

Jana Plichtová. *Metódy sociálnej psychológie zblízka. Kvalitatívne a kvantitatívne skúmanie sociálnych reprezentácií* (An insight into the methods of social psychology. The qualitative and quantitative study of social representations). Bratislava: Média, 2002, 350 pp.

In the foreword to the book under review the author describes her experience from qualitative methodology teaching as follows: "I have realised it is impossible to lecture on the research methods in psychology without mentioning epistemological questions, without speaking about how the object of study (i.e. the human being) has been conceptualised in numerous variants of the post-modern psychology and what the post-modern turn means in other social sciences. Without this knowledge the student can easily succumb to the illusion that qualitative research is simply the one that refuses to quantify, ergo to use mathematical instruments of formalization (p. 9)."

Within the last decade Slovak and Czech authors have published several books about (social) psychology methods (see Kollárik, Sollárová 2004; Ritomský 2002; Komárik 2002; Ferjenčík 2000; for the most recent ones). In practically all of them one section is dedicated to qualitative methodology, mostly understood as a complement to quantitative research, which is paid much more attention. (An exception to this pattern is the book by Hendl 1999 dedicated exclusively to the qualitative methodology epistemological background and research instruments.) What these books have in common is that they generally offer recipes concerning the right sequence of steps to take in order to carry out a good research project; these recipes being mostly grounded in the hypothetic-deductive approach to the study of social and psychological reality. Moreover, the quantitative methods are sometimes presented as a synonym of statistical analyses (e. g. Kollárik, Sollárová 2004). Paradoxically, a chapter dedicated to the "royal" method of positivist psychology – experimentation is absent in all these books but one (Ferjenčík 2000). A deeper reflection about epistemological aspects of psychological research and their relevance for the choice of the research methods and subsequent data analysis is also rather rare. For example Bačová (2000) offers an overview of the main theoretical arguments of the post-modern approaches in social psychology and confronts them with the positivist research tradition.

The book under review fills this gap. Its aims are: (1) to present the methodological approaches developed within the framework of post-modern social psychology; (2) to point out that it is problematic to understand knowledge as a product of research practice. This would mean, according to the author, narrowing the understanding of the science solely to the sequences of manipulation of variables and testing the statistical relations in the laboratory context, where the individual is understood as a passive product of various inner and outer forces (p. 10). The author argues that the quantitative approach assumes that a credible knowledge of the human being can be reached by reducing the latter to a set of measurable variables, between which one can suppose the relations of causality. The purpose of such knowledge is to predict and control human behaviour. The qualitative approach sees people as intentional actors, as semiotic and socio-cultural beings, whose adaptation has a social character (p. 9). This book presents arguments in favour of a meaningful combination of both approaches, within the conceptual and methodological framework of the theory of social representations.

What makes this book unique—in the Czech and Slovak social psychology context—is the focus on one particular social psychology research tradition. The concept of social representations was established by Serge Moscovici's seminal book *La Psychanalyse son image et son public* (1961) and further developed mainly in France, Switzerland, Italy, Great Britain, and Latin America. Social representations are ensembles of socially elaborated knowledge shared by a group in relation to an object, and guiding the practices towards this object. They are not products of isolated minds, but of minds involved in interaction and communication. This implies, according to Jana Plichtová, a historical and linguistic approach

to their study. One of the aims of the book is to document and analyse the diversity of methods used in the field of social representations, integrating also the author's own empirical research experience. She chooses an original way to achieve this aim. Each chapter is constructed as a case study, first telling a story of a particular research project and then exploring its epistemological background as well as more "technical" issues concerning the choice of a research method.

In chapter 1 ("The natural or social character of the human mind?") the author raises the following questions: Can the study of psychological life be separated from the study of social life? Is the way of thinking independent from the society and historical period in which one lives? Are the psychic processes universal or are they shaped by social interactions and cultural forms of life? Is it possible to think of human action as independent from social rules and constraints? The author attempts to trace the answers to these questions in the works of the "founding fathers" of sociology and psychology and to situate the social representations theory in a historical context. For example, Durkheim argues that social reality cannot be reduced to psychological reality and society goes beyond the individual and determines his/her behaviour and thinking. Wundt considers that collective products such as language, mythology and customs are mental products, but later revises his position stating that the mental products cannot be explained solely in terms of individual consciousness, and stresses the necessity of historical analysis. Lewin argues in favour of mutual interdependence of the individual and social: the reality of the social life of groups is not equal to the sum of the individual characteristics of their members; the whole and its parts are complementary and cannot be reduced to each other. To formalize the psychological and sociological facts, Lewin proposes the instruments of geometry, which would allow expressing the topography of mutual relations of the studied objects. However, it is the need for formalization that should stimulate the creation of appropriate research instruments and not the opposite. Jana Plichtová criticises the fact that for a long time this has been ignored by the mainstream psychology. Finally, she mentions the social representations approach, which understands representations as products of the social life and studies them on the individual, group, and societal discourse levels. The social representations are situated on the crossroads of psychological and sociological concepts: they are a structured metasystem that regulates cognitive systems of the individuals and can be considered as a link between the social and individual knowledge (p. 39).

Chapter 2, which describes the genesis and key assumptions of the theory of social representations argues that the individual thinking is developed in a dynamic, interactive and creative process and is anchored in a particular social and historical situation. Thinking must be examined as a societal phenomenon and its content and structure studied in the context of the societal discourse. A vision of the social psychology that would become a cultural anthropology of the modern society is suggested (S. Moscovici). Jana Plichtová further mentions that the theory of social representations assumes that unlike the world of science, the world of everyday knowledge is a consensual and narrative world where the truth is something about what the social consensus has been reached. I think the author puts too much emphasis here on the consensual nature of social representations. In fact, Moscovici in his later texts distinguishes various types of social representations, e.g. hegemonic (shared by all members of a collectivity, reflecting the stability of a society), emancipated (different versions of social representations shared by sub-groups of a collectivity, having a certain autonomy in relation to different segments of society which interact and communicate mutually) and polemical (are generated during controversies or social conflicts, are not shared by the whole society, create antagonistic relations between social groups members and are mutually exclusive).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the free association method, which is considered by Jana Plichtová as a way to study the relationships between language and the way of thinking on the level of cultural collectivities. It is the most elaborate part of the book and as far as I know, in no other

methodology book on social representations is there such a large array of analytical approaches to the free associations. The approaches of psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, discursive psychology and social representations, etc. are described in detail with many empirical research examples. The author argues that the analysis of group associations allows understanding the semiotic model of reality, the model for future reality as well as the experiences of social actors. The semiotic model of reality and the model for future reality serve as reference points in relations to which the individual social actor is evaluating his/her own experiences.

Chapter 4 focuses on the analysis of text and media communication. It starts with an account of Serge Moscovici's book *La psychanalyse son image et son public*, which is an example of an extensive analysis of the social representations of psychoanalysis in the French print media in the 1950's (centrist, Marxist and catholic newspapers and magazines). Moscovici argued that the presentation of new elements of knowledge (e. g. psychoanalysis) in the media not only shapes the everyday discourse, but is also influenced by this discourse. The processes of spreading and acquiring of knowledge change the knowledge of the readers. A new social reality emerges—the one of social representations. In this chapter, Jana Plichtová further mentions descriptive and interpretative approaches to text analysis, qualitative and quantitative content analysis, compares positivist and hermeneutic understandings of interpretation, and finally discusses the position of the text analysis in practical psychology.

Chapter 5 deals with the software assisted text and transcript analysis. The author presents here the procedure of the computer assisted text analysis and of category construction, discusses its advantages and disadvantages, compares selected types of software assisting the theory building, and finally gives an example of her own empirical research on national identity. However, she does not mention at all the software, which is mostly used in the social representations approach, namely Alceste and Spad-t, which are able to perform statistical analyses on the textual material. I also think it would be extremely useful to present here a more detailed overview of different approaches to coding and categorizing—i. e. open coding, axial coding and selective coding (grounded theory), thematic coding (often used in social representations approach), qualitative content analysis, global analysis etc. Although I believe that the action space and the freedom the analyst has while coding depends very much on his/her decision about the choice of the software, I disagree with the idea presented by the author that “the computer programs limit the text analysis solely to explicit and repetitive signs of the text and the implicit meanings and contextual relationships are not taken into consideration”. For example when using Atlas-ti, the analyst is free in creating new codes and categories at every moment, has the possibility to edit comments and interpretations while coding, and s/he is not bound to base his/her analysis on the frequency of occurrence of signs. This particular software facilitates a grounded theory construction, sensible to implicit meanings and contextual relationships.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to qualitative interviewing. The first part describes the well-known study by Claudine Herzlich *Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis*. Herzlich suggests that social representations of health and illness testify not only to the relationship of an individual to health and illness, but also to the relationship between an individual and society, in the sense of the expectations the society has from a “well functioning” individual. Jana Plichtová further compares structured vs. non-structured approaches to interviewing and presents a reflection on validity, reliability, generalisability and repeatability of the qualitative interviews—criteria being stressed by the positivist tradition in social psychology research. She compares procedures of interview analysis in positivist psychology, symbolic interactionism, narrative approaches, discursive psychology, etc. She considers the qualitative interview is an active interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. It does not give

a mirror image of the social world, but it is a method that allows understanding the human subjectivity and the meanings that people ascribe to events and relationships.

Chapter 7 focuses on discussion groups and group interview. Its first part analyses Michael Billig's *Talking of the Royal Family*, based on interviews with British families of various social backgrounds whose aim was to identify what the royal family means for them. Billig argues that the way the interviewees talk about the royal family says something about the British themselves. The Royal family is a symbol of the continuity of Britain and it is an important element of the collective memory. Billig characterises the discussion group as a thinking society in miniature: it allows studying the thinking and implicit ideologies in the argumentative context. Plichtová further mentions the sociological tradition of the study of discussion groups, compares focus groups and discussing groups, and describes differences between individual and group interview conducting and analysis.

A considerable part of Chapter 8 entitled "Ethnographic observation" is dedicated to the analysis of Denise Jodelet's *Madness and Social Representations*. This remarkable research project examined the integration of mentally ill people in the life of a community (host families) in the French town of Ainay-le-Château and the representations of the mental illness by the people in the town depending on the nature of their contact with the "patients". Jana Plichtová also presents a reflection about the position of the researcher and of the "observed". She compares the approaches of interpretative, sociological and narrative ethnography to observation and opens again the questions of generalisability and repeatability.

The last chapter returns to methodological and epistemological issues of social representations research. The author concludes with a reflection on the practical activity of a psychologist who is in everyday contact with his/her client and compares it to the fieldwork of an ethnographer. Being in the field and observing everyday practices and interactions might move the psychological discipline forward and make it more sensitive to unpredictable and small nuances of psychological meanings, which often escape purely academic research. Psychology has often ignored these nuances and has simply "measured" variables the way the natural scientists do without taking into account how the people who are studied interpret them. Jana Plichtová's book in contrast tries to take this more 'sensitive' approach on board. Unlike most of the authors mentioned above, she goes beyond simple research recipes. She does not mechanically oppose quantitative and qualitative research, but she clearly shows that the choice of a research method should be a result of a critical epistemological reflection.

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