The Fallacy of Misplaced Intentionality in Social Representation Research

Wolfgang Wagner*
Universität Linz, Austria

* Author's address: Wolfgang Wagner, Institut für Psychologie, Universität, 4040 Linz, Austria. Phone +43-732-2468 577, Fax +43-732-2468 228, E-mail W.WAGNER@JK.UNI-LINZ.AC.AT. The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments by Gerard Duveen, Fran Elejabarrieta, José Valencia and three anonymous reviewers on a previous version of this paper.
Abstract:

This paper argues that social representations cannot be used as independent variables in causal explanations of social behaviour. It is shown that the structure of investigations often follows a causally explanatory design despite explicit statements to the contrary by the researchers. This fact is analyzed with three investigations. It is argued that verbal data used to assess the contents of a representation as independent variable are logically equivalent to data obtained from the "dependent" overt behaviour. Therefore these two kinds of data must be seen as two illustrations of the same representational contents. The researchers' preference for using verbal data to assess the independent variable and the tendency to introduce a causal relationship between representation and behaviour is shown to result from misplacing folk-beliefs. Folk-beliefs about intentional causality, it is shown, pertain to the same level as other beliefs about the world on the part of the subjects. Hence they are part of the folk-representation itself and must be treated as such; their use in scientific accounts of the belief-action relationship is not implied by data on rational belief systems. It is suggested to conceptualize social representations as integral units of beliefs and action which may be used to explain causally subsequent contingent social events. The function of folk-beliefs in intentional causality for the self-concept of rational people and for social accountability is discussed.
The Fallacy of Misplaced Intentionality in Social Representation Research

No rules govern the way we as theorists must appeal to common sense. We must all in one way or another start from the base of common sense if we hope to be understood, or to understand ourselves. But reliance on any particular item of common sense is treacherous. (Dennet, 1989, p. 4)

A major part of research on social representations describes the system of shared beliefs and rational convictions, that is the "mental topography" of social groups and societies. In this research social representations are considered as determining the social behaviour of individuals qua representatives of social groups (Moscovici, 1982, p. 129). While there is little disagreement about the fact that social behaviour and action must be seen as being highly related to social representations, there are conflicting views possible on how to conceptualize and operationalize this relationship. Originally social representations are not conceived as cognitions simply intervening between stimulus and behavioural response, but as symbolic structures linking both, stimulus and behaviour. Hence, Moscovici (1984, p. 60ff) holds, representations are stimuli themselves and therefore independent variables in empirical investigations (cf. Doise, 1990; Jodelet, 1989a). Whereas, however, in theoretical accounts of the theory the view of representations as integrating stimulus and behaviour prevails, empirical work emphasizes the view of social representations as an independent variable determining behaviour as a dependent variable. This latter view implies some crucial problems of how to interpret the representation–behaviour relationship.

Three examples are used to illustrate the theoretical consequences of this independent–dependent dichotomy in social representation research. These investigations serve as examples and illustrations of much similar research. I refer to them because they are typical for the type of thinking inherent in much empirical work within the field. The point I want to make is that, although investigators may explicitly reject the notion of causality to characterize a representation–behaviour relationship, their actual research design is only warranted within a framework of causal thinking.

The three investigations used here are not exactly those where one might expect to find that investigators assume a clear representation–behaviour causality. The point could be made much more straightforwardly with explicit experimental research in the domain of social representations.
like Abric and Kahan (1972), Abric, Faucheux, Moscovici and Plon (1967), Faucheux and Moscovici (1968), to name but a few. I find it worthwhile, however, to refer to research which was conducted in the field and which is much less well structured than an experiment in order to illustrate my point.

A thorough analysis of a representation–behaviour relationship is Thommen, Ammann and von Cranach's (1988) investigation of professional beliefs and behaviours of psychotherapists. The authors show how the social representation of professional theory and practice guides the therapists' professional actions vis-à-vis their patients as well as their colleagues. The authors studied the theoretical premises of two competing schools in psychotherapy – behaviour therapy and the client-centered orientation according to Rogers – by analyzing documents and interviewing therapists about their theoretical and methodical background knowledge and beliefs. In a subsequent step therapeutic behaviour of therapists was observed and analyzed. The authors show, for example, that non-directive therapists relate their attributions and interventions to expectations and desires, whereas behaviour therapists relate more to cognitive information processing, goals, and dispositions of their clients. In their professional behaviour the majority of therapists conforms highly to their professional representations.

Echebarría and Gonzalez (1994) studied whether social representations in political contexts appear either as secondary rationalizations of preceding behaviour, or as its primary determinants. In their study they administered an elaborate questionnaire designed to assess representations, attitudes, and intentions one month before elections were going to take place. After the elections they asked the same subjects again if they had voted or not. From the data they concluded that "social representations appear to be to some extent justifications or rationalizations of previous social practices (here understood as the practice of voting in a political election)" and at the same time "it is true that in our study social representations appear as guiding behavioural intentions, (though) they do not directly determine the actual behaviour" (p. 10). Although the authors favor the view of representations being rationalizing constructions – indicated in their data by a β-weight of 0.59 from "past behaviour" to "behavioural intention" – they also found a clear indication of the representation guiding voting behaviour by a β-weight of 0.48, which is still a rather high β-score for structural models.
A particularly clear example of a research design linking a knowledge system with behaviour is Kempton's (1987) investigation of beliefs about home heat control. Although this research was conducted under the label of "cultural models" and not of social representations, there exist sufficient similarities of this research to representation research to warrant its mention here. The author identifies two folk-theories on the functioning of thermostat regulated heating systems: the valve model and the cybernetic model. The first considers home furnaces to be continuously adjustable to temperature demands. This implies that a room will heat faster if the lever is turned high, and it heats slower, if the lever is raised less. The second model pictures the regulating lever technically correctly as a thermostat by means of which the desired temperature is pre-set. All further regulation will be done by the control circuit firing the furnace as long as necessary until the preset temperature is reached. Then the furnace will be turned off automatically.

These two models imply different strategies when heating is desired. Contrary to the cybernetic model the valve model implies that heating can be accelerated by high lever settings. Kempton investigated these behaviours by recording switch settings, room temperature, and furnace activity in different homes for some weeks. The data supported the expectation that the type of heat control model governs control action by the subjects adhering to them. The recorded control actions of "valve-model–subjects" showed an erratic up and down of lever positions, while the lever positions of "cybernetic-model–subjects" revealed a much calmer pattern of regulation.

The sequence of Kempton's assessment procedures for his investigation where first assessing the model the subject adheres to by asking specific questions, and second, recording or observing the behaviour implied by the subjects' models. In between lay the assumption that the subjects possessed a mental representation or folk-model governing heat control behaviour.

The three investigations described above differ with regard to the methods used. The data collection of the first investigation (Thommen, et al., 1988) is primarily based upon complex qualitative methods of document analysis, interviews, questionnaires, and observation. The second one (Echebarría & Gonzalez, 1994) relies on a type of questionnaire panel analysis, whereas the third research (Kempton, 1987) in a first step involves interviews and questionnaire data, and in a second step applies automatic recording of behaviour. Despite the different approaches, however, it will be shown that the structure of their research is virtually the same.
WHAT RELATIONSHIP?

The problem whether a representation-behaviour relationship can be regarded as causal or as some logical or other relationship is an old one and has been dealt with extensively in the philosophy of social sciences. Its historical details should not concern us here. Suffice it to say that in present day psychology the belief-action relationship is often discussed in terms of (everyday) logic (e.g. Holzkamp, 1986; Smedslund, 1978; Wagner, 1993), negating a causal view.

The authors of the three investigations mentioned also seem to negate investigating a causal relationship between representation and action. Rarely, if ever, they use the term "cause". Despite their different methodology and research designs, the authors of these investigations do not differ in the vocabulary they use to talk about the independent–dependent relationship between representations and behaviour. None of them adheres explicitly to a causal interpretation. Thommen et al. speak of representations "steering", "controlling" or "influencing" individual action and its organization (1992, p. 195f); Echebarría and Gonzalez (1994) write about representations "influencing" and "guiding" behaviour, or as "constraining" people's action alternatives; Kempton (1987) talks about the behaviour being "guided by" (p. 203) or "corresponding to" (p. 216) the respective folk-models.

The authors' use of language when speaking about the representation–behaviour relationship is in stark contrast, however, to the logical structure of how they operationalized this relationship in their research. I intend to show that it is the very structure of these investigations which implies a causal interpretation of the representation–behaviour link. Specifically it is the temporal sequence of their assessments which only makes sense if at least implicitly a causal relationship was presupposed. In order to show this I need to address the following questions:¹

(a) The first is, whether their research steps are ordered arbitrarily or whether it has an ordering with implicitly causal "motives". I shall try to show that the sequence of assessments in this research – i.e. first assessing a representation by verbal questioning, second observing overt behaviour as a consequence of the representation, etc. – is not warranted if a non-causal relationship had been presupposed by the authors. This boils down to the question whether verbal behaviour (speaking and answering questions) related to a representation and its object is empirically
equivalent to other overt or non-verbal behaviour related to the same representation and object or not.

If it is found that the structure of the research is biased in favor of a causal interpretation of the representation–behaviour relationship, then

(b) the second problem is to search where the causal bias of the operationalization may come from: is it legitimized by theory or is the folk-psychological causal model of belief–intention-behaviour projected upon the data. If the latter were more plausible than the former we need to ask

(c) whether it is legitimate to use folk-causality as a theoretical category or whether folk-causality is part of the representational system of the subjects themselves and therefore not part of the theory supposed to describe or explain the subjects' representational system. If the latter is found to be the case we need to

(d) identify the functions a causal folk-model of the representation–action relationship fulfills for rational individuals and for group life.

(e) Finally it will be discussed whether the scientifically vital notion of causal explanation may enter legitimately at the behaviour–and–its–consequence link.

(1) OPERATIONALIZING THE REPRESENTATION–BEHAVIOUR RELATIONSHIP

A MODEL OF CAUSAL EXPLANATION

To answer the first question we need to have a closer look at what would be the logic of a research explaining behaviour causally by a pre-existing knowledge structure, belief or representation. This logic can be modeled according to von Kutschera's (1982) simple model of "modal explanation". The model is supposed to capture the structure of everyday causal explanations, but it lends itself also to be used with social psychological research (Wagner, 1994). The present context forbids a lengthy presentation of the modern philosophical discussion of explanations. This can be found for example in von Kutschera (1982), M. H. Salmon (1989) and W. C. Salmon (1989).

A modal causal explanation consists of giving a condition \( q \) and an implication \( q \rightarrow p \), such that

\[
[q \rightarrow p] \text{ is defined as } [(q \rightarrow p) \& \text{ non (non } q \rightarrow p)].
\]

(1)
Formula (1) states that an event \( p \) is caused by an event \( q \), if the following conditions are met:

(a) the implication relationship \( \rightarrow \) is synthetical, which means that

(b) \( q \) is an event happening before the event \( p \) and

(c) the complement of \( q, non-q \), does not produce the same event \( p \) which is to be explained.

Syntheticity (a) is completely defined by requirements (b) and (c): if we assume that the relationship \( q \rightarrow q, p \) be analytic, then also the reverse implication \( p \rightarrow q, q \) would be possible for logical reasons, given requirement (c), \( non (non q \rightarrow p) \). This reversal, \( p \rightarrow q, q \), however, is prohibited by requirement (b). Hence, the temporal sequence requirement (b) is a condition holding, and making sense, only with synthetical relationships. That is, if the logic of a research design observes conditions (b) and (c), this research presupposes to investigate a synthetical relationship between two events \( q \) and \( p \), which is just another way of expressing that \( q \) and \( p \) are causally connected and experimentally provable.

Let us now look at the empirical examples cited above. According to the model of modal explanation the respective authors use a design where the professional representations precede professional behaviour, where voting beliefs precede voting behaviour, and where heating folk-models precede heating behaviour, hence they strictly observe the temporal sequence requirement (b). The authors also show that a "client-centered representation", but not a "behaviour-theoretical representation", implies the overt behaviour "client-centered behaviour"; that "beliefs in voting-is-good", but not "beliefs in voting-is-no-good" significantly predict positive voting behaviour; and that a "valve folk-model", but not a "cybernetic folk-model", implies "valve behaviour", hence they also strictly observe requirement (c). It is virtually inconceivable that we observe a, say, "ticket buying-behaviour" as a consequence of a "client-centered-representation", a "go-for-a-walk-behaviour" implied by a "belief in voting-is-good", or a "kissing-the-kids-behaviour" resulting from a "valve folk-model". If this occurred, we would doubt either our analysis of the representation, belief or folk-model, or be convinced that the respective representation, belief or folk-model was not adequate at the moment.
In formal terms the research refers to a causal representation–behaviour relationship, because the representation $R$ is assumed to exist anterior to behaviour $B$, because the representation $R$ implies behaviour $B$, and because some other representation $\text{non-}R$ does not imply behaviour $B$:

$$R \rightarrow B \div (R \rightarrow B) \& \text{non} (\text{non-}R \rightarrow B).$$

The causal interpretation is only hinted indirectly by Echebarría and Gonzalez (1992) who use a causal regression model with their data. However, also Thommen et al. (1988) as well as Kempton (1987) use a causal research design by strictly observing the requirement of temporal sequence (b).

SPEAKING AND ACTING

The authors obey a common practice in studying beliefs and behaviours in social psychological research. This is to observe the following order in research: first, one evokes a series of reactions from the subjects. These reactions are either verbal or non-verbal, depending on the specific methods used. Verbal reactions are answers either to more or less open interview questions, to word association tests or to more or less closed questionnaire items. Non-verbal reactions very often are drawings. They are used either in cases where the subjects are not able to express themselves verbally, like children, or where the aim of the research is to tap the iconic aspects of a representation's core images (cf. Farr, 1993). Second, the inferred representation is postulated to explain subsequent behaviour which follows from the contents of the representation.

Thommen et al. (1988) observe exactly this sequence. However, nowhere do the authors attempt to prove that the verbal behaviour during the interviews of the subjects, and the observed professional behaviour in their daily practice are two qualitatively different things. It is presupposed that the verbal record of the interviews and the observable therapeutic behaviour are two different entities. This is a necessary assumption if one attempts to explain behaviour causally by an underlying representation since any event can only be caused by an explanans which is prior to the event itself.

But is this assumption well founded? Wouldn't it be equally possible to assess the supposed underlying representation by observing their professional behaviour and predicting their verbal behaviour in an interview which could occur in the future? Aren't verbal and professional behaviours both two expressions of one and the same represented group-knowledge? This question
can obviously be put in three respects: what is first, (a) the verbal or the professional behaviour, (b) the representation or the verbal behaviour, or (c) the representation or the professional behaviour? We are usually tempted to assert that first there is the representation, then there is our "measuring" or assessment of the representation, and finally there is the behaviour, which we observe as a dependent variable. But nothing and nobody prescribe this sequence. It is just a convention following from the psychologists' experience as experimenters, who first define the independent variables and subsequently observe the dependent events.

The same problem arises with Echebarría and Gonzalez' (1994) investigation. Wasn't it an arbitrary decision to apply the questionnaire before the elections? Wouldn't essentially the same results be obtained if it had been administered after the elections? The causal sequence from a political representation to voting behaviour, intended to be shown by the research, is not implied by the research object but only by the time schedule of the researchers.

By the same logic we could assess a representation $R$ by observing some overt behaviour $B$ and causally predict subsequent verbal behaviour $V$ by stating: "The representation $R$, with a content described by means of $B$, determines the verbal behaviour $V$." Such a statement will probably be rejected because of its strangeness, though not because we could not subscribe to the determination of verbal behaviour, but because of the sequence. It does not conform to the psychologists' expectations to look first at overt behaviour and then at verbal behaviour.

The example of the heat control-folk model (Kempton, 1987) illustrates the problem even better, because it refers to a rather narrow range of actions which are connected to the folk-model. In fact, the action structure in this research is such that by simply looking at the patterns of recorded switch positions as a reflection of action supposedly implied by the model, one can easily infer what the heat control model of the respective subject looks like. Such an approach to assess the content of the model by analyzing overt behaviour is as straightforward and easy as interviewing the subjects. Their words could not be clearer than their actions.

There are, in fact, examples in research where the overt behaviour of actors was used to infer at least some parts of a social representation. When Jodelet (1989b) investigated how her subjects who hosted mentally ill people thought about their illness, she observed that, e.g., when the hosts washed the cloths, they always took care to separate their own cloths from those of their guests. She
observed a similar behaviour when dishes were used for meals. The dishes of their guests always were stored separately and care was taken not to confuse them with the family's own dishes. These observations led the author to conclude that the social representation of mental illness contained beliefs about contagion. The author legitimately used overt behaviour (as well as verbal) as a data source for assessing a representation.

The question is: who or what prescribes the common research sequence verbal data–inferred representation–observed action? Put in other words: verbal action makes the researcher infer a specific model, which is supposed to exist independently of the interview and lets him or her expect that it implies a specific behaviour. The model is thought to be responsible for the assessed verbal data as well as for the later observed overt behaviour. It is supposed to exist independently as a mental entity in the subjects.

(2) FOLK PSYCHOLOGY IN ACTION

FOLK INTENTIONALITY

To understand why the authors of our examples insist in the sequence verbal data–inferred representation–subsequent behaviour, we need to discuss the question "Who or what or which folk-model held by the researcher demands the sequence of steps in the research?" This is not a trite question, because the answer given has serious consequences for our understanding of the representation–behaviour relationship. To discuss this question let me connect briefly to cognitive science and intentionality.

Authors in cognitive science have criticized the use of folk psychological concepts and models of explanation in scientific psychology. Folk psychology is understood "as a body of causal explanatory theoretical references to contentful psychological states employed by lay folk" (Greenwood, 1991, p. 5). In other words, folk psychology deals with the causal interconnectedness of concepts like beliefs, wishes, desires, motivations and actions of people, as employed by these same people (e.g. Searle, 1983). During the history of scientific psychology this corpus of folk knowledge has been made its basic conceptual framework, hindering, as some exponents of cognitive science argue, the truly scientific development of psychology (e.g. Stich, 1983). The multitude of positions on this problem of intentionality in cognitive science is bewildering and need
not concern us here. In fact, the solutions proposed by many of the exponents lead to completely doing away with folk psychological concepts and replacing them by concepts and causalities at the neurophysiological level of analysis (e.g. Churchland, 1991; Stich, 1983). This search for a computational model of the human mind and its related neuro-reductionism in any case would not be viable for a social psychological approach (cf. McDonough, 1991).

There is, however, a problem raised in the cognitive scientists' discussions which relates to the question put at the beginning of this chapter: to assume a causal relationship between psychological entities, i.e. to have a meta-belief about the relationship between believing what is correctly done in a given situation and consequent action (Dennet, 1989, p. 47). There is no doubt that this kind of thinking is deeply ingrained in our common sense psychology. If asked why we bought a red sweater two days ago, we would not hesitate to answer that we bought it, because we wished or needed it. No other cause would sound reasonable for us; neither that our purchase might have been caused by the sweater having being exposed in a shop's window, nor that some cerebral neurons fired at time $T$. Beliefs and thereby implied intentional states apparently explain subsequent actions under normal everyday conditions.\(^4\)

What is correct and normal in everyday reasoning and action-explaining when talking with our friends, need neither be adequate nor necessary when social psychologists talk about the same events. This is not to say that a belief $R$, a subsequent action $B$ and the related meta-belief $J = (R \rightarrow B)$, that $R$ has the consequence $B$ should not be taken seriously if offered by a subject as an explanation of the event $B$.\(^5\) Such explanatory propositions form the valid fabric for a scientific description of subjective worlds. What must be questioned is the use of this same structure of explanation when applied from a scientific observer's point of view. It is one thing to accept a subject $P$'s statement $J = "I do B because I think R"$ as a true statement from $P$'s point of view, but it is quite a different thing to state as a scientific observer "$P$ did $B$ because she thought $R$", i.e., using $J$ as a theoretical statement and interpreting it causally (e.g. Beckermann, 1979).

There are two problems involved in using a folk-model about "action-causation" and intentionality in theoretical accounts: (a) first it needs to be discussed, whether $P$'s meta-statement $J$ may or may not enter a theoretical account of subjective worlds and thereby determine – at least implicitly – the research design, or whether $J$ needs to be understood as being part of the subjective
worlds which are the object of the theoretical account. (b) Second it needs to be analyzed, whether $J$, when uttered by subjects, in fact means that the subjects perceive their behaviours as being caused by their intentional beliefs, or whether $J$ rather means that the subjects perceive their action-outcomes as being caused by their beliefs-plus-actions. This point refers to the folk-meaning of intentionality and personal causation and will be addressed later in this paper.

SUBJECTIVE WORLDS AND THEORETICAL ACCOUNTS

In social representation research we are in the position of an observer surveying a social field, the embedded beliefs or representations of the social believers and the sequence of actions performed by the social actors. We dispose of data, verbal, non-verbal, and overt behaviour, which allow us - in a hard ontological version - to infer that $P$ has certain beliefs in her mind, or - in a soft epistemological version - to state that $P$ acts (verbally, non-verbally, overt) as if she had certain beliefs (Dennet, 1989). Which of the two versions we adhere to is not important here. What is important, is to see that the observable behaviours are in principle equivalent, be they verbal, non-verbal or other, if we pass from a mere description to an interpretation of these behaviours.

Interpreting verbal, non-verbal or bodily data is to re-arrange and to add something to their description. This re-arrangement of and addition to the data is the theoretical work of the researcher (cf. Sperber, 1982, 1989). By interpreting data in social representation research the researcher constructs a set of interrelated beliefs, images, symbols, and emotions, i.e. the representation, which summarizes the observed verbal, non-verbal, and bodily data in a meaningful manner (cf. Geertz, 1973). The student of social representations in fact re-constructs what seems to be the set of beliefs $R$ which $P$ is communicating verbally, non-verbally or bodily to him or her (Duveen & Lloyd, 1993).

The result of interpretative work is the statement "$P$ thinks $R$". The data are at the beginning of the interpretative work and suggest such an inference. The statement "$P$ thinks $R$", also suggests that future data obtained from the same set of subjects at time $T_2$ – assuming reasonable stability over time – will let us infer the same or a similar set of beliefs $R$. Representations can be re-assessed, confirmed, or disconfirmed by new verbal, non-verbal, or bodily data after some time. Hence, the first data – through the interpretative work of the researcher – imply the construction of an assumed representation. The second data, again through the interpretative work of the researcher,
also imply the construction of the same or a similar representation which allows to state that "P still believes R", or "P now believes S".

It would sound utterly strange if a researcher stated that the representation R, constructed from the first set of data, caused the new set of (confirming) data. This would be like asserting that "The fact 'P believed R at time T1' caused the fact 'P believes R at time T2'". Such a statement just comments on temporal stability of the belief R. If a set of verbal data in an investigation of a belief system lets us infer a specific interpretation and the subjects later exhibit some overt behaviour which we come to interpret as being related to and a consequence of this belief system, we simply observe a certain stability of those beliefs. Both behaviours can be related to the beliefs only by interpretation, such that neither the behaviours, nor the beliefs inferred therefrom have temporal priority relative to the other.7

Each of the three empirical investigations mentioned first assessed verbal data – describing therapeutic, voting, or heat control beliefs and behaviours – which were interpreted and used to construct what the "underlying" belief system could be. Then some therapeutic, voting, or heat control behaviour was observed, which was interpreted as belonging to the same class of belief-specific behaviours as the verbal data. In light of the foregoing argument these investigations showed a certain stability of therapeutic, voting, or heat control beliefs under varying conditions of assessment. The result would have been the same if the order had been reversed, since nowhere in the phenomena the temporal sequence was necessarily implied. In order to interpret two events as being causally connected we need an irreversible order of events. In the same way as the questionnaire and interview data, also the therapeutic, voting, or heat control behaviours were instigated by the beliefs. The data themselves do not imply their being used in a temporal sequence.

In practice we are well advised to assume the existence of a representation before we either conduct interviews and apply questionnaires, or before we observe behaviour which somehow is related to the representation. But obviously both behaviours, the verbal one as well as the "overt", "actual", or "real" behaviour – you tick it – are closely connected to the representation. Both are expressions of the same underlying construct and either one could be used to describe the representation's content and structure; each has its merits and shortcomings as a data source. The fact that we prefer to use verbal behaviour as descriptions of the contents is just a methodological
convention (and an economical one), but not prescribed by the research object. Verbal as well as non-verbal behaviour each offer themselves as data sources. Which one we finally use depends upon our familiarity with different methods. If it is the case that verbal utterances and "actual" behaviours each exhibit features of a "folk-rational" knowledge system, the two are logically equivalent phenomena and there is no reason to prefer one to the other. Therefore I suggest we look at verbal and behavioural data related to a social representation as *two kinds of observations or illustrations of a representation.*

(3) **RATIONAL INDIVIDUALS AND MISPLACED INTENTIONALITY**

**FUNCTIONS OF INTENTIONAL CAUSALITY**

When questioned about their beliefs, feelings, and representations on some topic, subjects usually refer to them as being true. Also the researcher, because of the basic rules of conversation (Grice, 1957), presupposes that the subjects do not only talk *as if* they believed in what they say. They must identify with the content as is the case with spontaneous common sense in everyday life.

Spiro (1982) suggested five levels of intensity of cultural symbols. These stretch from (1) simply learning a belief, (2) understanding it, (3) believing that it is true, (4) having it shape the actor's perceptual world, to (5) having one's actions instigated by it. So, if the researcher is looking for action-relevant knowledge, he must assume that the subjects take their knowledge held to be true into account in their decisions and actions, i.e. subscribe to level (4) and (5). Not doing so would be utterly irrational, because subjects then would neglect accessible knowledge which is relevant for orienting their actions. Such rationality is a sign of social and cultural expertise (Dreyfus, 1984).

Let us come back to the empirical examples cited at the beginning. Thommen et al.'s (1988) therapists, if they had been asked, would most certainly have acknowledged that most of their professional action is guided or can be explained by the therapeutic theory they subscribe to. Echebarría and Gonzalez' (1994) subjects, if they had been asked, would certainly have confirmed that they actually will vote if they considered it good and necessary. Kempton's (1987) subjects, if they had been asked, would not have denied that they are orienting their heat-control behaviour according to their vernacular model of optimal heating.
A suspicious researcher might have engaged his or her subjects in a deeper questioning:

Researcher: "How do you know you really will act according to your beliefs as you say?";

Subject: "Well, I told you, I think it's right."

Researcher: "Are you sure?"

Subject: "Do you think I'm lying? I'm telling you what I consider right and this I will do. I'm not stupid, am I?"

This short fictive dialogue reflects on the one hand the subject's conviction of herself as a rational person who prescribes to do what she thinks to be right, and, on the other hand, it reflects the subject's appeal to her honesty. An appeal to honesty relates at the same time to her action prognosis as well as to her present action, i.e. telling her interviewer the truth about what she believes. Honesty, thus, is presupposed for her telling the truth about her beliefs (present verbal behaviour) as well as for her (overt) acting truthfully in the future.

By subscribing to level (5), i.e. having their actions instigated by their beliefs, subjects refer to themselves as rational beings in thinking and acting. This is the reason why they can answer "I do B because I think R" when asked "Why did you do B". But this statement \( J = \text{"doing B because of R"} \) is the private opinion of the subject \( P \). It is part of her folk model about human functioning as well as a means to preserve her self-image as a rational person and as such it is part of the inferred representation itself as a kind of meta-belief. The researcher can interpret data which include statements like \( J \) such that he or she arrives at the conclusion \( P \text{ thinks } R \) and \( P \text{ thinks 'thinking } R \text{ causes her to do } B' \). This acknowledges the subject's personal conviction of intentional "causality".

The researcher would, however, violate the legitimacy of his interpretation work if he took one part of the data obtained from \( P \), i.e. the belief \( J \), and integrated it into his or her theoretical framework. A statement \( J \) by the subject \( P \) is a data at the same level as it is a statement \( R \) by \( P \). Neither of the two offers itself to become part of the conceptual framework by means of which the researcher does the interpretation work. The researcher must not confuse the data with his or her categories serving to bring the data in order.

ON BELIEFS AND GHOSTS

The belief in behaviour being caused by one's intentions and beliefs is so deeply ingrained in everyday thinking and Western psychology that it might be difficult to dispose of it. Therefore let
me give a fictive example to illustrate the problem from a different perspective. Let us imagine a
foreign tribe where our subjects believe (R) that in the nearby river lives some dangerous mythical
beast. Observing the behaviour (B) of the people we see that no one ever goes close to the river. In
our common Western thinking we consequently would state that the people do not go close to the
river because they think it is dangerous and they do not want to risk their lives, hence postulating a
causal relationship (R → B) between river-avoidance-behaviour and belief in the dangerousness of
the beast. But further questioning these people could reveal that they offer another explanation.
They may say, e.g. that it is the good ghosts of their forefathers who protect and stop them before
they get too close to the river, offering thereby a belief (J) about an external causation of their
behaviour.

In this case one could not state that the behaviour B is caused by their belief in good ghosts
(J), because in their folk-understanding it is the ghosts themselves, and not their beliefs in the
ghosts, who govern their actions. Such a finding would most certainly enter the researcher's
description of the tribe's everyday beliefs but not the theoretical statement explaining their
behaviour. In this case, because it does not conform to the researcher's everyday psychology, belief
R and belief J clearly pertain to the same level of the subjects' knowledge and belief system and
need to be treated as such.

Neither would a psychologist adopt a belief J′, which states that

"it is the good ghost in my head who makes me avoid the river". (3)

for his or her theoretical elaboration of the representation–action relationship, although the meta-
belief J′ is equivalent to a plain causal-intentional interpretation: it is a belief about an internal
agency (and not an external agency as in belief J in our foregoing story) which governs subsequent
behaviour B. Therefore it is equivalent to the meta-belief

"it is my belief R in my head which makes me avoid the river". (4)

which is equivalent to a folk-belief in intentional causality. Why, then, should a psychologist treat
beliefs (3) and (4) differently, such that (4) is a viable theory for explaining a behaviour by a belief,
but (3) is not, and why should he or she let his or her research design be informed by a folk-belief
like (4) but not by one like (3)? Well, it is obviously the strangeness of (3) and the familiarity of (4)
for psychologists trained in Western thinking, which makes them regard the two meta-beliefs differently.

Each of the two beliefs (3) and (4) gives coherence and rationality to the ensemble of beliefs and actions of the subjects subscribing to them. Each one is a viable description of the worlds the subjects live in and allows their beholders to sustain a rational self-image.

MISPLACED INTENTIONALITY

The foregoing arguments suggest an answer to our initial question "Who or what or which folk-model held by the researcher prescribes the sequence of steps in the research?". It is the folk-model held by the researchers themselves and shared with their subjects which implies a causal interconnectedness between beliefs and behaviours. Researchers – usually – do not integrate a subject's belief on, e.g., mental illness – even if they find it good, correct, or even if they share it with the subject – in their own scientific elaboration of mental illness. Why then should they accept an intentional/causal meta-belief as part of their theory of representation and behaviour? Folk-beliefs belong to the subjects and are part of their world construction and not of the researchers' theory about their subjects' world construction.

If the researcher's personal folk belief in intentional causality is the reason to implicitly assume representation–behaviour causality, we'd better do away with it. A social representation does not "cause" behavioural data if it is regarded a rational system; moreover, a representation necessarily implies a series of behaviours by means of which the contents of the representation is enacted and confronted with the external world. It does not make sense to disconnect representation and behaviour neither on a conceptual nor on an empirical level. Both form a unity of representation and behaviour, (R/B), which is glued together by the overarching belief J that rational behaviour is always justified and implied by foregoing rational beliefs in an appropriate situation.

This view of situation, belief, and behaviour being linked by a meta-belief is in accordance with Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) finding that subjective reports on higher mental processes often do not reflect experimentally established contingencies between stimuli and responses. Reports on mental processes are not based on an interrogation of "a memory of the cognitive processes that operated on the stimuli", even when the report conforms to experimental evidence. Instead they
may be based "on implicit, a priori theories about the causal connection between stimulus and response" (p. 233).

I argue that folk beliefs about causal effects of intentional states and folk beliefs about other aspects of the world are located at the same level of analysis and hence are the same thing if considered from an empirical point of view. Both are true in the world of the subjects who express them by whatever means available. As such they are data and they need to be investigated as part of the belief system itself, their contents analyzed and their functions deciphered, if a psychologist is interested in the representational system of the people. They must not be misplaced in the theory accounting for these data.

(4) GIVING IT A TWIST: WHERE CAUSALITY COMES IN AGAIN

There is a certain ambiguousness in people's accounts. If we listen closely to how a person talks about a misdeed, he may be heard saying "Well, I really wanted to hit her"; or, less criminal, "I bought the sweater because I needed one". The person refers to an action as if it had been intended or – put loosely – as if it had been "caused" by his "wanting-to-hit-her" or his "needing-a-sweater". But is he really referring to the action of hitting respectively buying? Doesn't he rather refer to the outcomes of his actions, i.e. the "hurting-her" or "possessing-a-sweater"? Listening more closely we may hear that the verbs referring to action in the accounts in fact refer to the outcomes of the actions. The whole account is an elliptical proposition whose meaning reaches beyond the superficially visible content. The concepts of action being used contain at the same time the behavioural characteristics (the act of raising a hand and hitting, the act of buying) as well as the results of this behaviour in the outside world (the injury, the possession of a sweater). No person really means to say that he intended the movement of "raising his hand" or of "handing over money (in exchange for the sweater)", but rather that one intended to achieve a goal. The behaviour is just an intervening aspect between belief/desire and the transformation of a situation towards a goal.

In a pilot investigation I interviewed subjects about how they use the concepts "to intend", "intention", "to cause" and "causation" by giving and asking for situations and examples where a person believes something, acts/behaves according to the belief, and the goals and resulting outcomes. It turned out that most interviewees refused to see the behaviours themselves – i.e. when the behaviour was conceptually separated from the outcomes – as being intended or caused.
"Intending" and "causing" was accepted as a valid explanation for actions only, if they included the respective outcomes, where both verbs referred to a result according to the goal, and "causing" referred also to an unwanted outcome. In fact, the subjects encountered severe difficulties in viewing behaviour separate from the behavioural outcomes in the outside world. In a similar vein neither Heider (1977, p. 27f) nor Smedslund (1988, p. 21) conceptually separate behaviour from outcomes in their analyses of naïve conceptions of "wanting".

Well, how do psychologists conceptualize the complex of beliefs, goals, behaviour and outcomes? For psychologists the concept of behaviour refers to the physical movement of parts of the body and not to the changes in the physical conditions of the situation induced by the movements. They refer to movements by verbs like "walking", "grasping", hitting", "turning", etc. The outcomes of a behaviour, whether they accord to the goals or not, are different entities: one walks to reach a geographical point, one grasps a bottle to prevent it from falling, one hits a person to cause an injury, and one turns around to see another person (see, e.g., von Cranach, Kalbermatten, Indermühle, & Gugler, 1980).

If, on the one hand, subjects in their spontaneous thinking about intentionality are unable or unwilling to separate behaviour/action from the changes in the outside world being induced by it, but, on the other hand, psychologists do, we get a fresh view on the problem of the causal explanation of behaviours by beliefs, where we set off from at the beginning of this paper. The psychologists' tendency to design their investigations according to a causal explanation approach was shown to be due to misplacing the folk belief of intentional causality in theoretical accounts. It was argued that representations do not constitute valid causes of behaviour because the relationship between the two entities is an analytical and not a synthetical relationship. The fact that a representation is followed by a specific behaviour is not a contingency, but a logical necessity by virtue of the subjects being rationally disposed. However, if we see a "representation plus behaviour", \((R/B)\) , result in an outcome \(O\) , we do observe a contingent and synthetic relationship. This relationship conforms to our model of modal causal explanation:

\[
(R/B) \rightarrow s \; O \div \{ (R/B) \rightarrow O \} \& \text{ non } \{ \text{non}(R/B) \rightarrow O \} .
\]

The event \(O\) is caused by the event \((R/B)\), because (a) the implication relationship "\(\rightarrow s\)" is synthetical, which means that (b) \((R/B)\) is a social representation plus associated behaviour existing,
respectively happening before the outcome \( Q \) and (c) the complement of \((R/B)\), \(\text{non-}(R/B)\) does not produce the same outcome \( Q \) which is to be explained.

It is immediately conceivable that a social representation and associated behaviour may result in a variety of outcomes, where a few or even only one may be intended. A specific outcome is not a necessary or logical consequence of, but a contingency with a foregoing representation plus related behaviour, simply because often enough action results in undesired outcomes, specifically on a collective level (Elster, 1983).

Such an approach was adopted by Di Giacomo (1980). The author analyzed the representations held by the leading committee and its followers in a student protest movement at a Belgian university. He shows that these representations were significantly different both in terms of structure and action implications. This divergence of social representations explains causally the failing success and final breakdown of the movement as a contingent consequence and collective fact.

In contrast the research design by Thommen et al. (1988) is such that it shows therapeutic behaviour \( B \) to result from the therapeutic representation \( R \) and not from another representation. This is a logical necessity. But the design also may show – although the authors did not set out to answer this question – that the therapeutic representation \( R \) plus the logically related therapeutic behaviour \( B \) causes the clients' neurotic condition being changed as suggested by the theory and, perhaps, being cured more rapidly than when a different therapeutic representation plus behaviour was employed. The same is true for Echebarria and Gonzalez' (1994) and Kempton's (1987) research. Their designs would serve well to explain causally why a certain number of ballot papers can be found in the ballot box given that a certain number of voters hold beliefs in "voting-is-good" and behave accordingly, or why the temperature in a room increases with, perhaps, little fuel consumption, given that the inhabitants subscribe to a certain folk-model of heating and its related behaviour, respectively. The events of the clients' neuroses being cured, of a certain number of ballot papers in the ballot box, and of an increasing temperature in a room is not a logically necessary consequence, but a contingent and therefore causally explainable fact.

A critical reader may comment that investigating the relations between specific representations-plus-behaviours and outcomes is a totally different task than investigating the belief
systems of people. This objection is absolutely correct. But if one investigates a social *belief* system of people one is necessarily also investigating the related system of social *behaviours* these people will exhibit in certain situations, as well as the underlying meta-belief in the two being intentionally/causally connected. Neither belief nor behaviour can be investigated without simultaneously also talking about the other one.

(5) FOLK INTENTIONALITY AND SOCIAL GROUPS

Social representations are shared systems of beliefs in social groups. They are rational, not by virtue of their being physically provable, but because of the group members' consensus in acting them out and speaking in their terms (Moscovici, 1988). Beliefs and reasons need not correspond to some external reality. Considering beliefs as rational concerns the relation between the belief and the available evidence and not the relation between the belief and the world (Elster, 1983, p. 16). Everyday rationality is not defined by physical evidence in the sense of "scientific" verification, but by social evidence, i.e. by the beliefs and the actions of the relevant others. The consensus about some beliefs may refer explicitly to some specific contents which are accepted as true in a given group, or there may be collective agreement about the admissible means of establishing some other kind of evidence: these may be, e.g., scientific experiments in the Western world – as suggested by Festinger in his second postulate (1954) – or questioning an oracle.

Social representations are an integral part of everyday practice, reflecting this practice in cognitive, symbolic, and iconic terms (Doise, 1990; Moscovici, 1988). By being part of social practice, representations are intimately linked to the coordinated action and interaction of the members of social units, and representations change when social practice changes. Most often it is a change in the conditions of life within a society that gives rise to collective debate, argument and subsequent re-elaboration and changing conceptions of social objects.

It seems therefore that social representations can hardly be assessed without taking into account the complex phenomenon of social practice, where thinking, acting and interacting go hand in hand as shown, e.g., by Jodelet (1989b) in her comprehensive study of a village as a whole social unit. At this level neither acting nor individual and collective "thinking" has priority, such that the question of causality relating believing and acting does not arise. Collective beliefs about psychological functioning, i.e. representations about how beliefs and individual actions are linked,
be it causally or otherwise, are a necessary part of collective functioning. These folk-psychological representations determine the structure of proper accounting strategies without which no society can exist (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Shotter, 1984). They are necessary devices of communication and social regulation (Shegloff, 1991). As such they cannot be separated logically from other systems of beliefs and common sense.

In fact, if social actors would not attribute their actions to their own intentions, beliefs, and desires, the concept of personal responsibility would be impossible. This does not preclude that under certain circumstances social actors refer to justification strategies trying to deny responsibility for undesirable consequences. Jurisdiction and psychiatric expert testimony are speaking examples of social institutions supposed to construct and maintain the ideology of belief-action causality.

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to assess social representations in empirical research without taking into account all the surrounding social conditions at all available levels of analyses and assessment. But when doing so, i.e. if one reduces social representations from a collective phenomenon to a distributed property of individuals, the researcher's focus of interest may come to disregard the close interrelationship between representations and actions and related folk psychological beliefs at the social level. Once the researcher investigates a representation at the individual level only, the question of causality in intentional systems intrudes quasi automatically into his or her theories because of the researcher's proximity to folk-psychological thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

I set out to show that investigations aimed at showing links between social representations and behaviour often apply research designs, where the representation becomes the independent and behaviour the dependent variable. These designs make sense only if one wishes to investigate causal relationships between independent and dependent variables, a presupposition which is unwarranted in the field of social representations and other rational systems. Even if the researchers themselves do not intend to see this relationship as a causal one, it is the design which makes the research ultimately causal. The unspoken foundation of these designs seems to be the meta-belief of intentional causality held not only by the subjects but also by the researchers. If such meta-beliefs are closely linked to the subjects' thinking, then, it is suggested, they should be treated as parts of
the representations people hold, linking the beliefs about some object with the behaviour related to the object and its causation in one and the same representation: "The beliefs must be treated as part of the action, and not separated from it..." (Douglas, 1982, p. 200f).

The inseparable complex of thinking and behaviour which we call a social representation is an independent variable in causal explanations only with respect to subsequent dependent events as there are social objects, institutions, conflict etc. These are contingent events being created, constructed or caused by collectively concerted action, interaction and counteraction.

Considering the collective level of the representation appears as a safeguard not to confuse contents of data with theoretical categories, when investigating socially shared rational systems like representations. This is to say that it is necessary to consider folk-psychological beliefs in general and intentional causality specifically as playing a crucial role and function in everyday social practice. This is even more necessary if social representations are the object of study. On the one hand, rational and everyday-rational systems presuppose intentional causality as a prerequisite for communication, justification, and action explanation at an inter-subjective level. On the other hand, subjects can perceive themselves as rational only if they accept intentional causality to be true. As such, i.e. as socially functional beliefs, intentional causality needs to be dealt with in analyses of common sense. Entering scientific discourse, common sense does not necessarily provide a feasible basis for theoretical analyses.8
NOTES

1 I am convinced that the central arguments of the present paper, except chapter (5) also apply to areas other than social representation research. The structure of research on the relationship of attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, etc. with behaviour in all of social psychology is very similar (see e.g. Kelman, 1974; Wicker, 1969). Due to restrictions of space, however, the analysis focuses on social representations and similar constructs like cultural models.

2 It is not the place here to elaborate on the problem of empirically proving analytical or everyday-analytical relationships between events in social psychology. See Holzkamp (1986), Smedslund (e.g. 1978), Wagner (1993) for detailed arguments. Quine (1961) and other philosophers have questioned the analytic-synthetic distinction. But even if one accepts this argument Smedslund's and Holzkamp's critique remains valid in a pragmatic sense. They point to the relative sterility of social psychological theories which mirror the structure and concepts of the semantics of the very subjects they are supposed to describe (Bourdieu, 1983). Part of this is the topic of the present paper.

3 I exclude here document and media analyses because by their very nature, investigations using such methods usually do not attempt to establish representation-behaviour/action relationships.

4 Note that our report is true as a subjectively valid account independently of whether, e.g., an advertising stimulus might have instigated the purchase of the sweater beyond our awareness. The search for objective stimuli (advertising) causing behaviour (purchasing) is situated at a different level of analysis than an investigation of subjective worlds.

5 Beliefs in folk psychology are roughly defined as "information-bearing states of people … that, together with appropriately related desires, lead to intelligent action" (Dennet, 1989, p. 46, italics in the original). This definition is close enough to a loose definition of a social representation as a distributed property of social individuals to use "belief" and (social) "representation" interchangeably.

6 This paragraph hits also the problem arising from attributing representations ontological reality, i.e. the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which cannot be discussed in the present context.
7 Trying to explain one expression (e.g. the behavioural one) by another expression (e.g. the verbal one) of a representation resembles the situation of a person who intends to explain the hand-drawing of a chair made at 2 pm by a photo of the chair taken at 1 pm. Both, drawing and photo are more or less equivalent mappings of the object "chair", the causal illusion is only introduced by the arbitrary sequence. This is, of course, not an argument, but a slightly exaggerated illustration.

8 It seems to me that the social level of analysis and assessment also could contribute to the present discussion of the problem of intentionality in cognitive science. The role and meaning of folk-psychological conceptions which also have become part of individually oriented scientific psychology only expose themselves in the collective context of groups, societies, and cultures. They cannot be disposed of in emic and inside analyses of socio-psychological functioning. Their use in scientific theoretical elaboration, however, needs to be justified in the light of the research's goals and explanation space.
REFERENCES


