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'Changing the context': Tackling discrimination at school and in society

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we propose a social psychological framework for studying the role of schools in promoting positive intercultural relations. We draw on data from schools in England where addressing issues of cultural diversity is a key aim of educational practice. We focus specifically on the role of social context in educational activities that tackle discrimination. We consider the socio-political context, local community context, and immediate school context from a social representations theory perspective. Using data from interviews with staff and focus groups with students in schools from three very different localities, we show that the socio-political context may limit schools' ability to promote positive intercultural relations but also that it is possible for schools to promote broader change from the bottom-up, acting as agents of change at a societal level, i.e. in terms of changing the local and broader societal contexts in which they are located.

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1. Introduction

The negative impact of stigma and discrimination on young people has been largely documented. Direct as well as more subtle and institutionalised forms (e.g. Crozier, 2009; Howarth, 2004) of discrimination and stigma can lead to lower achievement (Crozier, 2005; Zirkel, 2004; Steele, 1997) and academic disengagement (Ogbu, 2003; Schmader et al., 2001) for minoritised students, contribute to their wider marginalisation (Crozier and Davies, 2008) and damage their sense of self-worth and positive identity (Howarth, 2002; see Goffman, 1963). Moreover, 'multicultural' school practices in the UK and elsewhere are often shown to unintentionally perpetuate rather than resist racialisation (Andreouli et al., 2013; see also, Schofield, 2004, 2009; Gorski, 2008). On the other hand, students in schools with a constructive approach to cultural diversity benefit from "enhanced learning, higher educational and occupational aspirations" (Frankenberg et al., 2003) and more secure identities (Race, 2011). Together this points to the need for continuing to search for appropriate educational practices in contexts of discrimination and social exclusion. Schools can indeed play a key role in reducing discrimination (Banks, 2006) and in protecting vulnerable children

facing stigma. In other words, schools can act as agents of change (Zirkel, 2008). Often it is assumed that schools are 'change agents' in terms of changing the attitudes, aspirations and achievements of individual students; that is, facilitating change *within* the context of the school. Here we consider a more ambitious possibility: how far schools can be agents of change at a societal level, i.e. in terms of changing the local and broader societal contexts in which they are located.

In this paper, we present a social psychological framework that positions educational practice, discrimination and approaches to tackle prejudice in their local and broader socio-political context. We suggest that this analysis of context allows us to move beyond models of 'best practice' and develop targeted guidelines for specific educational and community settings. As others have also argued, it is important to "ask how psychological processes are constituted through and operate in social context" (Subašić et al., 2012; p. 6; see also Israel and Tajfel, 1972; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Andreouli and Howarth, 2013). Here we focus particularly on approaches to tackle discrimination and prejudice in schools. We argue that considering the complexity of the social context is necessary in order to appreciate the challenges that schools face in their efforts to tackle discrimination and thus also for developing efficient practices against discrimination for the protection of vulnerable children. This paper is divided into three parts. We first outline a social psychological perspective for the study of context (Section 1.1) and focus particularly on how the theory of social

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representations can help us conceptualise context (Section 1.2). We then present empirical findings from a study on multiculturalism in English schools. After outlining the methodology and analysis of the study (Section 2), we discuss the findings (Section 3). In line with the theoretical discussion, our data show that the process of representation – where hegemonic representations of difference are maintained and defended but also sometimes challenged and reworked into more emancipatory representations – needs to be understood not only as a product of context but also as a process that sometimes may actually alter this context. We conceptualise context in our study in three key ways discussed in these sections: the broader socio-political context (Section 3.1), the local community context (Section 3.2) and the school context (Section 3.3). These layers are interrelated, but examining them in three separate sections allows for analytical clarity. We conclude with a discussion of how schools may tackle discrimination and promote positive change through practices that enable the development of emancipatory representations, while recognising that contextual factors at the social and community level often restrict these efforts for change.

1.1. A social psychological approach to the study of context

The discipline of social psychology is valuable for an analysis of context as its focus is precisely the dynamic relationship between individuals and their social context. This context can be the immediate context of a social interaction (such as for discourse psychology and conversation analysis approaches), it can be the group or intergroup context (as for Social Identity Theory), or it can be the broader social and political context, incorporating beliefs, values, norms and other forms of knowledge that circulate in a society (as for Social Representations research). Social psychology should deal with all these layers that shape social-psychological phenomena, integrating the intra-personal, the inter-personal, inter-group and ideological levels of analysis (Doise, 1986). As Howarth et al. (2013) have recently noted, despite the ongoing individualism of the social sciences, and psychology in particular (Farr, 1991), the politics of context should be at the core of social psychological study (see also Himmelweit and Gaskell (1990)). This was indeed the original vision of Wundt, the father of the discipline, for social psychology (Farr, 1996) but something that is sometimes less evident in some current psychological research (Howarth et al., 2014c; Reicher, 2004).

In light of this, we argue that social psychology is ideally positioned to study the context that shapes social phenomena and social projects, such as anti-discrimination strategies – the focus of this paper. There are many ways of conceptualising the notion of context; different studies emphasise different aspects of context, such as the physical, social and psychological (Howarth et al., 2014c). For the most part however, mainstream psychology treats the context as a background for the phenomena or individuals that it studies. In this paper we aim to move beyond this somewhat one-dimensional and static construction of context. We show that the context not only shapes and restricts efforts to reduce discrimination, but also that such micro-level efforts have the potential to have an impact on the broader context. Our focus is thus on both stability and change, in line with theory and research in the social representations tradition (Kessi and Howarth, in press). Since in this paper, our interest is on discrimination and stigma, we understand context here in terms of societal processes of representation which mediate social relations and permeate institutionalised practices of stigmatisation (Andreouli and Howarth, 2013; Howarth, 2011). We suggest that the theory of social representations, originally formulated by Moscovici in the 1950s, can help us conceptualise and study the relationship between the micro context, the specific local community context and the macro context of broader systems of representation.

1.2. Social representations and social context

Social representations are “systems of values, ideas and practices” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii) that provide a framework of thinking about the social world and a common frame of reference for groups and communities. What make social representations social is not simply that they are collectively shared, but that they are socially constituted, resisted and transformed through communicative processes and that they serve social functions by orienting social behaviour, communication and social change among people (Rose et al., 1995; Moscovici, 1961). Social representations therefore mediate the relationship between self and other. It is indeed the difference between the self and the other, the need to make familiar what is strange, that motivates the construction of social knowledge (Jovchelovitch, 1996). Thus, otherness, in the sense of engaging outside the self, is constitutive of social representations. However, one could say that there are two sides to otherness: (a) a constructive process of engaging with others in the development of self and the development of social knowledge; (b) a divisive process that is about the delimitation of ‘us’ and ‘them’, in ways that ‘otherise’ or stigmatise other groups and individuals (Howarth, 2001, 2006).

While Moscovici differentiated between modern ‘dynamic’ social representations and Durkheim’s collective representations that function as social facts, there remain today hegemonic forms of knowledge that continue to hold a ‘truth status’ in that they are rarely challenged. Otherising representations, such as ‘race’ is an example of a social representation that is heavily naturalised, i.e. when considered as a biological category that can differentiate people (Lott, 2010). Modern forms of ‘cultural racism’ continue to be based on the rarely challenged assumption that cultures are essentialised (and unalterable) features of different communities (Leach, 2002). Essentialisation is a representational tool that establishes social categories, such as race and culture, as discrete and impermeable (Wagner et al., 2009), so that intergroup differences are consequently understood as incompatible (Chrysochoou and Lyons, 2011). Several social representations studies have highlighted forms of othering through representational processes: for example, on race (Augoustinos and Riggs, 2007; Howarth et al., 2014c), immigration (Deaux and Wiley, 2007) and poverty (Chauhan and Foster, 2013). Such representations are often hegemonic (Moscovici, 1988; Howarth, 2011) or belief-based (Marková, 2003). They are based on the ‘us-them’ theme (Marková, 2003), a fundamental and relatively stable opposition that underpins social representations about social groups. They are harder to change as they have become habitual ways of making sense of social groupings. To put it simply, such representations are prescriptive: they are not easily re-constructed but they are a type of knowledge that is ‘passed down’ with little opportunity for debate, critique or change.

However, such hegemonic representations do sometimes change, becoming emancipated representations (Moscovici, 1988). In fact, all representations contain the ‘seeds of change’ insofar as the ability to debate and argue is part of the representational process of human thinking (Billig, 1987; Howarth, 2006). Moreover, although asymmetries in dialogue and recognition help to maintain dominant representations, they are also the starting point for the negotiation of existing knowledge because they create the possibility for debate and contestation (Howarth et al., 2014a,b). It follows that more ‘dialogical’ contexts are conducive for the development of more ‘open’, knowledge-based representations (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Emancipated representations reflect more heterogeneous social systems whereby different sub-communities construct different versions of the world (Moscovici, 1988). This is a matter of the possibility of social recognition of different perspectives. While lack of recognition in

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