INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE HOWARTH BY ADELINA NOVAES

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Adelina Novaes: Likewise, given that mainstream Psychology treats context as a background for phenomena or individuals, how can this framework of Social Representations help to promote positive change in society through practices? I am trying to understand not only the way that people think but also how can we promote changes in practices.

Caroline Howarth: I think your question highlights an important distinction between how people think and what they do in practice. Of course, in Social Sciences, we see very interesting studies that look at the connections – and sometimes the disconnections – between what people say what their attitudes to something might be and then what they actually do in practice. In Psychology, we call this the attitude-behaviour link. We would think that there is a link between the two, but sometimes we find real contradictions, we find that people think something and actually do the opposite. A classic study on Social Representations is Denise Jodelet's study on Social Representations of mental illness. It is a beautiful study, it feels like a piece of anthropology in that it is very contextualised. She spent a very long time in a village in France looking at the everyday practices of the villagers who lived with people who had mental illness. There were people called lodgers, their families would pay to have them living in local homes. Those people had been released from the local psychiatric hospital and had a history or diagnosis of mental illness. Denise Jodelet really looked at the social practices between the villagers and the people with mental illness. And she was able to show that some of their practices conveyed a system of knowledge around mental illness that was in fact quite negative, quite stigmatising. That partially explained systems of exclusion where the people with mental illness were somewhat symbolically excluded in different ways, which was really evident in the villagers' practice rather than in what they said. So this was one example; we can think of many others, where people may on the surface seem quite positive about intergroup relations – if you gave them a survey or a questionnaire you might find that their attitude seems to be fairly positive. And that may be because they genuinely believe that their attitude is positive, or it may be due to social pressures; they're aware that they shouldn't really discriminate against others, that most of us would find it problematic to

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have very negative views about people with mental health, difficulties or other groups in society that experience stigma. Or this disconnect between what people think and what they do may be quite unconscious; people may not, in fact, be aware of these contradictions. That was one of the key insights of Jodelet's study, showing that there can be quite different systems of knowledge: a sort of conscious explicit knowledge and the knowledge that guides more collective and sometimes less reflective practices. This was something that I explored in my research looking at multiculturalism in different schools, a research that I did with Delaine and Julie in which we found something similar but actually, ironically, much more positive. We found that when you ask people about multiculturalism, particularly in the United Kingdom, where there is a lot of very negative discourse about multiculturalism, people are negative. They say that multiculturalism has failed; that's something our Prime Minister has said, as well as other politicians. People say that multiculturalism leads to segregated communities, to tensions between different communities, to isolated communities that don't understand British Culture, that don't properly integrate, and as people like David Cameron have said, at its extreme, may lead to extremist and even terrorist behaviour and attitudes. So many people if asked about multiculturalism will say that it is problematic and it has failed. But then if you actually look in the context of their lives, at their practices in very diverse settings, you see that people interact. They have friendships, they're integrating and living together, often very, very unproblematically in quite culturally diverse settings. They go to school together, they take the bus together, they have classes together, play sports together, and they have relationships together. They may end up marrying each other. Things seem pretty unproblematic. But it is just that they don't see those practices necessarily as an example of multiculturalism, not quite. They just see it as getting on; that's their friends, their sport, that is what happens. And so the context comes to shape what kind of behaviours are appropriate, and here we get to the point of your question, which was about how to promote social change. In that research Delaine, Julie and I saw that if you want to think about how to manage cultural diversity in the most constructive way, how to promote positive social change around cultural diversity, one of the first things to understand is that we cannot have one rule for everywhere. Every context is different. The context of London, that is intensively diverse, where there is a lot of interaction between different groups, is very different to some rural English settings that are much more monocultural but still have their pockets of interaction and connection to other cultures. So you have to look at the context and you have to understand that there are practices and attitudes relevant in each of the contexts and understand that there may be contradictions between what people say and what people do. Often even when there are difficulties in the context, even when there are high levels of prejudice, inequality or marginalisation, there are still examples of conviviality, examples of people getting on together. And I think that what's important for researchers and for policy makers is to really try to understand those constructive social practices in order to build on them. To understand what is it about a particular context that has allowed a group of boys from different cultural backgrounds, or different religious backgrounds to come together and play well to achieve something together as a sports team or representing their school, and to put all their differences

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aside. It is important to understand the particular demands of each context, I think, in order to try and understand how to promote constructive change at a more general level.

Adelina Novaes: In your paper with Eleni you ask: "How far can schools be agents of change in societal level?". You work in three levels, one of which is the societal level. Please tell us what are these changes that can be promoted in that level.

Caroline Howarth: One of the examples that we talk about in the paper is, I think, an important example today, and it involves national identities. Currently in the UK there is a bit of a crisis about what is Britishness, about how do we define it, and this is very much wrapped up in debates around security. So on the one hand, there's a sense of material security and the risk that current international events pose some sort of threat, such as extremism and terrorism. But there is also something of a sense of anxiety about who belongs and who doesn't, who is British, who is not, and all the rest of it. Some schools really tackle these very complex, difficult and sensitive debates about nationalism and provide ways of encouraging their pupils to claim an identity, to claim the right to belong, even in contexts where others may not think they belong. If you think about black British pupils, or Muslim British pupils, there are many ways in which in dominant discourses in societies or at home they're constructed as not being British enough, or as somehow problematic. Some schools, I believe, are very bold, very brave and there are attempts to bring these difficult conversations into the classroom and to do it in an enormously constructive manner, allowing pupils to develop a whole vocabulary around prejudice, exclusion, belonging and their own identity, and their own ability to debate these issues with

others in order to be citizens in the fullest sense of the term.

Adelina Novaes: In the Brazilian context, multiculturalism is not the main aspect of marginalisation in schools. On the other hand, Brazilian social thought scholars have highlighted the intersection between class and race prejudice. This results in a double and indissociable stigmatisation combining race and class. Now, the Brazilian foundational myth is based on the mix of three races (the European migrants, the African migrants and the indigenous peoples who used to live there before the first colonisers arrived). Based on this myth, the nuances of colour may not be the predominant indicator for marginalisation, since class-based prejudice can prevail. It is very difficult to single out one cause and it is a very complex social representation matrix that subtly supports the marginalisation phenomena in schools. Caetano Veloso, the Brazilian musician, has lyrics about that; it is a Haiti metaphor: "we are almost white but poor enough to be almost black". Considered alongside the results of your research, how can this iridescent effect of social representations of colour and race be analysed in order to avoid marginalisation in schools? Because this is very difficult to identify, being so subtle and at same time a mix of many kinds of prejudices.

Caroline Howarth: That would mean that middle-class black Brazilians are somewhat less discriminated against?

Adelina Novaes: Yes, it's very difficult to identify racial prejudice, because we have so many colours. We can't say "that's a black person". And the class phenomenon means that if you have more money you are perceived as whiter. So there is a mix of social representations that is present in schools

and is very difficult to avoid. My question is, how can we try to work with this phenomenon similar to the one Jodelet described in her book, where people's discourse is very accepting and egalitarian but in fact things are different, practices are quite different. How can we work in schools to identify this kind of social representation, or this matrix of social representations? Because they are processes, they are very dynamic.

Caroline Howarth: Well, that is great. That is a good question. Looking at places like Brazil and trying to understand racial hierarchies and the ways in which these have shifted and changed over time and also across the huge country of Brazil, the ways in which they play out differently in different areas and so forth, and the interconnections between race and class. I think that places like Brazil highlight the fact that these different categories are always intersectional, they're always interconnected, that an analysis on race that doesn't look at class, gender, region or any sort of other aspect can only be a partial analysis. Also that these are always constructions which can be almost easy to forget in some contexts such as here in the UK, where these categories sometimes feel a bit fixed. It almost feels, reading some psychological work, that we've forgotten that the black community is a construction and that many people within this imaginary black community may not feel black, they may not look black, they may not be recognised as black. Then, in one moment, they are. And these complex categories are interconnected, intersection with other things and are hugely contested and change over time.

One of the studies that I did in the UK looked at mixed-heritage children in a predominantly white community. Those children had quite complex heritages – family from the Caribbean, and from Africa, but also family living in America, or somebody living in Greece, connections across the globe. One of the things that came out of that study was the ways in which the young people created quite different identities that were appropriate to them, or were strategically useful for them within the home, and then quite different identities within the school, quite different identities for hanging out with their friends elsewhere in the community and so forth. Again, I highlighted the role of context in the construction of identity and the ways in which other people's expectations played a very significant part in whether or not they felt marginalised. Sometimes they did not feel marginalised or discriminated against at all. At other times, they were very aware that having dark skin may make them vulnerable to the gaze of a police officer, a shopkeeper etc. All of that is very important. So I think that the Brazilian context highlights the need for caution in that we should not take these categories too easily or simplistically. We should understand that while they're deeply historical, in that we have centuries of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, that we still have echoes of the systems of meaning that sustain those very old practices that continue today and explain practices of exclusion within schools, universities and everywhere. On the one hand, we have to see that these ideologies are a dominant form of discourse. But on the other hand, they are complex, slippery, complicated. Representations of what it means to be racialised, change quite evidently from one context or another. In understanding it we have to really listen to the experiences of the marginalised. I think we often go into research projects or social changes projects feeling that somehow we'll understand what the issues or the problems are. Without this bottom-up sense of what

the lived reality is in different contexts, however well-meaning our policy to create some kind of productive social change, it may really have little effect or it may have unintended consequences that may in fact be quite destructive. In order to understand systems of exclusion and marginalisation we have to understand something about the very particular local context, and in Brazil that context starts, as you explained, with understanding connections between class and race, and perhaps other forms of social categories; gender and sexuality may also be important. In order to hold on to one of the last points you made, these representations are highly dynamic and that is their potential, that is the point that we need to work with if we want to try to change something, to understand the way in which there exists change in this local context in order to promote positive productive social change.