Moscovici & Nemeth, 1974).

Transmission and change

Processes of language acquisition by children do not only imprint children with the language spoken in their surroundings, but also convey the deep characteristics of local culture (e.g. Howarth, 2002; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992; Tomasello, 2003). Later in a child's life parents may utilize their instrumental knowledge and convey 'useful' norms to their offspring (Tam, forthcoming). Also, novel developments and particularly cross-

cultural channels of culture diffusion will enrich people's repertoire of norms to a certain degree (Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson, & Sammut, 2014). However, two points require mention: First, to a large part norms are not arbitrary but are built upon deep-seated necessities, most if which can be twisted only so much: These are all norms that derive from humankind's eusociality (e.g. Crespi & Yanega, 1995) such as norms allowing group structures, overlapping generations, brood care, and a division of labour into reproductive and non-reproductive sections.

Second, diffusion of cultural artefacts and consequent norms by electronic mass media has an impact on dominant norms in societies and shapes cultural preferences (e.g. Fiske, 1987; Hartley, 1996; Zafar, Mirza & Syed Qamar, 2013). The spread of scientific literacy in everyday life, for example, brings new representations that supersede old knowledge. This does not mean in most cases that the old representations and behavioral norms disappear but that their claim on validity changes and the new and old attain different situational values, which is called cognitive polyphasia (Provencher, 2011; Wagner, Duveen, Verma, & Themel, 2000). In one of our studies, for example, we show that traditional cultural thinking about mental illness is not replaced by Western psychiatric knowledge when the latter is attained through education. Instead, both are legated to being used in different circumstances and situations: Traditional explanations appear in the context of family conversations, while scientific psychiatric discourse is used with strangers and in the public (Wagner, Duveen, Themel, & Verma, 1999).

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Outlook

We think that the social psychological investigation of norms, values and everyday knowledge needs to consider the place of norms in overarching social representations. Only as expressions of social representations these notions attain cultural meaning and shared understanding that includes the possibility to interact and co-construct local worlds (Wagner, 2015).

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