

Social representations and the study of professional practice

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Abstract: *The social representations perspective provides a framework for understanding the thinking of the practicing professional, but its effectiveness as a tool for analyzing professional practice has not been considered. In this article, the author assesses the methodological implications of the social representations perspective to the study of social work practice in child protection. The perceived advantages of the perspective—that it captures symbolic forms of thought, permits analysis of the social context of practice, and enables thought about action to be organized and analyzed in an integrated way—are partially supported. The author could not identify the interplay between scientific and everyday knowledge but does describe other knowledge forms significant to the practitioner. Researchers make only partial use of the perspective’s major ideas. This suggests that a different method is needed to ensure greater application to professional practice.*

Keywords: *social representations, professional practice, qualitative methodology, child protection practice, social work*

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The study of professional practice creates unique challenges for the qualitative researcher. It implies analysis of the application of scientific or expert knowledge to the resolution of human problems. At the same time, it demands recognition of the subjective consciousness of the practitioner engaged in a process of practical problem solving. This suggests that belief, value, personal experience, and commonsense explanation have a role in the thinking processes of professional practice. Although creative problem solving might arise from the practitioner's commonsense understanding of the world (Argyris & Schon, 1974), professional practice generally operates under the assumption that scientific knowledge guides practice (Bartlett, 1961).

But does it? Are there ways in which professionals interweave "everyday knowledge" about human beings with scientific knowledge to practice professionally? To understand professional thought about action, we need a theoretical framework that can guide analysis of complex thinking processes. The effectiveness of the social representations perspective, used to study the practice of psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and social workers, has not been considered. In this article, I provide an evaluation of this perspective in relation to the study of professional social work practice in child protection.

Social work knowledge for practice

The social work profession conceptualizes knowledge for practice as practice theory, social science facts, or practice wisdom. Although theory-based practice is powerfully sanctioned in social work (Roberts, 1990), social work practice theory is often imported from other disciplines and professions (Bartlett, 1970; Payne, 1997). Today, a plethora of practice theories is available to the social worker, including psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, systems, ecological, humanist, existential, radical, Marxist, antidiscriminatory, and antioppressive (Payne, 1997). In spite of these many theories, however, the ways in which practitioners use theory or other forms of knowledge in practice are relatively unknown. Some exploration of the integration of theory and practice has occurred in professional education, but little examination of this has taken place after degree completion (Barsky, Rogers, Krysik, & Langevin, 1997). An exploratory study of 20 social workers in Britain found "that few of the responses reflected the use of theory and research findings" (Carew, 1979, pp. 361-362). Despite pleas dating back to 1929 for this kind of research, few studies have been carried out (Roberts, 1990). Payne surveyed the current literature to find that some social workers use theoretical knowledge inexplicitly, others take a general approach to clients rather than make explicit use of theory, and still others had "cognitive guides" (ways of thinking about practice) to guide them (pp. 46-47). Canadian social work education requires course work in the social sciences and humanities to encourage social workers to develop a knowledge base founded on the critical assessment of facts and theories. However, the extent to which scientific facts and theories are used in thinking about practice is relatively unstudied.

"Practice wisdom," traditionally a source of social work knowledge, is defined as the "experience of professionals in working with people and helping them to meet a wide range of life problems" (Bartlett, 1970, p. 73). It is often submerged in practice, passed informally to colleagues in the same office, in supervision sessions, or at conferences, and can be difficult to generalize. Some have argued that practice experience should serve as a foundation for theory development, thereby recognizing the mutual influence of practice and theory (Payne, 1997).

Child welfare knowledge for practice

Child welfare knowledge for practice takes two forms: decision-making tools and public inquiries. Decision-making tools, known as risk assessment technologies, assess a child's risk of harm through quasiscientific measures (Brissett-Chapman, 1997; Callahan, 2001; Dawson, 2001; Doueck, English, DePanfilis, & Moote, 1993; Jones, 1993).¹ There are also public inquiries, usually retrospective case analyses into the death of a child in which social work intervention has occurred (Corby, 1991; Gove, 1995; Reder, Duncan, & Gray, 1995; Tomlinson, 1984). The public inquiry is concerned with understanding why a child died and developing recommendations to government for reform of child welfare services. Corby noted, "There are surprisingly few empirical studies of social work practice in the field of child abuse, if public inquiries are excluded" (p. 95).

Little social work research has been devoted to studying the thinking professional in the context of practice within political, organizational, and legal structures. The social representations perspective was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because it enables the holistic study of the thinking professional. Thought about action is organized and analyzed in an integrated way, analysis of the social context of practice is possible, and it captures symbolic forms of thought. Its ability to accomplish these objectives is the focus of the evaluative component of the article.

The social representations perspective

Social representations are defined as a "system of values, ideas, and practices that establish a consensual order among phenomena" and "enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange" (Moscovici, in Duveen & Lloyd, 1993, p. 91). Central to the perspective of social representations is the belief that psychological states are socially produced and that our representations determine our reactions. Representations are not "individually produced replicas of perceptual data" but are viewed as social creations and are, therefore, seen as part of social reality (Billig, 1993, p. 43). Social representations also reflect a commonsense understanding of the social world. As Moscovici (1984) noted, social representations are formulated through action and communication in society and are "a specific way of understanding and communicating what we know already" (p. 17). They reflect the practical, everyday knowledge of the ordinary person rather than expert or scientific knowledge. Social representations also organize and structure our perception of social reality. A representation is the "product of processes of mental activity through which an individual or group reconstitutes the reality with which it is confronted and to which it attributes a specific meaning" (Abric, 1994, p. 13). However, it is more than just a reflection of that reality. It also provides a "meaningful organization" of reality and functions as a "system of interpretation" that governs relationships between individuals and their physical and social environment. As representations determine both behavior and practice, they thereby act as guides for action (Abric, 1994).

The social representations perspective recognizes human beings as "thinking persons," capable of asking questions, seeking answers, and, in general, thinking about life (Moscovici, 1984). Interest in social representations derives from studying the social nature of thinking and the importance of thinking in human life (Billig, 1993). It also acknowledges an historical dimension to ideas in social life. In other words, social representations are part of a society's collective memory and are the "substratum of images and meanings without which no collectivity can operate" (Moscovici,

1984, p. 19). Although they are linked to previous systems, images, and schema, they should not be viewed as permanent or static. They are “social entities with a life of their own communicating between themselves, opposing each other and changing in harmony with the course of life, vanishing only to re-emerge in new guises” (p. 10).

Origins

The origin of the concept of social representations can be found in the work of Durkheim, specifically, an 1898 article titled “Collective Representations and Individual Representations.” This article was written to emphasize the significance of collective representations and to distinguish them from individual representations in social life (Verquerre, 1989). An individual representation is a purely psychic phenomenon, argued Durkheim, not reducible to cerebral activity. A collective representation, similarly, cannot be reduced to the individuals that make up the society because it affirms the primacy of the social over the individual in society (Herzlich, 1981). To Durkheim, representations “act as stabilizers for many words or ideas” and include a whole range of intellectual forms: science, religion, and myth, as well as modalities of time and space, and ideas, emotions, and beliefs (Moscovici, 1984, pp. 17, 19). Moscovici (1961/1976) argued that this definition was too broad and proposed to define social representations as

an intermediate stage between concept and perception based in the dimensions of attitude, information, and images contributing to the development of behavior and social communication leading to the processes of objectification, classification and anchoring characterized by a focus on a social relation and a pressure towards inference, and above all elaborated in different modalities of communication: broadcasting, propagation, and propaganda. (Translated from Doise, 1986, p. 83)

His study *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* (1961/1976), on the commonsense understanding of psychoanalytic theory in France, was published in 1961. It marked the beginning of contemporary interest in social representations. Studies of health, mental illness, social gender, breast-feeding, conception, the child, urban space, schooling, justice, and professional practice have taken place from the social representations perspective. Although scholarly interest in social representations is confined primarily to European social psychology (Breakwell & Canter, 1993; Emler & Ohana, 1993; Farr, 1993; Zani, 1993), it is a subject of multidisciplinary interest, and anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and sociologists have incorporated the perspective into their work (Doise, 1986).

The perspective of social representations has been employed to study professional practice in psychology (Palmonari & Pombeni, 1984), nursing, and psychiatric nursing (Zani, 1987, 1993). Palmonari and Pombeni identified four social representations of the socioprofessional identity of Italian psychologists.² Zani (1987) identified three representations of the role of psychiatric nurses in Italy faced with the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals.³ I found only one study in which the practice of social workers was studied (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993). This was an exploration of the characteristics required of specialized educators in their work with children and colleagues.

Similarity to other theories

Social representations theorists chose Durkheim (1898) as their intellectual ancestor, but significant similarities to the American school of symbolic interactionism are evident. Both share “a dynamic processual view of human behaviour” (Deutscher, 1984, p. 96). Both are concerned with the “implicit” aspects of behavior and put an emphasis on the role of symbolic processes and language in the definition of social reality (Herzlich, 1981, p. 304). Both emphasize discovery based on direct empirical investigation of social phenomena rather than verification and theory testing. Both are concerned with social situations, or “lesser units than total societies or social institutions” (Deutscher, 1984, p. 97). To symbolic interactionists, the kind of person one is is less significant than the kind of situation in which one finds oneself in determining how one acts (Deutscher, 1984). In spite of the parallels between the American school of symbolic interactionism and the French school of social representations, there is little evidence of interrelated scholarly writing or research.

The social construction of knowledge and the social representations perspective also have an evident relationship. Social constructivism and social representations theorists both argue that subjects construct their knowledge of the social world through interaction and experience, and that such knowledge is based on a practical, commonsense understanding of the world (Jodelet, 1991a). The emphasis in the social representations perspective on the communicated character of thought and the role of social groups in the development and continuation of social knowledge coincides with social constructivism (Emler & Ohana, 1993). In addition, the social constructivist orientation encourages the view of the subject as a social actor participating in a sociohistoric project who inevitably influences the construction of his own representations (Bertrand, 1993). In this sense, subjects can be viewed creating and re-creating reality through the medium of social representations. A number of epistemological and methodological orientations have been applied to the study of social representations (Breakwell & Canter, 1993; Doise, Clémence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993), but two major approaches are evident (Lipiansky, 1991). First, there is the naturalistic orientation of Moscovici (1961/1976) and others such as Herzlich (1981) and Jodelet (1991b). Second, there is the experimental-laboratory orientation of Abric (1994), Codol (1975), and others.

Functions

Moscovici (1984) argued that the purpose of social representations is “to make the unfamiliar familiar” (p. 24), and Doise (1986) argued it is “to regulate relations between social actors” (p. 84). Within these general purposes, four functions to social representations can be identified: (a) the knowledge function, (b) the identity function, (c) the guidance function, and (d) the justificatory function (Abric, 1994, pp. 15-18). The knowledge function enables reality to be understood and explained. Social representations permit social actors to acquire, integrate, and assimilate knowledge in a coherent fashion in relation to their cognitive system and values. This permits the communication, exchange, and diffusion of a “commonsense” knowledge about the world. The identity function situates individuals and groups in a social field and enables the development of a social identity compatible with the norms and values of the society. The orientation function guides behavior and practice, and the justificatory function permits after-the-fact justification of positions and behavior. Representations also provide justifications for social differences between groups, particularly when stereotypes and hostility are evident.

Processes

Social representations are generated through two processes: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring strives to reduce strange ideas to ordinary categories and images and set them in a familiar context. Objectification turns an abstract idea into something almost concrete and thereby transfers something in the mind's eye to something existing in the physical world (Moscovici, 1984, p. 29).

Anchoring “draws something foreign and disturbing that intrigues us into our particular system of categories and compares it to the paradigm of a category which we think to be suitable” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 29). Fundamental to anchoring is the process of classification and naming. “By classifying what is unclassifiable and naming what is unnamable, we are able to imagine it, to represent it....And by so doing we reveal our “theory” of society and of human nature” (p. 30).

Categorization is the process of choosing a paradigm from those stored in our memory and establishing a positive or negative relationship to it. Deciding how to categorize is reached by either generalizing or particularizing. In generalizing, a feature is selected at random and used as a category. The feature becomes coextensive with the category. By particularizing, the object under scrutiny is considered as a divergence from the prototype, and the emphasis is on the feature, motivation, or attitude that makes it distinct (Moscovici, 1984, p. 32).

Objectification is the process by which mental content is turned into reality; it consists of identifying or constructing an iconic aspect for a new or difficult to grasp concept, theory, or idea (Wagner, Elejabarrieta, & Lahnsteiner, 1995). As Moscovici (1984) noted, to objectify is “to discover the iconic quality of an imprecise idea or being, to reproduce a concept in an image” (p. 38). Through this process, a figurative nucleus, or a complex of images that captures the essence of the concept, theory, or idea, is identified. This figurative nucleus has an image structure “that visibly reproduces a complex of ideas” (p. 38). In this process, ideas are taken literally and attributed physical reality. They are detached from their social sources and turned into empirical phenomena confirmed by the senses (Wagner et al., 1995, p. 672). Metaphors, like images, are an important device in the objectification process as they make something less familiar more familiar (p. 674).

The social representations perspective is basically “a general theory about a meta-system of social regulations intervening in the system of cognitive functioning” (Doise et al., 1993, p. 157). Although some have argued that social representations imply consensually shared beliefs within a social group, others have held that only stereotypes are consensually shared and that the theory postulates consensus only within the context of a propaganda dynamic (pp. 160, 167).

Social representations in the field of child welfare

To identify social representations of professional child welfare practice, we require an additional two guiding concepts. These are the field of the representation and the field of practice. The field of the representation expresses

the idea of an organization of the content: there is a representational field where there is hierarchical unity of the elements, but also the relative richness of this content as well as the qualitative and imaging properties of the representation. In this sense, the representational field presupposes a minimum of information that

it integrates in images and in return assists in organizing. (Translated from Herzlich, 1981, p. 310)

The idea of field, according to Bourdieu, can also convey

a group of social objects having between them hierarchical and oppositional relations that structure precisely the division between these objects of a specific capital with social value. (Translated from Doise, 1986, p. 85)

Within a field, social relationships will mirror class relationships in the field of productive relations, and the social representations will have a certain regularity and durability informed or shaped by the social divisions of the society. The field of child welfare practice is, “the distinctive settings, population groups, or social problem areas in which social workers practice and to which social workers adapt their practice” (Kamerman, 1995, p. 86). In social work, the concept of a field of practice assumes,

there is a core foundation of social work knowledge, values, and skills that (apply) to all social work practice but that the arena in which social workers practice is so large and diversified that there are distinctive variations in practice. (p. 92)

In this study, I took into account the concepts of field of representation and field of practice to create a field of child welfare practice. I integrated two preexisting frameworks (Bartlett, 1965; Kamerman, 1995) and then sketched five dimensions to this field of practice. These are as follows.

A social condition dimension

This is a description of the needs, issues, problems, and conditions to which intervention is addressed. It includes analysis and explanation of the condition, and incorporates a more precise description of the populations and groups to be served.

A contextual dimension

Child protection practice takes place within a framework of organized social relationships. Social workers and their clients meet and interact within a framework sanctioned by society and structured by a legislative mandate, a bureaucratic organization, and the social provision of helping resources. Implicit within the contextual dimension of practice is a set of power relationships that structure the social worker’s relationship to the client and the social worker’s relationship to the wider society through the authority of the state. “The institutional alignments—the politics—that form the context of social work practice change in each generation and in so changing periodically reconstitute the practice” (Rein & White, 1981, p. 3).

A knowledge dimension

This refers to the theory, concepts, generalizations, and research used to inform practice. It recognizes that social work action should be under the conscious guidance of knowledge (Bartlett, 1961).

A normative dimension

This dimension fundamentally recognizes social work practice as a normative activity informed by philosophy, purpose, attitude, value, and ideal (Roberts, 1990). These provide a framework for the interpretation of need, the explanation of conditions, and the arguments made to justify intervention. The purpose need not be envisioned as a “grand and shared purpose,” and the philosophy need not be viewed as logically consistent (Rein & White, 1981, p. 5). This normative content provides the locus of consensual values as well as the clues to difference in purpose and philosophy.

An action dimension

The action dimension recognizes the methods, skills, and techniques required by the child protection practitioner to respond to needs. It also refers to the helping process: the conscious and systematic ways of acting and interacting with others to encourage change. This involves observation, assessment, action planning, intervention, and evaluation (Bartlett, 1961). These actions constitute the major steps of “doing” child protection practice.

These dimensions, intended to clarify and increase understanding of the field of child welfare practice, also provide a framework with which to explore social workers’ descriptions of their practice, as well as provide a supportive structure to aid data collection and analysis.

Method

The purpose of this study was to understand social workers’ thinking about their child protection practice with Aboriginal children and families in British Columbia, Canada. Aboriginal children have been overrepresented in Canadian child welfare systems since the 1960s, with Aboriginal peoples making up only 5% of the population of British Columbia but more than 40% of the children in state care. This disproportionate representation is found in Western and Northern Canada, where, at times, Aboriginal children make up 70 to 80% of the children in government care. Aboriginal communities in Canada have been reclaiming authority and responsibility for child welfare services from the state since the 1980s. A range of program models has been developed under the sponsorship of band and tribal councils. At present, descriptions and evaluations of programs can be found, and statistics are available describing the percentages of Aboriginal children in state care, but there has been little exploration of practitioners’ thinking about practice with this significant minority (Walmsley, 2001). In this study, I employed the social representations perspective to understand practitioners’ thinking about child protection practice with Aboriginal children.

There were 19 research participants in this study who met the following criteria: (a) a completed bachelor’s or master’s degree in social work, (b) at least 2 years’ full-time work experience as a

child protection social worker, (c) employed by either the B.C. Ministry for Child and Family Development or an Aboriginal child welfare organization in British Columbia, (d) had job responsibility to assess a child's risk of harm and the authority to remove a child from the family, and (e) had extensive professional contact with Aboriginal communities. The sample comprised 7 Aboriginal women, 8 non-Aboriginal women, and 4 non-Aboriginal men.⁴ Practice experience ranged from 2 to 20 years. The participants lived and worked in small urban centers, rural communities, and reserve communities in British Columbia, Canada.⁵ Eight local offices of the B.C. Ministry for Child and Family Development and 4 Aboriginal child welfare organizations in the province were represented. Participants were selected from my contacts as well as referral from other child protection social workers. No prospective participant refused a request for an interview. All participants were provided with a written introduction to the study, including a copy of the informed consent form. The informed consent form was reviewed with me and signed before the interview began. I conducted semistructured interviews at the work site lasting 1.5 to 2 hours following an interview guide with questions designed to explore the five dimensions of child protection practice described above (social condition, normative, knowledge, social context, action). All participants received a draft of the findings; were given the opportunity to review it for accuracy, quality of interpretation, and completeness; and had the opportunity to provide oral or written feedback. Participants were also invited to participate in one of two focus groups—one made up of Aboriginal social workers and the other of non-Aboriginal social workers—to discuss and validate the findings. The research method was reviewed by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the School of Social Work, Laval University, where I was a doctoral student. I conducted the research under the direction of my supervisor and dissertation committee.

Data analysis for this study began during the interviews, as I posed questions to seek clarification or expansion of an idea or to test the accuracy of a tentative conceptualization or hypothesis. Data analysis continued following the interview as I recorded impressions, reflections, ideas, and questions. A professional secretary transcribed the interviews, and I verified the accuracy of the transcription. The data were entered for analysis into a NUD*IST software program and coded using (a) the five theoretical dimensions of child protection practice outlined in the theoretical framework, (b) the questions from the interview guide, and (c) naturally emerging categories from the data. As interview content emerged that did not appear to fit these categories, additional codes were created (i.e., naturally emerging categories). Each interview was coded a second time at an interval of 2 to 6 weeks and the new coding verified against the initial coding. When differences emerged, I initiated a process of careful review of the data to determine the most appropriate coding.

The physical act of coding was an ongoing opportunity to reflect, explore, and search for meaning in the data. I made notes by questioning, commenting, and describing emerging relationships in the data. At the conclusion of this phase, I printed out reports for each code and analyzed the data for similarities, differences, variations, and negative instances. At this stage, data analysis was centered on the constant comparison of the data found within each code (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I wrote a summary of results for each code, noting similarities and differences as well as themes and silences. At the conclusion of this process, codes were linked together to correspond to the dimensions of child protection practice found in the theoretical framework. At the same time, there was an ongoing scanning of the content to identify possible themes, interpretations, explanations, and representations. At times, I tested an emerging conceptualization using the NUD*IST software's ability to search for a particular word or phrase. I summarized, interpreted, and described the data in relation to the representations of practice they suggested. I then made revisions to incorporate participants' feedback and concluded the data analysis process.

Discussion

In this study, I aimed to identify social representations of child protection practice but also used a framework that conceptualized dimensions to child protection practice. This provided a secondary analytic structure for undertaking analysis of the field of practice. After initial coding, data analysis explored similarities and differences in the data within each code and between codes within a dimension of practice. The data were continually reduced to illuminate the significant variations, patterns, and themes. The aim of this process was to identify and eventually explicate the significant social representations of professional child protection practice. At the outset of the research, I believed the social representations perspective would enable the researcher to capture symbolic forms of thought, permit analysis of the social context of practice, and enable thought about action to be organized and analyzed in an integrated way. I have now explored its ability to accomplish these objectives to assess whether it is a good way to analyze the practicing professional's thought about practice.

Captures symbolic forms of thought

This aspect of the social representations perspective drew my analytic attention to the use of images, iconic forms, metaphors, and symbolic thinking in practice descriptions. At times, this led to particular phrases' being highlighted to illuminate ways in which practitioners perceived the organizational context of practice at the B.C. Ministry for Child and Family Development. Some spoke about the level of fear and paranoia that influenced practice decision making, but a more powerful way of representing this practice reality was found in the following phrases: "out there on a limb," "under a microscope," "walking on eggshells," and "my goose is cooked." Taken together, the phrases provide a thumbnail introduction to the reality of child protection practice, as they depict the practitioner living and working in a climate of organizational uncertainty. There are management expectations that practitioners fulfill the requirements of child protection legislation and policy but no assurance of management support. There is knowledge that practice often demands creative complex intervention to meet the needs of a child or family but awareness that if such an intervention enters the spotlight of media scrutiny or external review, it could unleash a search for responsibility aimed at fixing blame at the lowest organizational level: the practitioner. These themes permeate participants' representations of the organizational context to practice at the B.C. Ministry for Child and Family Development.

Several Aboriginal social workers spoke about memories of child protection in their communities in the 1960s and invoked those memories to understand recent large removals in one B.C. community. To them, the removal of 71 children re-created an older representation of child protection practice in the Aboriginal community known as "The Sixties Scoop." One Aboriginal participant describes it in the following way:

What a shocker. It was very shocking to me...That's the first impression I got when I heard about that, was these massive amount of families that had children removed from them and...it reminded me of the Sixties Scoop, where kids on reserve were taken without even the parents being aware of them taken. It brings up a lot of memories...I don't know if you have seen these different videos where they have shown how airplanes would go into places and just haul the kids on the airplane without parents being aware and taking off with them.

Another Aboriginal participant employed by the B.C. Ministry for Child and Family Development saw it this way:

It sure made a dirty name for the Ministry social workers and it brings up those old issues of “just want to take kids away and don’t even ask questions” or “they don’t even do their job,” and just all the bad negative stuff that social workers do...that really brought up that old feeling...you’re just coming in to scoop kids and you don’t even care, you don’t understand, and it really brought up a lot of stuff like that.

This suggests that the understanding of state child protection practice in Aboriginal communities today is informed by the past. The social representations perspective, however, provides more eloquence to this understanding by suggesting that such images are a part of a society’s collective memory and the “substratum of images and meanings without which no collectivity can operate” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 19). Aboriginal social workers viewed this incident as a re-creation of the Sixties Scoop, informed by their community’s collective memories and images of past child removals. Non-Aboriginal social workers saw this incident as a stress and workload issue, completely devoid of the historical content so present for Aboriginal social workers. The social representations perspective enabled different communities of meaning to be identified based on their contemporary interpretation of a controversial public child protection practice incident.

Permits analysis of the social context of practice

The social representations perspective, which reflects the social dimensions of thinking and the perceptual organization and structure of social reality, suggests the researcher’s attention will be focused to explore ways in which practitioners make sense of their day-to-day work. It also implies that the researcher will explore the practitioner’s perceptual understanding of the social context of practice to investigate the influence that context has on practice decisions and actions. Extensive interview data were available to explore this practice dimension strongly suggesting that it was a rich and significant source of understanding about professional practice. Although the number of questions in the interview guide was approximately equal for each practice dimension (although there were more subquestions for the social context), it appeared the reflective process for practitioners in this dimension was easiest, most direct, and the one with which they had the most to say. Was this due to the many recent organizational, legislative, and policy changes that had occurred? Was it related to the political uncertainty after a recent judicial inquiry into a child’s death and ongoing media interest? Was it an easy opportunity to express frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction with an employer? Although the organizational changes and political uncertainty are clearly sources of pain, stress, and anxiety that motivate practitioners to vent their “practice reality” toward a sympathetic researcher, this only partially explains the extensive content for this dimension. A more profound explanation suggests the practice context is a web of complex, rapidly changing pressures within which the practitioner thinks and functions. There is a multiple-layered system of accountability: to the hierarchy of officials within the BC Ministry for Child and Family Development (MCFD), beginning with the team leader and extending upward to the Minister but, at the same time, reaching outward to review bodies, such as the MCFD Audit and Review Division, the children’s commissioner, the child youth and family advocate, and the ombudsman. Each can potentially question the practice of an individual social worker. The legacy of a public inquiry, with its public questioning of social workers and extensive media coverage, generated a climate of fear, in which practitioners felt they were “found guilty until proven innocent.” Although some represented the contextual pressures with

paranoiac overtones, the impact of multiple contextual pressures created a dynamic interplay between context, ideas, and action to suggest practitioners search for a level of certainty in a climate of intense uncertainty. Its absence implies that practitioners create the certainty for themselves through the evacuation of creativity from thinking about practice because it constitutes “risk”—to oneself, to one’s clients, to one’s family, and to one’s future as a social worker. Following policy, avoiding risk, and recognizing child protection practice as political become the “commonsense,” everyday knowledge practitioners derive from their practice context. This brief discussion demonstrates that the social context and its analysis proved to be a rich source of insight into the social world of the child protection practitioner. Practitioners’ knowledge that practice has “political” dimensions became highly influential in shaping thought about action.

Enables thought about action to be organized and analyzed in an integrated way

The third perceived advantage to the social representations perspective was that it enabled thought about action to be explored in a way that identified interrelationships between ideas. It aimed to identify the “mental mind set” of the practitioner but also the commonalities between the mind sets of practitioners in this field of practice. This was recognized as a potential advantage to this analytic perspective before collecting and analyzing the data. However, the research design also incorporated a reductionist approach to the analysis of practice, as it conceptualized five formal and discrete dimensions to child protection practice. Interview content was categorized and sifted into the respective dimension of practice, and analysis proceeded almost exclusively within the parameters of the dimension’s content. Although the stated purpose was to use the social representations perspective to identify the central ideas that influence the practice of groups of child protection practitioners, the ability to see across dimensions as well as to identify links between ideas within a dimension was limited by the method chosen. This was most apparent in the analysis of the content with respect to the “social condition” dimension. Practitioners were encouraged to explain the causes of abuse and neglect of children as they saw them. As they did so, the explanations provided were almost always multifactorial. However, as practitioners responded, it was never clear whether they saw significant relationships between the explanations they provided. For example,

I think sometimes it’s hopeless; people have lost hope and poverty, and generational poverty, generational alcoholism resulting from pain that you can attribute on a larger scale and in individual ones too to the impact of the residential school. It’s been said over and over again, you can’t minimize what a disaster that was.

In this example, a number of factors are identified, but it was not possible to assess whether the practitioner saw a larger conceptual structure underlying the factors identified. In general, it was not possible to assess whether practitioners constructed explanatory matrixes of factors, whether some factors were viewed as subsets of others, or whether one or two factors could be viewed as explanations to which all other factors were constituent parts. Some Aboriginal social workers, for example, identified “colonization” as an explanatory factor, but whether they viewed it as sufficient to explain all abuse and neglect of children in Aboriginal communities was not clear.

Understanding thought about action in an integrated way was one aim for the choice of the social representations perspective, but it became apparent in its use that the method for this study was insufficiently detailed to permit this. Had practitioners been asked to identify relationships

between factors, to construct a matrix of factors, or to identify the most significant factors as well as the subfactors, an additional step toward viewing thought about action in an integrated way would have occurred.

The method also did not allow for exploration or analysis of relationships found in the content of one practice dimension with the major ideas found in the content of another. Although a range of explanations was provided for intervention in the social condition dimension, for example, it was not clear whether these were related to the major ideas found in the normative dimension. Furthermore, the influence between the ideas found in one dimension with the identification of central ideas influencing practice action could not be assessed. (I could not identify central ideas.) In short, the extent to which it was possible to view thought about action holistically or “in an integrated way” was limited. This was partially due to the addition of the five dimensions of child protection practice to the conceptual framework and its influence in segmenting content into discrete dimensions. However, the social representations literature is also unclear about methods of analyzing interview content to derive a holistic understanding of professional thought.

A different method might have enabled greater integration of thought and thereby greater understanding of the major ideas informing practice, but significant attention was also needed to the ways in which such ideas are related to one another.

The relationship between scientific and everyday knowledge

The social representations perspective is believed to have particular potential to convey an understanding of the ways in which practitioners use both scientific and commonsense knowledge in practice (Moscovici, 1961/1976). However, in this study, its application was limited to (a) identifying theory and social science facts in practice discourse, and (b) describing knowledge that practitioners regard as significant to practice. It was possible to identify a wide range of concepts that suggest that attachment theory, social systems theory, and colonization theory principally inform practitioners’ thinking about practice. Occasional references to social science facts, such as the numbers of Aboriginal children in state care, suggest that these data have some influence on practitioner thinking as well. However, to suggest that child protection practice is “under the conscious guidance of knowledge” or is “directed by knowledge” would seem to be an exaggeration. Although scientific knowledge appears to be a small influence on practice thinking, the more significant question is What do practitioners consider significant knowledge for practice? Political knowledge is clearly significant, constituting knowledge about the norms, values, expectations, policies, and procedures of the organizational context. Practitioners also identify community knowledge, family knowledge, and cultural knowledge as significant to practice. By community and family knowledge, practitioners mean knowledge about the history, major events, tensions, and relationships within the family and community. Aboriginal practitioners, in particular, regard this as significant knowledge for practice in an Aboriginal community. Some also identify cultural knowledge as significant to practice and mean knowledge of the traditions, values, and practices that constitute the culture. Its significance is that it enables a child or family to reclaim cultural knowledge lost through assimilation or colonization.

Although identifying the interplay between scientific and everyday knowledge in the resolution of particular practice problems was not possible in this study, it was possible to identify other knowledge forms significant to the child protection practitioner.

The partial use of the major ideas of the perspective

Concepts that constitute the social representations perspective include a description of the functions of a social representation: knowledge, identity, guidance, and justification, as well as the processes of objectification and anchoring. In this study, these concepts only indirectly informed the analysis of interview data and were modestly employed. Working with subcategories of data within an overall practice dimension, I was not able to find ways to use an understanding of the processes of objectification and anchoring to interpret the data. I employed an understanding of the four functions of a representation only indirectly to explore whether Aboriginal practitioners could be described as having a different practice identity than non-Aboriginal practitioners (an informal hypothesis at the outset of the study). Similarly, I made indirect references to the guidance function of a social representation when describing a search for ideas that constituted a “guide for action.”

Within the framework of the existing method, I could not argue definitively that a discrete number of social representations were found. Rather, I suggest an interpretive argument that four social representations of child protection practice informed and influenced by three practitioner needs were found. These identified needs are

- to structure uncertainty,
- to negotiate two worlds (the state child protection system and the Aboriginal community),
and
- to create a map of practice.

I believe that these practitioner needs underlie the thinking processes of different practitioners, and this led me to a tentative conceptualization of four potential social representations of practice. These were

- power-oriented practice—overt and ongoing use of power in day-to-day practice,
- policy-oriented practice—high compliance with the dictates of child protection policy,
- family-oriented practice—exploring the strengths and resources of the extended family, and
- community-oriented practice—incorporating the community to ensure children’s safety.

Aboriginal practitioners were found within policy-, family-, and community-oriented representations of practice. Non-Aboriginal practitioners were found in all four representations of practice.

Conclusion

The social representations perspective enabled me to identify and describe a variety of forms of everyday knowledge used by practitioners in practice. It was particularly useful for identifying iconic forms of language use and for understanding the significance of the social context to practitioner thought about action. It was not possible to determine how practitioners interweave scientific and commonsense knowledge. Determining interrelationships between ideas, such as whether there is a relationship between practitioners’ explanation of the causes of child abuse and neglect and their approach to intervention, was also not possible. A more complex method might have enabled me to identify a limited number of central ideas that inform practice. However, the social representations perspective did permit construction of an interpretive argument to describe four social representations of child protection practice.

Notes

1. Concerns exist about the validity and reliability of such instruments.
2. The representations are the political activist (also referred to as the “social worker”), the interdisciplinary expert, the clinical expert, and the psychotherapist.
3. Some continued to view their role traditionally and emphasized the central role of pharmacology and their dependence on doctors. Others emphasized the humanitarian aspects of their role: their ability to listen, care, and understand. A third group emphasized the active involvement of the nurse in treatment planning and the preventive components of the role.
4. I could not find any Aboriginal male social workers that met the study criteria.
5. I could not obtain access to child protection social workers in metropolitan British Columbia with extensive contact with Aboriginal children and families.

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