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Social representations in the ordinary explanation of a 'riot'

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the notion of social representations by way of a systematic analysis of media and participants' accounts of the St Pauls street disturbances of 1980. The analysis concentrates on two major explanatory categories which appear in the accounts: (A) 'race'; (B) 'government cuts and amenities'. In each case it is possible to distinguish three different levels of consensus between accounts: (i) particular explanatory schemata can be recognized as available but treated as mistaken; (ii) particular explanatory schemata can be recognized as relevant and adopted to explain the particular events, although in different ways; (iii) particular schemata can be adopted and used to explain events in the same way. The flexible meaning of these categories is highlighted along with the recurrent reference to alternative explanations. These findings raise problems for the suggestion that social representations minimize conflict and create 'consensual universes', and question the straightforward relationship between social representations and identifiable social groups. In conclusion the need is identified for a more detailed analysis of the language in which social representations are couched, and the relationship they bear to different contexts of use.

INTRODUCTION

An extraordinary and enigmatic event, like a 'riot', provokes interest on a national scale. Attempts are made by Parliamentarians, the media, local people and by the participants themselves to describe the phenomenon, to establish the 'facts of the matter' and to explain what caused it. Given that such an event demands explanation, a perfect opportunity arises for studying social representations (Farr, 1977; Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Herzlich, 1973; Moscovici, 1976a, 1981, 1982,

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1983; Moscovici, and Hewstone, 1983) and ordinary explanations (Heider, 1958; Pollner, 1974; Wegner and Vallacher, 1981; see also Antaki, 1981). Much of the social psychological interest of the explanations generated derives from their status as representations, the way they are constructed and organized, and in the types of function they serve.

Moscovici has characterized a social representation as 'a set of concepts, statements and explanations orginating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communication' (Moscovici 1981, p. 181). Despite the apparent usefulness of this notion, especially as a replacement for the problematic notion of 'attitude', there are difficulties and ambiguities in Moscovici's discussion of social representations. Given the theoretical and methodological significance of his work on the subject, it is important that these be addressed. The present study will attempt to do this by analysing accounts of the causes of the 'riot' which occurred in the St Pauls area of Bristol on the 2 April 1980.

Central to Moscovici's formulation is the idea that 'every representation tends to turn an unfamiliar thing, or the unfamiliar in general, into something familiar' (1981, p. 188). The act of representing the 'disturbing and threatening' creates, in Moscovici's terms, a consensual universe. In this consensual universe 'each of us wants to feel at home, sheltered from areas of disagreement and from incompatibility. Whatever is said or done tends to reconfirm the accepted assumptions and meanings, to affirm rather than to contradict' (1981, p. 188–9). A representation creates 'a reassuring impression of something we have "seen before" and "known before"' (1981, p. 191). As Moscovici writes '[t]he question that the theory of social representations must solve is . . . how groups or individuals faced with the apparent diversity of behaviours and phenomena that they view as unfamiliar or unpredictable, create a relatively stable order in which these become familiar and predictable' (1981, p. 204). Social representations are generated by groups, hence the consensual nature they display: '[t]he angle from which a group will try to cope with the non-familiar will be determined by the images, concepts and languages shared by that group' (1981, p. 189). Social representations 'have their own properties, which can only be discovered by studying their relations with social groups' (1982, p. 135). Clearly, then, for Moscovici the function of social representations is to create a world rid of the unknown and the threatening. Social representations constitute a practical, linguistically based apparatus for making sense of the social world.

A number of unanswered questions arise from Moscovici's formulation of the nature of social representations. Firstly, to what degree are social representations shared and in what sense are they consensual? Of course they can be distinguished from the Durkhiemian notion of collective representations, which are shared by a whole society, and also from individual representations, which may be unique to one or a few persons. Within this range, however, a considerable variation in degrees of consensus and types of consensus is possible, and this has yet to be addressed in the social representations literature. It might be, for example, that individuals share a set of resources for making sense of the world, leaving room for disagreements when these are employed in the context of actual explanations; or it could be that there is consensus at the level of practice too. The tenor of Moscovici's work certainly suggests the latter (e.g. 1981, p. 88 and 204—although this appears to be contradicted by his discussion of situational and dispositional attributions 1981, pp. 206–208). There is also the possibility that explanatory

resources will be recognized as relevant and important, but nevertheless not drawn upon in the specific context in question.

Secondly, and related to the ambiguity over the degree to which social representations are shared, is the delimitation of the groups whose 'images, concepts and languages' determine the angle from which the 'non-familiar' will be approached. Moscovici gives no indication how such groups are constituted, or the degree of agreement or consensus the groups should display. He is clearly talking about naturally occurring groups which share social representations, in whatever sense, but provides no explicit procedure for identifying these groups independently of the data itself and thus risks circularity; groups being identified by their social representations and social representations being sought within the framework of prior groups. It must be stressed that this is quite separate from the problem of identifying groups as they are constructed within the social representations themselves. Such groups may or may not exist independently of the social representation; whether or not they do is a matter for empirical investigation.

In this study we shift the initial emphasis away from groups and towards the linguistic phenomena which constitute social representations. This shift is required to avoid certain difficulties related to the problem of circularity. For if social representations are defined *a priori* as group diacritica (see Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983, p. 116)—and it will always be possible to find linguisitc phenomena which mark off one group from another—there is a risk of excluding linguisitic phenomena of like kind (which are shared and used to make sense of the world) but which cross-cut group boundaries. To make groups the central focus of attention and social representations characteristics of those groups, encourages the analyst to draw cleavages between groups, ignoring similar sorts of data which link those same groups. Because of considerations of this kind linguistic data are taken as the starting point in the analysis described below.

Before we embark on the analysis there are one or two points which must be stressed. The extracts from accounts discussed below should not be read as examples of social representations in themselves; instead they are presented as a body to demonstrate the difficulties faced in applying such a concept given the way it is currently defined. It is the connections between them, and the problems faced in attempting to establish where one social representation begins and another ends which is at issue. Nor, for the same reason, should they be read as examples of different individual opinions; as we stress, the extracts display shared features and evidently possess a social character. However, it is essential to begin the analysis on firm empirical ground by looking at the statements made by individuals in response to a particular event. This is the only data available and it would be dangerously precipitate to attempt an explanation of it in terms of groups or group ideologies which *underly* certain apparently diverse statements. It is necessary first to ask how the individual statements which constitute our data relate to the idea of social representations; how the boundaries between different representations are to be recognized and delimited, if this is a reasonable exercise at all; whether social representations are generated by particular groups, or particular ideologies, or perhaps by different situations. There is also the danger that, unless we begin with a close look at the data, we will unwittingly smuggle in our own social representations of the groups we may want to talk about, or their ideological commitments. We should attend very closely to the ontology of our own concepts.

In the analysis and discussion which follows we look critically at the notion of

social representations, emphasizing the difficulties encountered by the work done until now. Elsewhere (Potter and Litton, 1985) we propose positive solutions to these problems by introducing the idea of linguisitic repertoires. Space does not permit us to elaborate on that here.

METHOD

Materials

Radio and television programmes which referred to the St Pauls 'riot' were fully transcribed and used in conjunction with a wide range of newspaper reports and editorials. Six subjects, involved in, or present during the riot, were interviewed; the interviews were taped and later transcribed. The full corpus of materials from all the different data sources approaches 80 000 words of transcript. All these data were collected by Stephen Reicher of Exeter University.

Procedure

The data were closely and systematically examined to identify all accounts of the cause of the riot. These were coded according to the type of explanation offered, and indexed for ease of reference. This gave convenient access to accounts invoking, for example, unemployment or government cuts as causes. The coding procedure was inclusive rather than exclusive: anything that could be construed as a causal explanation was incorporated. For this reason, also, only minimal attempts at quantification were undertaken; to formulate explicit categorization rules at this stage would prejudge the theoretical issues. After the initial coding the data were re-analysed with the objective of identifying similarities and differences in the explanations given. This general methodological procedure is described in more detail in Potter and Mulkay (1985).

The extracts described below do not deal exhaustively with the available material; space would not permit this. Instead we have chosen to present a detailed analysis of just two topics: (A) the role of 'race'; (B) the effects of 'government cuts and amenities'. Although this choice is to some extent arbitrary—the overriding consideration being length—we have elsewhere analysed 2 other topics and identified a similar pattern of variation to that described here (Litton and Potter, 1983). Selectively of this kind is justifiable since the goal is not to reconstruct the sequence of events which made up the 'riot' by producing a coherent composite from various people's versions of what went on. The emphasis is entirely on people's explanations and their organization. For a systematic reconstruction of the 'riot' itself see Reicher (1984) and Joshua, Wallace and Booth (1983). In this paper we make no attempt to relate participants' and media' explanations to those of academic researchers into collective behaviour as this has been attempted elsewhere (Reicher and Potter, 1985).

The principle methodological advantage of concentrating exclusively on just two topics is that a large proportion of the data can thereby be reproduced in the text. As our central concern is to illustrate the range of variation in explanations we have included representatives of all the different types of explanation in the categories

'race' and 'cuts and amenities'. This minimizes the extent to which the reader has to take our categorizations and interpretations on trust. For, as far as possible, they are available to be inspected. This is particularly important as we are trying to show the existence of distinctions which have remained unexplicated elsewhere in the social representations literature (Potter and Litton, 1985).

RESULTS

(A) Race

Race relations receive great attention in the discussions concerning the St Pauls 'riot'. The issue is seen as relevant to the explanation of disturbances of the type experienced in St Pauls, but there is no unanimity as to its relevance in this particular case. It is possible to distinguish three different levels of agreement between accounts: (i) particular explanatory schemata can be recognized as available but treated as mistaken in this context; (ii) particular explanatory schemata can be recognized as relevant and adopted to explain the particular events, although in different ways; (iii) particular schemata can be adopted and used to explain events in the same way. Extracts 1, 3, 4 and 5 each raise race as a cause to varying degrees. Also apparent in these extracts is the flexibility in the meaning of such terms as 'race', 'racial' and 'race riot', which is illustrated most graphically in the comparison between extracts 2 and 9. Certain kinds of terminology are seen to be appropriate in certain versions of events. This section also documents some of the dynamics of social representations, particularly the way in which the premises on which alternative accounts are based are identified and dismissed (extracts 4–6).

The following extracts outline some of the meanings attached to the term 'racial':

> (1) It is argued that the troubles in Bristol were not racial. That is true, in the sense that it was not a battle between white and black communities. But it would be absurd to pretend that there were not racial overtones (The Sun, 5 April).

Here 'racial' can mean battle between black and white, or something else unspecified but present at St Pauls. The next passage also identifies 'racial' with conflict between black and white groups, but in this case a racial basis for the 'riot' is ruled out.

> (2) Interviewer: Would you have the description of it as a riot against police authority rather than a riot against whites?
> Interviewee: Yes. I don't think there was anything racial about this at all. I don't think this has ever been suggested. I think it was purely a riot against authority. (Press conference).

However, there is no unanimity on the matter. One local is quoted as saying:

> (3) 'The tension in the area was caused by racism, by the problems of living in a racist society'. (Western Daily Press, 9 April).

The next extract puts much the same view in a much more elaborate form. Commenting on a statement denying racial overtones ('Relationships between the coloured community and the police are absolutely excellent') the report comments that:

> (4) It is a hard argument to produce before a West Indian audience. There is no form of perfect race riot, although in different forms they usually contain a confrontation with authority in the form of the police.
>
> The British practice of shutting out any possibility of racial antagonism that is based to a major degree on race and not on factors shared with other groups, like bad housing, poor employment prospects, and so on, amounts in the eyes of many West Indians to repressive tolerance.
>
> Thus, the argument goes, if you can say that the Bristol troubles, or the Notting Hill Carnival troubles or the Wolverhampton troubles or the tension in Chappletown, Leeds, is 'not really racial', but merely a fight between some black youths and the police, or is an aberration in an area which has enjoyed 'good relations' or is a result of too few jobs or too little housing, then you can remain in blissful ignorance of the frustrations of the whole black community in Britain.
>
> Britain has a history of race related riots . . . (The Guardian, 3 April).

The passage has been quoted at length since it refers explicitly to other explanatory schemata, such as those quoted above, in an effort to throw doubt on them (*cf.* Trew, 1979a). There is an attempt, in short, to make competing accounts unconvincing by showing them up to be conveniences, in some way artificial. For example, the suggestion that relations between blacks and whites are good (extract 2) is seen as a strategy for ignoring the problems of the black community. It is recognized as available for use, but rejected. The historical 'facts'—but no details of the St Pauls 'riot'—are brought in to support the contention, and St Pauls is linked to other disturbances which are seen as part of the same phenomenon. The rejection of racial unrest is dubbed a 'British practice', the sort of thing we might expect in connection with St Pauls, but assertions made in other accounts are simply met with counter-assertions, no proofs. The article seeks to bring into play causes which other sources, as the account explicitly notes, have attempted to push outside the explanatory arena. This is achieved in terms of general, historically based arguments, not by reference to the 'actual events' in St Pauls. To ignore race is seen as an illegitimate ploy; instead, it is upheld as a factor of importance, a resource to be drawn upon in constructing an explanation in this case. There is a recogniton that race riots can take various forms, but no attempt to specify exactly what racial means. Implicitly, racialism is displayed as something existing between the 'British', or the British establishment, and racial minorities.

The argument over race is rehearsed on national television too:

> (5) Interviewer: People would be very puzzled. Why do you think it was in Bristol? It is a small community. It's often thought of as a good city for you.
> Local: It has been thought by whom? I mean I listened to the Home Secretary say about we got good race relations in Bristol. What does he know about it? He doesn't know anything about it. He hasn't been to Bristol. He hasn't been

> to the black community. The police officers, the Chief Constable, have never gone to parties where the black people go, or to the clubs, so it is only on paper that they says there is good race relations. (Points West, BBC, 3 April).

Once again, the attempt is made to reinstate race as a resource for explaining this particular 'riot' in the face of contrary suggestions.

The disagreements over race are forcefully highlighted in extracts 6–9 where the different views are juxtaposed during a television interview. The first speaker claims that:

> (6) it is very important to start off by making absolutely clear that the disturbances of Bristol, as far as I understand them, are not about race, they are not about colour. They were about poverty and they were about unemployment. (Nationwide, BBC TV).

Race, then, is put aside in favour of poverty and unemployment, explanatory factors that are widely aired elsewhere, and which were rejected as part of a 'British practice' in extract 4. The claim is not that such disturbances could not in principle be explained by reference to race, but that in this case such an explanation is inappropriate. The claim is said to stem from an 'understanding' of the St Pauls 'riot' itself, rather than being made in general terms like the argument in extract 4. However, this 'understanding' is not made explicit, the account merely asserts two alternative explanatory factors—poverty and unemployment—to replace race.

The next speaker puts a similar view, if less assuredly:

> (7) I suppose it was not a race riot.

However, this is not accepted by the following speaker who, mentioning unemployment as well, believes that:

> (8) it does, I'm afraid, have quite a lot to do with colour'.

a view shared by an American interviewee:

> (9) I don't believe you can separate race from the explosion and it is not just coincidence. I think that the reason the violence was directed at the police is that the police are the representatives of the white establishment.

Although this extract puts a similar construction on events to that seen in extract 2 there are certain analytically interesting differences. In extracts 4 and 9 violence against the police (the cause of the 'riot' according to extract 2) is explicitly linked to racial problems. Extract 2, on the other hand, attempts to sever the linkage. A 'riot' against authority and a 'race riot' are seen as distinct and distinguishable events. In extracts 2, 4 and 9, then, the 'same' phenomenon—violence against the police—is seen as indicative of different 'facts': a reaction to authority on one side; a racial problem manifest in the reactions to the police on the other. These two positions, very close in the details they muster, are distinct in the interpretations

they offer. It is clear then, that the terms 'race', 'racial', 'race riot' and so on, come to mean different things in the context of alternative explanations.

In terms of the distinction between different levels of agreement made above, the accounts which reject racial tension as a cause in this particular case explicitly allow that it could have precipitated a 'riot' of this nature. While many accounts admit the *possible* relevance of race as an explanatory resource, not all formulate it as actually relevant in this instance. Moreover, those accounts which do claim its relevance interpret it in a number of different ways.

(B) Government spending and amenities

An explanatory notion which was frequently alluded to in accounts of the 'riot' was the influence of government spending. As in the previous sections, many of the accounts are orientated towards the issue of whether competing explanatory schemata are adequate or not (10–12, 17). Some accounts either deny that cuts have been made or else abdicate government responsibility for them by characterizing them as an inescapable aspect of the current economic situation (10–12, and 14). Other accounts (e.g. 16) treat the government as responsible for cuts and thereby for the disturbances themselves. Another way of dealing with government spending is not to take issue with how much has been spent, but with what the money has been spent on (13). Each account indicates the availability and *potential* relevance of this explanatory schemata; however, not all accounts take the schema to be actually relevant, and of those that do the schema may be applied in many different ways.

Lack of consensus over the relevant explanatory schemata as well as over their application to the events at St Pauls, is shown in extracts 15–22 which deal with the question of amenities. As before, the flexibility of the categories used is evident. A 'riot' can be many things, and it is a point of issue exactly what it means in this case. Different explanatory resources are appropriate for different types of 'riot'. Denying that cuts have been made can go along with suggestions to the contrary, as in the following interview sequence:

> (19) Interviewer: Some of those problems are social; it's about unemployment and maybe some of them are upset about taxing social security benefits, it's been suggested today; mustn't you, as a member of government, accept that your current industrial and economic policies, potentially at least, are going to exacerbate that problem?
> M.P. No I don't. Of course, as far as today's incidents are concerned, they couldn't possibly be traded off by government cutbacks or anything like that because they haven't been happening. I don't accept the premise. What I think you must remember is that the basis of our policy is to restore a strong economy. The reasons for cutting is that we have been spending money we haven't been earning. As soon as we get a strong economy the sooner the employment opportunities for black youths and for anybody else becomes stronger. (Nationwide, BBC TV, 3 April).

The M.P. identifies 'current industrial and economic policies' with 'government cutbacks', but only in order to deny that cutbacks have been made. The issue is

faced without circumlocution; there is an outright denial that government cuts have occurred. Even so, once Government policy is portrayed as restoring a strong economy, by counteracting overspending, the idea of cuts is reintroduced, reevaluated as part of a positive policy of economic recovery forced on the government.

Cuts are also the topic of the following passage from a television interview. The interviewee was asked:

> (11) Whether, in the light of the violence in St Pauls the social cost of the government's cuts in public expenditure might not become too high to be borne. (TV Eye ITV, 3 April).

Taken for granted in this question is the 'fact' of government cuts. This matter is addressed in the reply:

> (12) This is precisely why we didn't cut the inner city programme . . . The one programme which we deliberately protected from economies was the inner city programme . . .

The answer rephrases the question in terms of inner city spending, which may or may not be the same as the public expenditure cuts mentioned in the question. However, St Pauls has become an illustrative case; rather than referring to government cuts to explain St Pauls, St Pauls is held up as the reason why cuts cannot be made, or have not been made, or whatever other construction is put upon events. No explicit link is made between St Pauls and government cuts; government cuts are not shown to be the cause in extract 11; the causal link is assumed. Similarly, extract 12 denies that cuts were made, and implies that cuts will not do as an explanation of the St Pauls 'riot'.

Other accounts do not deny that enough money has been spent, but attack the way in which it has been spent. Extract 13 puts this view, extract 14, following it in the interview sequence, putting an opposing point of view.

> (13) The local authorities . . . have already laid their cards on the table, that is they spend so much money here, they spend so much money there, but none of that money has (been) spent with the black community. There are no members of the black community receiving any direct aid or benefit. The money is spent on workers maybe and on buildings, but the buildings are not the type of buildings or type of thing that the black community wants. It is not buildings. (TV Eye, ITV, 3 April).

This point of view is answered by another interviewee:

> (14) For you to say we are not doing anything directly to help black people is absolutely wrong. This very building we are in is here to accommodate, and help at a community level, black people.
> Interviewer: Will it survive the cuts?
> Councillor: It has survived the cuts. (TV Eye ITV, 3 April).

Totally contradictory points of view about the allocations of funds are brought into direct conflict in this sequence, then.

These extracts all reveal agreement on the relevance of government spending to a 'riot' of the type enountered in St Pauls, despite disagreement over the 'facts of the matter'. On the related question of amenities, however, this basis premise comes under attack. One local mentions that:

> (15) The facilities and resources of the St Pauls area have been eroded away for one reason or another and the only last place left to the community where a large number of unemployed youngsters can congregate through the day and in the evening is the Black and White cafe . . . (Points West BBC, 3 April).

The same point is made in the next account:

> (16) St. Pauls, like many inner city areas, already suffers from chronic social problems: high unemployment, poverty, lack of amenities and basic facilities for young people, poor and inadequate housing. (Militant, 11 April).

Once again the local problem is keyed into the problem of 'inner city areas'. Lack of amenities is reiterated again in the next extract:

> (17) The Home Secretary should respond quickly to the city council's appeal for extra aid to provide the amenities and services required. (Evening Post, 5 April).

Even if cuts have not be made, extracts 15–17 maintain that more money has to be spent.

Other points of view are voiced, however:

> (18) We have, quite rightly, been pouring money into St Pauls. Compared with other areas, they have had more than their share. No other community has got so many social workers and aid schemes—in fact I hear complaints that there are too many do-gooders in St Pauls.
>
> There is no flip answer; people say they want community centres, but in my experience these are not what the young want. (Western Daily Press, 9 April)

Lack of amenities was seen as a problem, and money was spent. Now a problem is perceived in the opposite direction—too much irrelevant assistance.

The next extract makes a different, if superficially similar, point:

> (19) No more youth clubs, please . . . St Pauls probably has more clubs, community centres, and remedial and training projects per acre than anywhere in the country. It also has, for a population of barely 10 000—3000 of them black–packed into less than a square mile of decaying streets. Its own full-time detached youth worker, community relations officer, specialist careers officer, community advice officer and other publicly minded 'helping staff' . . . [T]he twin calls from [politicians and press] for more amenities and more policemen for Britain's ghettos are further evidence that the white establishment does

not, or will not, understand what is really wrong. (Times Higher Education Supplement, 16 April).

This extract is reminiscent of extract 4 in the way it attacks alternative accounts. Provision of more and more amenities is the material equivalent of the denial of racial tension: evidence that the 'white establishment' does not understand what is wrong. Amenities are not the answer. The implication is that it was wrong to pour money into St Pauls in the way suggested in extract 18. Lack of amenities is ruled out as a cause of this type of disturbance, which is seen as cultural, a rejection of white society by Rastafarians. The type of disturbance which is to be explained is implicitly raised as a question.

A much more forceful rejection of amenities as a possible cause of such an event is made below:

(20) The advice givers have made a great chorus of 'Amenity'. Is it really supposed that a craving for table tennis and coffee bars is at the bottom of this? (The Daily Telegraph, 5 April).

Although this account agrees with that given in extract 19, that amenities are not to blame, it draws very different positive conclusions. It attributes the 'riot' to internal, individual causes, rather than social or cultural problems, and is scathing about alternative explanatory schemata. The 'riot' is described as a 'vicious and imbecile tantrum'.

(21) The problems, rights and tragic deprivations of those who burn things have been solemnly munched over for two days; those whose things have been burnt have hardly been given a parenthetical deploring cluck. (The Daily Telegraph, 5 April).

The 'advice-givers' are disparaged by a very powerful use of imagery and bathos; the 'tragic deprivations' are 'solemnly munched over', a ridiculous and scornful picture of misplaced attention. The perpetrators of the 'riot' are seen as a 'violent, thieving and destructive group of untalented adolescents'.

(22) The most serious problem confronting the police is undoubtedly a section of West Indian youth which is estranged from its families for a variety of reasons. These youths equally reject approach by the police or West Indians . . . The subculture has a substantial criminal fringe . . . we are not dealing with black immigrants, but with the irreconcilable worst group of those immigrants. (The Daily Telegraph, 5 April).

The 'irreconcilable worst group' is parcelled off and depicted as unapproachable. The call for 'Amenity' then becomes irrelevant, as does any reference to race or, indeed, any other factor external to the individual. Factors of this sort are ruled out of the explanatory schema. Once again, as in extracts 4 and 12, amongst others, the argument is in terms of general assertions. 'Undoubtedly' the problem is a 'subculture', but nothing is presented in support of this statement.

Several issues emerge from the extracts considered in this section, then. Firstly,

there is room for disagreements over the 'facts of the matter' despite agreement over which explanatory schemata are relevant. We saw in extracts 10–18 how disagreements arose despite the generally accepted explanatory framework which related lack of government spending and amenities to this type of disturbance. Secondly, there are disagreements on the appropriateness of the resources drawn upon to construct the explanation, as in extracts 19–22; in these cases doubt is thrown on the relevance of amenities in explaining the type of disturbance encountered in St Pauls, and an alternative view proposed. Extract 19 depicts the constant reference and recourse to amenities as the response of an uncaring society and rejects that type of schemata altogether, proposing cultural estrangement instead. Extracts 20–22 also reject the relevance of amenities, but draw on a different explanatory schemata in turn. Here the 'riot' is seen as the fault of the rioters themselves. They are displayed as worthless and beyond salvation. The problem of culture is again invoked, but now in relation to a 'subculture', a 'criminal fringe'. Extracts 20–22 thus represent the most sustained attempt to locate the cause of the 'riot' in the psychology of individual participants.

DISCUSSION

This analysis places us in a better position to address the ambiguities in the notion of social representations, particularly with respect to the sense in which they are shared. Three degrees of agreement were distinguished. (i) At the most general level particular explanatory schemata were recognized as relevant and available for use. For example, all the extracts in section B allow that cuts in public spending and loss of amenities can at least on some occasions be partially responsible for rioting. (ii) At a more specific level, a subset of accounts warrant the use of the explanatory schemata for the *particular* case in question. Thus in section B a number of extracts adopted a cuts-and-loss-of-amenities schema to explain the St Pauls 'riot'. (iii) At the most specific level, although cuts-and-loss-of-amenities schemata are accepted as germane in the particular situation in St Pauls, the way they are used in the course of constructing specific explanations varies. In section B for instance, of those extracts drawing affirmatively on cuts-and-loss-of-amenities schemata, some explained the 'riot' as a consequence of cuts in government spending leading to loss of amenities, while others described the funding as static but allocated to the wrong sort of amenities.

These different levels of agreement are also identifiable in section A. Here no accounts questioned the premise that racial conflicts and issues could potentially lead to rioting. However, there was extensive disagreement over the specific relevance of race to the St Pauls 'riot'. For example, in extract 2 there is an avoidance of any implication of racism in the police force, and a denial of the racial basis of this particular riot, which is construed as a protest against authority instead. Extract 4, by contrast, explicitly attacks other explanations which play down possible racial causes, and makes a positive link between riots against authority and racial causes.

In addition to these different levels of consensus, two other findings should be emphasized. Firstly, there was considerable flexibility in the meaning of central terms such as 'racial', 'cuts' and 'amenities'. Such flexibility is a characteristic

feature of natural language usage (Heritage, 1978) and can be seen in this case to be closely bound to the aims of the explanation in which the terms appear (Kress, 1983; Kress & Hodge, 1979, Trew, 1979a, b). This suggests that studies of social representations should employ a methodology which is sensitive to the flexible and contextually dependent use of terms. Gross content analyses in which a signifier is taken to refer on all occasions to the same signified are not adequate. Secondly, explanations of the 'riot' were recurrently constructed in the process of undermining competing schemata. That is, explanatory schemata were typically sustained through contrasts with alternative 'mistaken' schemata. This clearly implies that the users of social representations were well aware of the availability of alternative explanations.

These findings do not fit easily into Moscovici's conception of social representations and their function. For it seems that even where an explanatory schema is shared in general terms it can be interpreted in highly disparate ways in practical situations. Thus if on the one hand the explanatory schemata themselves are taken to be equivalent to, or indicative of, social representations (as appears to be the case with Herzlich's, 1973, work) they do not seem to achieve the function that Moscovici claims. Far from creating a safe, consensual universe these schemata appear to form an arena in which disagreements emerge; the schemata create boundaries for conflict but do not eradicate it. The prevalence of references to alternative representations again suggests that social representations are used to manage conflict but not necessarily to eliminate it. On the other hand, explanatory schemata as interpreted in practice could be taken as social representations. This could be warranted by Moscovici's stress on the involvement of social representations with practice. However, if this analytic course is taken, it reveals the least degree of consensus in explanations of the 'riot'; and this seems to conflict with one of the most significant features claimed of social representations: that they are highly consensual within social groups (see also Hewstone and Jaspars, 1982; Jaspars and Fraser, 1984). Either way, the present findings are not easily reconciled with Moscovici's conception of the nature and function of social representations.

It is worth commenting on three possible rejoinders to these points. Firstly, 'riots' of the kind occurring in St Pauls are unusual. It could thus be that disagreements in practice reflect immediate confusion but would give way to consensus with the passage of time. However, apart from the overly rational, consensual model of society implicit in this suggestion, there is little in the present data to suggest such a process. Indeed, the findings show that it is quite possible to *maintain* different interpretations even where an explanatory schema is shared.

Secondly, it might be suggested that the sorts of variation in accounting we identify result because although participants' share the same social representations they have access to different information and this different information leads to the differences in accounting. However, this is unsatisfactory in the light of Moscovici's stress on the impermiability of representations in the face of information (Moscovici, 1983). In fact, the central thrust of the theory has been to suggest that information and novelty is assimilated or even manufactured by representations. Given this, any clearcut information/representation division is hard to maintain.

A third rejoinder is that the above results can be understood through the association of different groups with different social representations in the explanation of the 'riot', and that consensus is simply an intra-group phenomenon. However, this raises the question of how the relevant groups are to be identified

independently of their social representations. In his writing on social representations Moscovici has treated the notion of a group as relatively unproblematic. Elsewhere, despite his sophisticated discussion of the social psychological nature of groups (Moscovici, 1976b) little indication is given concerning how groups can be analytically constituted independently, outside of participants' own conventional categorisations. In his classic study of the representation of psychoanalysis Moscovici (1976a) appears to identify social groups with sections of the press. To do this in the present case would necessitate us drawing upon unexplicated and potentially contentious participants notion of ideological complexions of different media. Moreover, this would still leave questions about the social group(s) whose ideology the media 'represented' and about the group(s) the media is 'aimed' at. Even if these questions could be answered (and they remain areas of deep dispute within media studies—see e.g. Davis and Walton, 1983; Morley, 1980) the present data show striking variations within particular newspapers and programmes; variations which undermine any straightforward correspondence of media channel and explanatory form. As we have argued above and elsewhere (Potter and Litton, 1985; Reicher and Potter, 1985) there is at present no straightforward way to trace the origin of the extracts given to particular groups or ideological commitments without recourse to yet further social representations.

If the relevant groups cannot be identified independently, analysis slides into unenlightening circularity: the group is identified from its social representations, and yet the group itself is taken to generate those social representations. Studies of scientists' discourse, for instance, have shown that participants' characterizations of their own and other's group membership in the course of naturally occurring accounts are highly variable and can be closely tied to evaluative goals (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Potter, 1983; Yearley, 1984). It is thus unlikely that such accounts can be taken as indicative of group boundaries for the purposes of analysis. The different levels of consensus identified confound any simple link between groups and social representations. As we said at the outset, attempts to identify social representations with groups are likely to exclude from the category of social representations those linguistic phenomena which link groups even though they are essentially the same as those linguistic phenomena which distinguish groups, i.e. shared resources from making sense of the world.

Moscovici has treated the idea of shared social representations and consensus as relatively straightforward. The above results indicate the need for a more precise set of distinctions. In particular they show that shared explanatory schemata do not necessarily lead to consensus over explanation in practice (*cf.* Wieder, 1974; Zimmerman, 1971, for an analogous discussion of rule usage). The kinds of variation evident in the analysis given here are overlooked when researchers presuppose that social representations are static and consensual explanatory schemata (Herzlich, 1973) or when they elicit social representations using quantitative techniques such as cluster analysis of participants' free associations (Di Giacomo, 1980), or measures of concept occurrence in open-ended accounts (Hewstone *et al.*, 1982), which gloss over such distinctions. Clearly, in order to avoid compounding this confusion, there is a need for a more detailed conceptual and empirical analysis of the notion of social representations than has been carried out up to now. This would avert the possibility of either turning the notion of social

representations into a vague catch-all term for all aspects of ordinary explanations or making it simply a synonym for (social) stereotypes or belief systems.

Despite these criticisms, the above analysis plainly shows the operation of a limited number of apparently pre-formed, shared explanatory schemata drawn upon to make sense of and evaluate the 'riot' at St Pauls; we are not simply dealing with atomized individual opinions. This is one of the central notions of the theory of social representations. It also shows the centrality of such schemata in practice and the importance of the specific terminology of the explanations, both points strongly emphasized by Moscovici. Nevertheless, the analysis also suggests that it may be premature to move towards broad explanations of the social psychological function of social representations, particularly given the difficulty of independently identifying groups. It appears more profitable to concentrate initially on revealing the ways in which explanatory schemata are interpreted in the context of certain types of account and thereby elucidate the relationship of social representations to particular contexts of use. This would necessarily incorporate insights from developments in sociolinguistics (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew 1979; Halliday, 1978), semiotics (Barthes, 1967; Coward and Ellis, 1977; Eco, 1976), conversation analysis (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Levinson, 1983), and discourse analysis (Kreckel, 1981; Mulkay, Potter and Yearley 1983; Potter and Mulkay, 1985; Van Dijk, 1984). Overall, there is a need for a much more thoroughgoing analysis of the construction of lay explanatory accounts (Potter, Stringer and Wetherell 1984). It seems likely that such an analysis would be a prerequisite for the development of a more encompassing theory of the relation of social representations to social categories.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine de façon critique la notion de représentation sociale au moyen d'une analyse systématique des rapports des média et des participants concernant les démonstrations de rue à Saint Paul en 1980. L'analyse se concentre sur deux principales catégories explicatives qui apparaissent dans les rapports: (a) 'la race'; (b) 'les restrictions et durcissements gouvernementaux'. Dans chaque cas, il est possible de distinguer trois niveaux différents de consensus dans les rapports: (i) des schémas explicatifs particuliers peuvent être considérés comme disponibles mais traités de manière erronée; (ii) des schémas explicatifs particuliers peuvent être considérés comme pertinents et adoptés pour expliquer, mais de différentes manières, des événements donnés; (iii) des schémas peuvent être adoptés et utilisés pour expliquer des événements de la même manière. La flexibilité de signification de ces catégories est mise en lumière, de même que la référence récurrente à d'autres explications. Ces résultats posent des problèmes à la suggestion selon laquelle les représentations sociales minimiseraient le conflit et créeraient des 'univers consensuels'; ils mettent également en question la relation directe entre représentations sociales et groups sociaux identifiables. En conclusion, on met an exergue le besoin d'analyser de façon plus fouillée le langage employé pour les représentations sociales ainsi que la relation qu'elles ont avec différents contextes d'utilisation.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel wird der Begriff der sozialen Vorstellung (social representation) kritisch durchleuchtet anhand einer systematischen Analyse von Berichten zu den St. Pauls-Unruhen von 1980. Die untersuchten Berichte stammen zum Teil aus der Presse und zum Teil handelt es sich um Schilderungen von an den Unruhen Beteiligten. Die Analyse beschärungsversuchen: A) Rasse und B) Verhärtung der Regierung und Haushaltskürzungen. Bei allen Berichten zu den Vorkommnissen ist es möglich, drei verschieden Konsens-Stufen zu unterscheiden: i) spezifische Erklärungsschemata können als verfügbar erkannt aber als falsch zurückgewiesen werden, ii) spezifische Erklärungs-schemata können als stichhaltig erkannt und auf unterschiedliche Weise als Erklärung der Vorkommnisse beigezogen werden, iii) spezifische Erklärungs schemata können begezogen und auf einheitliche Weise als Erklärung verwendet werden. Die flexible

Bedeutung dieser drei Konsensstufen wird aufgezeigt und es wird hingewiesen auf alternative Erklärungen. Die Resultate problematisieren die Idee, wonach soziale Vorstellungen Konfliktsituationen herunterspielen und ein 'Universum des Konsens' schaffen. Ueberdies wird die direkte Beziehung zwischen sozialen Vorstellungen und identifizierbaren sozialen Gruppen in Frage gestellt. Es wurd auf die Notwendigkeit sowohl einer eingehenden Sprachanalyse der sozialen Vorstellungen als auch einer Analyse der Beziehung von Vorstellung und Gebrauchs-Kontext geschlossen.