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*Abstract.* Three studies explore the intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity as a strategy for validation of polemical social representations. The first study examines this strategy of validation in a context of simple intergroup differentiation. In the second study the context is one of open political conflict. The last study, also in a political context, introduces the perceptions of the relations between the groups as an independent variable. The first two studies show that the subjects adopted a strategy of validating the polemical representations of the ingroup and invalidating the representations of the outgroup consisting of perceiving the ingroup as psychologically diverse and the outgroup as psychologically more homogeneous, with values being perceived as equally homogeneous in the two groups (study 1) or homogeneous in the ingroup and diverse in the outgroup (study 2). In the third study results show that a salient perception of positive interdependence between the groups is accompanied by homogenization of the members of the ingroup who share the prototypical representations of the ingroup. When there is a salient perception of negative interdependence, the members of the ingroup and the outgroup who share the prototypical position of the ingroup are perceived as heterogeneous. Results are discussed in the context of social representations theory and social psychology of social validation of knowledge.

*Key words.* Collective beliefs – Group homogeneity – Intergroup conflict – Social representations – Social validation

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## Introduction

As researchers, we know that we live in a world of perceptions and that what we look upon as reality is no more than the result of an enormous factory of meanings. But in everyday life it is impossible for us not to attribute reality to our perceptions and truth to what our eyes and our hearts see and feel. Given the daily experience of differences in the perception of a same object or event, individual imputation of reality to perceptions and objectivity to opinions is, however, problematic. The experience of difference in perceptions and opinions generates doubt, and this doubt in turn generates strategies to create certainty. As Leon Festinger (1954) observed, each man seeks to validate his opinions and validates them by comparing them to others'. The testimony of another becomes the criterion for certainty and truth. Given the importance of objectivity, in our personal experience, for our psychological wellbeing, and given that objectivity is constructed through social relations, it is natural for social psychology to have theorized on the strategies of validation of experiences, perceptions and opinions in everyday life.

This article addresses the validation of a specific type of beliefs – those which distinguish and oppose social groups, or polemical social representations (Moscovici, 1988). The hypothesis we wish to propose is that the validation of polemical social representations is achieved through specific mechanisms, amongst which are the two following: validation through intergroup differentiation of consensus, and validation through the differentiation of constructed variability of the members of the ingroup and of the outgroup who share a given representation. In the first case, one perceives to be true what is consensual among the ingroup and distinguishes the ingroup from the outgroup; in the second case, one perceives that the validity of what ingroup members think derives from the heterogeneity of those members, while the error of the outgroup is due to the homogeneity of its members. These hypotheses are proposed in the general framework of the articulation of social identities and social representations (see Breakwell, 1993; Doise, 1990; Vala, 1993).

In order to discuss these hypotheses, we will start by explaining them within the framework of the psychosocial literature on processes of social validation of beliefs and opinions. Afterwards, we will present three studies based on the second hypothesis: validation of polemical social representations through intergroup differentiation of variability.

### **Social validation of polemical social representations by intergroup differentiation of consensus**

Festinger et al. (1952) found that, when individuals were informed that the majority of the members of their group disagreed with them, they were less confident of the validity of their own opinions. Efforts to tie the validity of opinions to a process of social comparison fall within the broader scope of research into the search for consensus. This is a long process which goes back to Allport (1924) and to his concept of the *illusion of universality* of individual opinions. More recently the debate goes back to the *false consensus effect*<sup>1</sup> (FCE) (Ross et al., 1977), a relatively robust finding (see Mullen and Hu, 1988). Various cognitive and motivational principles have been invoked to explain the FCE (Spears and Manstead, 1990). Research findings have given no clear lead as to which of these principles may be genuinely at work. But it is with motivational explanations, because they stress the functional value of the FCE, that we are able to associate this effect of the process of social validation of opinions. Indeed, Goethals and Darley (1977), in their reformulation of the theory of social comparison, maintain that "people often distort the social consensus for their opinions in several ways, which makes them more confident that these opinions are correct". Furthermore, Gerard and Orive (1987) propose that anticipation of an interaction relevant to a personal decision or opinion induces dissonance triggered by the negative aspects of the personal decision and by the salience of the positive aspects of the alternatives. And one way of reducing such dissonance is to imagine a high degree of consensus and social support for the alternative chosen. The phenomenon described would therefore correspond to the motivation to find or to construct social backing for individual opinions, and consequently validation of them (Orive, 1988). This hypothesis has received empirical support from some studies (e.g. Goethals et al., 1979; Manstead, 1982). As Kelley (1967) stressed, the perception of consensus allows a belief to be attributed to external factors.

However, authors who relate overestimation of consensus and the social comparison process to the quest for the validation of opinions have dealt only with personal opinions and within an interindividual analytical framework. What happens then with the validation of collective beliefs, as hegemonic social representations, and with the validation of polemic social representations? Social representations

(SRs) are practical social theories constructed and transformed in everyday communication. They organize the knowledge construed by social groups in order to respond to practical problems, knowledge which has been shown to be valid. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the analysis of the validation processes of this kind of collective knowledge. In the case of *hegemonic* SRs (Moscovici, 1988; i.e. the collective knowledge that substantiates the structures of a society), the question of validity has been, to a large extent, answered for us because these representations have long been endowed with "reality", inasmuch as they are objectified, stable, collective and coercive. These representations are seen as a reflection of external reality, and the reality they evoke is seen as a given sensorial fact, as information. For instance, the representation of an individual as autonomous and free is so far objectified in social institutions as not to be seen as a perception or a value, but as an incontrovertible fact. In the same way, the dominant representations of masculine and feminine are so deeply embedded in the subsoil of our culture that they have resisted questioning by groups or institutions.

But the validation of polemical social representations (Moscovici, 1988), representations about the same subject which differentiate opposing groups, is an ongoing struggle. With these, the problem of validity is a key question. It is perhaps the central question concerning the intergroup polemic surrounding these representations. The struggle between social groups over the representations which distinguish them and the legitimacy of these representations is obviously a matter of content, but it is also a question of the validity of such content.

As stated by Miller et al. (1991), support for a belief may be sought through comparison with a non-differentiated target, or with the ingroup, or else through intergroup comparison. Only this last form of analysis lends itself to the validation of polemical social representations, which by definition are collective knowledge and are associated with opposing social groups. The validation of polemical SRs by consensus therefore requires that social comparison be reformulated as an intergroup process (Tajfel, 1972), and consequently polemical SRs are validated by differentiating the positions of the ingroup from those of the outgroup. In the same way, Spears and Manstead (1990) observed that research into the FCE hypothesis has conceived of the social context as homogeneous and non-differentiated, and has neglected intergroup differentiation.

This observation could be extended to the wider field of research which relates the "magnitude effect" to opinion validation. However, research on consensus construction in intergroup arenas is limited, and the conclusions are mixed. Some findings suggest that the projection of own opinions is not reduced for outgroups (Spears and Manstead, 1990), while other findings are apparently discrepant (Holtz and Miller, 1985; Mullen et al., 1992). The findings of Holtz and Miller (1985) show that certainty of own position is greater after estimation of the positions of ingroup members than after estimation of the opinions of outgroup members. And Mullen et al. (1992), examining the FCE in an intergroup context, replicate the FCE for the ingroup but not for the outgroup. These results support the hypothesis of Spears and Manstead (1990) concerning two types of social projection: assimilation and contrast.

More recently, Wagner (1995), in research into the sociogenesis of SRs, argued that a polemical SR contains "meta-information" on the group which holds it, and shows that, while idiosyncratic representations are not attributed to specific social groups, polemical SRs are projected onto the ingroup and not onto the outgroup. Wagner's findings also show that the projection of an opinion onto an indeterminate target (the population) occurs more with idiosyncratic propositions than with propositions which derive from polemical SRs. Despite the fact that the aim of his research is not to illustrate the different ways in which polemical SRs are validated, his findings may be invoked to support the hypothesis that the polemical SRs of a group may be validated by intergroup differentiation of consensus. This would suggest that individuals thought that whatever was consensual in their own group was valid and whatever was consensual in the outgroup was invalid; or that whatever differentiated the ingroup from the outgroup was valid, at the same time as presuming to know what both the ingroup and the outgroup thought on a given issue. In this way, validation of polemical SRs by differentiation of the ingroup/outgroup consensus would fit into both the hypotheses on the comparative and normative function of reference groups (Hyman, 1942; Kelley, 1952), and the hypothesis of the informational referent (Boyanowsky and Allen, 1973; Garcia-Marques, 1987; Turner et al., 1987).

However, the hypothesis that polemical SRs are validated through the perception of a consensus in the ingroup on a given position and a consensus in the outgroup on an opposite position is not sufficient. Indeed, if both groups have equally and widely

consensual but opposite positions, their positions should be viewed as equally true because they are equally shared. The validity of opinions must be justified by another factor: the perception that the ingroup are psychologically heterogeneous, while the outgroup must be perceived as psychologically homogeneous. The rationale for this hypothesis is that only the variability of the ingroup guarantees that the consensus information is a reliable cue to validity. Otherwise, consensus in the ingroup could simply reflect a bias derived from similar personal characteristics. And might not the consensus in the outgroup be accompanied by a perception of the outgroup's homogeneity, allowing its ideas to be assigned to the fact that its members share the same characteristics or attributes?

### **Social validation of polemical social representations by intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity**

If the hypothesis of the validation of personal and group beliefs by the construction of consensus is relatively well established, the same does not hold for the validation by the construction of heterogeneity of those who share an opinion. Indeed, in Goethals et al. (1979) the authors found that individuals overestimate the proportion of people who share the same opinion as they (magnitude or consensus effect), and also that those to whom the subjects attribute their own opinions are perceived as being more diverse than those who share the opposite position (heterogeneity or diversity effect). This position would seem to obey the same motivational mechanism as that which underlies the perception of consensus: validating an opinion through the idea that the more diverse the people who share it, the more closely the idea derives from reality and the less closely it derives from the characteristics of the people who hold it. However, Manstead (1982), in a study which closely follows the procedures used by Goethals et al. (1979), failed to find the variability effect, concluding that "the tendency to see one's own opinion group as more diverse relative to the perceptions of those with differing opinions is more issue-specific than the tendency for the perceived degree of consensus for an opinion" (p. 39). Despite these empirical discrepancies, however, data from related subject areas suggest that the hypothesis of perceived variability as a validation strategy may indeed merit further consideration.

In a study into the effect of majority pressure on a dissident member of a jury, Wilder (1978) found that the more diverse the majority is presented as being, the more effective is such pressure and the more credible are the positions it takes. In a different study, the same author (Wilder, 1977) manipulated the source of influence, using in one case a group and in another case an aggregate of unrelated individuals. The findings showed that pressure had greater impact in the latter case, which the author interpreted as showing that independent sources were more credible than a homogeneous one. Wilder (1990) also shows that where individuating information was provided about outgroup members which increased their heterogeneity, their persuasiveness was enhanced. In the same vein, Harkins and Petty (1981, 1987) show that a categorized source is less influential than an individuating source. Furthermore, in a study of the attribution of causality, Wells and Harvey (1977) found that consensus generates the perception of external causality only if the consensus is drawn from individuals who are perceived as diverse. In other words, these findings show that the perception that a belief is valid is connected to the perception of the variability of those who share that belief.

As we proposed for social comparison and the perception of consensus, so too should the perception of variability, as a strategy for validating polemical SRs, be located in an intergroup context. The literature on the perception of the variability of the ingroup and the outgroup has grown amazingly in the last few years (see Park et al., 1991). In general, we may say that the ingroup is perceived as more diverse than the outgroup. However, as shown by Simon (1992), this is far from being a universal principle and pure cognitive explanations seem unable to address all the relevant empirical phenomena in this domain. It is in this context that motivational or cognitive-motivational explanations (e.g. Marques et al., 1992; Marques and Paez, 1994; Simon and Brown, 1987), socio-cognitive explanations and also conceptual analysis derived from the level of analysis framework (Devos et al., 1996), have called attention to the importance of the nature of intergroup contexts in the way perceptions of variability work.

It is through a cognitive-motivational approach and within specific intergroup contexts that the functional value of the perceptions of variability for validating group beliefs may be understood. As we have seen, the validation of a position held by the ingroup means



that its members must be perceived as diverse, while the discrediting of the position of the outgroup means perceiving its members to be similar to each other. This hypothesis ties in with a large number of studies on the perception of homogeneity, which have shown that, in terms of stereotypical traits and attributes, the ingroup are perceived as more diverse than the outgroup.

However, if we consider group representation of the beliefs and values of groups, the hypothesis ceases to make sense. Indeed, the perception of similarity or homogeneity in the representations of the values and objectives of the ingroup is fundamental to group identity. For the sake of nothing other than the value of belonging to a group and the validity of its social representations, the ingroup must be perceived as heterogeneous in the personality traits and attributes of its members and homogeneous in the shared beliefs and values which mark out the group. In turn, the outgroup should be perceived as homogeneous in terms of its psychological traits, and may be perceived as less homogeneous in the representations of the beliefs which mark it out. In cases of mere differentiation, it is likely that the beliefs of the outgroup can be discredited simply by homogenizing the stereotypical traits of its members. But in cases of open conflict, the positions of the outgroup may be invalidated by perceiving the outgroup to be homogeneous in terms of stereotypes and diverse in the representations it holds. This is the strategy that opposing political groups appear to employ most in situations of conflict: homogenizing their opponents in psychological terms, while assigning them a range of opinions on the same question (Kelly, 1989). These hypotheses are closely related to the classic results of Asch (1952/1987) and Allen (1975), and to more recent findings in literature on social influence: the heterogeneity of a source of influence enhances its persuasiveness (see Wilder, 1990) and the psychologization of a source (or its psychological homogenization) reduces its influence and power (Mugny and Papastamou, 1982).

Below we present three studies on the validation of polemical social representations by intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity, designed in the context of the hypotheses set out above. The first study examines this strategy of validation in a context of simple intergroup differentiation; in the second, the context under study is one of open political conflict. For practical research purposes, the object taken for study is not a specific social representation,

but rather representational elements (stereotypes and values) concerning relevant ingroups and outgroups. In the last study, also in a political context, we consider the subjects' perceptions of the nature (positive or negative interdependence) of the relations between the groups and their impact on intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity as a strategy for validation of polemical SRs.

*Study 1: Intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity and validation of polemical social representations in a context of simple differentiation*

This study analyses the validation of representations which oppose one group to another through the construction of heterogeneity or variability. Two dimensions of the social representations of opposing groups are considered: stereotypes (attribution of psychological traits to group members) and sociopolitical values. The hypothesis under analysis is the following: in order to validate ingroup values the ingroup will be perceived as more diverse than the outgroup in terms of stereotypes, while in terms of sociopolitical values the ingroup will be perceived as more homogeneous than the outgroup. This implies that, when the personality traits of the outgroup are less diverse, its values will consequently be invalidated, while greater diversity in the traits of the ingroup will validate their own values.

The groups in question are those that the subjects selected as relevant to their identity in ideological fields or in terms of social cleavages. The outgroups are likewise those that the subjects considered to be in opposition to the groups they chose to identify with. The social identification categories chosen by the management students who participated in this study are shown in Table 1. In order to control the relevance of the groups chosen, subjects were asked about the degree to which they identified with the ingroup and the degree of rejection of the outgroup. Results indicate that subjects chose relevant ingroups to which they opposed relevant outgroups. The intragroup and the intergroup saliences of the categories were also controlled.<sup>2</sup>

After choosing the groups, subjects were asked to list the personality traits (stereotypes) which best defined a typical member of the ingroup and those which best defined a typical member of the outgroup. Subjects were also asked to list the values or life aims of

**TABLE 1**  
**Identification/rejection categories referred by subjects**

<i>Categories</i>	<i>% (N)</i>
Ideological-Political Groups	33.3 (32)
Ideological-Religious Groups	26.0 (25)
National Social Cleavages	18.8 (18)
International Cleavages	21.9 (21)

their own group and of members of the outgroup. Values and stereotypes were then obtained by a open-ended procedure (Haddock et al., 1994).

In order to obtain information about the variability of the stereotypes and values, the following procedures were used. After replying to the question on the personality traits of the ingroup, the subjects were asked to indicate the percentage of members of the ingroup which had each particular trait. The same procedure was followed for the values of the ingroup, and then for the personality traits and values of the outgroup. From these responses we calculated an index of uncertainty or variability of ingroup and outgroup personality traits and values.<sup>3</sup>

Perceptions of variability or heterogeneity are presented in Table 2. According to our hypotheses, the result that should be stressed concerns the interaction effect. Although marginal, this effect suggests that the perceived variability of stereotypes is greater in the ingroup than in the outgroup, while values, perceived to be less diverse than stereotypes, are perceived as being equally diverse

**TABLE 2**  
**Validation through intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity:  
heterogeneity of the ingroup and the outgroup stereotypes and values in a  
context of simple differentiation**

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Ingroup</i>	<i>Outgroup</i>
Stereotypes	3.4	3.0
Group Values	2.8	2.8

*Note:* the higher the figures, the higher the heterogeneity.

Effect of the dimension:  $F(1, 90) = 14.21$ ,  $p < .000$

Interaction effect:  $F(1, 90) = 3.60$ ,  $p < .06$

in the ingroup and in the outgroup. The validity of ingroup values appears therefore to be guaranteed by the perceived variability of those who share these values with each subject, while the values of the outgroup are discredited by the greater homogeneity (in terms of the personality traits) found in the outgroup.

It should be noted, however, that, contrary to our hypotheses, homogeneity of values of ingroup and outgroup is not perceived to be different. That is, results suggest that, in a context of simple differentiation, invalidation of the outgroup's position is achieved simply by the attribution of psychological homogeneity to its members: they are recognized as having a common thinking, though an invalid one. But will this same strategy still be used in situations of open ideological conflict or will it become radicalized?

*Study 2: Intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity and validation of polemical social representations in an intergroup context of open conflict*

This study deals with the same question as the previous one, with the difference that the subjects are now members of two political parties facing an electoral fight. This is therefore a situation of open intergroup conflict. The study seeks to analyse whether moving from a context of simple differentiation to a context of open conflict in any way changes the strategies used to validate polemical social representations.

In this research subjects were members of two Portuguese political parties: the Socialist Party (PS) (centre-left) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) (centre-right).<sup>4</sup> The variables and measures are the same as in study 1. Data were collected during the week prior to the Portuguese parliamentary elections in October 1995.

The results obtained (Table 3) show again the hypothesized interaction effect. This interaction effect reveals that the values and personality traits of the outgroup are perceived as equally diverse, contrasting with a greater variability of personality traits than of values in the ingroup. The outgroup are therefore seen as more homogeneous than the ingroup in terms of personality traits and more diverse in terms of values.

The findings of this study differ from the previous one in terms of the strategy for discrediting the representations of the outgroup with regard to its societal values. Indeed, as in study 1, the validation of

**TABLE 3**  
**Validation through intergroup differentiation of heterogeneity:**  
**heterogeneity of the ingroup and the outgroup stereotypes and values in a**  
**context of open intergroup conflict**

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Ingroup</i>	<i>Outgroup</i>
Stereotypes	2.9	2.6
Group Values	2.3	2.6

*Note:* the higher the figures, the higher the heterogeneity.

Effect of the dimension:  $F(1, 103) = 7.93, p < .006$

Interaction effect:  $F(1, 103) = 10.25, p < .002$

the positions of the ingroup makes a connection between greater variability in the personality traits of the ingroup and greater homogeneity in their values. But in this study the outgroup's beliefs are discredited by the psychological homogeneity of its members, accompanied by the salience of the variability of the positions assigned to them. This strategy has a parallel in C. Kelly's findings (1989) on perceived homogeneity in a political ingroup and outgroup, which shows greater variability in the outgroup than in the ingroup in respect of opinions on salient political topics. It is therefore likely that, in order to discredit the outgroup in situations of simple differentiation, it is sufficient to homogenize its members in psychological terms, while in situations of open conflict the strategy used is more radical: homogenizing one's opponents in psychological terms and assigning them a variability of representational positions on a single topic. Indeed, psychologizing a majority or a group is not enough to invalidate its positions (Papastamou, 1986), but the perception of heterogeneity on a single topic is effective (Allen, 1975; Asch, 1952/1987).

*Study 3: Perceptions of intergroup interdependence, heterogeneity and validation of polemical social representations*

Studies 1 and 2 showed that the construction of a group's variability can be understood as a strategy for the validation of polemical social representations, both in situations of simple differentiation and in groups in open conflict. Our third study returns to the same problem, but differs in two particular instances.

First, unlike the second study, the subjects in this study are now confronted with specific statements which identify two polemical representations of social and economic development shared by two political groups during an electoral campaign. The statements contrast a representation of development as “growth of the material infrastructures” (an idea voiced by the Social Democratic Party) with a representation of development as “collective and personal advancement by educational improvement” (an idea voiced by the Socialist Party).<sup>5</sup> The procedure is therefore closed, as opposed to open, as in the previous studies.

Second, this study differs from the previous two in that it introduces a new independent variable: perception of intergroup relations as relations of “positive interdependence” or “negative interdependence”. Previous research has shown that, when cooperation (Sherif et al., 1961/1988), dependence on the outgroup (Correia and Vala, in press; Rabbie et al., 1989) or positive interdependence (Mugny et al., 1991; Roux et al., 1994) is salient, discrimination against the outgroup diminishes. We are therefore led to enquire about the impact of the perceived positive or negative interdependence between groups in the validation of the ingroup and outgroup social representations.<sup>6</sup> According to our previous results, when these relations are seen as relations of negative interdependence, we can expect the representations of the ingroup to be seen as valid and those of the outgroup as invalid. However, as suggested by Miller et al. (1991), when the relations between the groups are seen as showing positive interdependence, it is possible that individuals may be led to take the point of view of the outgroup into consideration, to diminish the validity of ingroup representations and to enhance the validity of the representations of the outgroup.

The subjects are the same as in the previous study, and the findings presented refer to the second part of the questionnaire used in that study.

For the propositions under analysis to be taken as indicators of polemical social representations about social development, they have to be perceived as propositions which identify and differentiate the groups. As we can see from the results presented in Table 4, on the statement concerning the highways building policy, PS members disagree with the proposition, while members of the PSD support it. However, members of both parties agreed with the proposition on education policy. In other words, the first statement is perceived as identifying the PSD by members of both parties. The second

**TABLE 4**  
**Political party identification and personal opinion on**  
**representational propositions**

Political party identification	<i>Highways</i> <i>Personal opinion</i>		<i>Education</i> <i>Personal opinion</i>	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
PS	22% ( <i>N</i> = 13)	78% ( <i>N</i> = 46)	93% ( <i>N</i> = 55)	7% ( <i>N</i> = 4)
PSD	96% ( <i>N</i> = 47)	4% ( <i>N</i> = 2)	82% ( <i>N</i> = 40)	18% ( <i>N</i> = 9)

statement is perceived as identifying the PS by the members of that party, whereas PSD members do *not* see it as typical of the PS. Consequently only the proposition concerning the highways building policy will be taken into the following analyses.

The hypothesis under analysis proposes that the perception of variability<sup>7</sup> of those who share the position of the ingroup should be greater in the case of ingroup/outgroup relations being perceived as showing negative interdependence than when they are perceived as showing positive interdependence. This hypothesis is supported by the interaction effect between party identification and perceptions of interdependence. Given that the proposition on the highways building policy is one which identifies the PSD and distinguishes it from the PS, we understand that, in a situation of negative interdependence, the PSD perceives those who support the proposition which identifies their group as being heterogeneous. At the same time, the PS homogenizes in the same way those who support a proposition with which it does not agree. However, in a situation of positive interdependence, an expectation of collaboration between the two parties leads to increasing uncertainty as to their respective positions. In the case of the PS, such uncertainty may be inferred from the reduced homogenization of outgroup members. Indeed, Wilder's findings (1990), in a study of persuasiveness, show that the outgroup need to be perceived as diverse in order to gain credibility. In the case of the PSD, this increased uncertainty is to be seen in the homogenization of the ingroup and in the homogenization of the outgroup members who share the prototypical position of the ingroup.

**TABLE 5**  
**Effect of party identification and intergroup interdependence on**  
**perceptions of heterogeneity**

		<i>Target of heterogeneity judgements</i>	
		<i>Members of PS</i>	<i>Members of PSD</i>
		<i>who agree with</i>	<i>who agree with</i>
		<i>the proposition</i>	<i>the proposition</i>
Identification with PS	Negative interd. between parties	2.4	2.5
	Positive interd. between parties	2.6	2.9
Identification with PSD	Negative interd. between parties	3.1	3.1
	Positive interd. between parties	2.5	2.6

*Note:* the higher the figures, the higher the heterogeneity.  
 Interaction effect (party identification  $\times$  perceptions of interdependence):  
 $F(1, 96) = 6.9, p < .01$

### **Towards a social psychology of social validation of collective knowledge**

Our initial hypotheses were confirmed in overall terms. However, the wide range of identification categories selected by the subjects in the first study means that they cannot be taken as an independent variable, and we are unable to say whether the results obtained might be attributed equally to the different types of categories. Moreover, the lack of any direct and specific indicator for measuring the credibility attributed to group representations limits the usefulness of the results. Nevertheless, the association between the psychological heterogeneity of a group and the credibility of the positions they hold has been empirically shown, even though indirectly, in other contexts (e.g. Wilder, 1978). The studies we have presented have led to further research which overcame the limitations we referred to and reinforced the hypotheses (Lopes, 1998). However, this topic of research needs more empirical support.

Next we will discuss the implications of these researches for the study of the social validation of collective knowledge and, specifically, for the study of social representations.



(1) Social psychologists have theorized, more or less directly, on the strategies whereby perceptions of reality are validated: by negotiation (Sherif, 1967), by social comparison (Festinger, 1954), by the perception of consensus (Allport, 1924; Goethals and Darley, 1977; Ross et al., 1977), by the testimony of individuals invested with legitimate or expert referent power (for a review, see Turner, 1991: 116–21), through the social judgeability norm (Caetano, 1996; Leyens et al., 1992) and also through the perception of the variability of those sharing the same view of reality (Goethals et al., 1979; Wilder, 1977). All these validation strategies were, however, studied as strategies of validation of personal beliefs and opinions, and not as strategies of validation of collective knowledge or knowledge in antagonistic groups.

In the specific case of SRs, Moscovici and Hewstone (1984) set out three processes whereby reality and truth are assigned to a representation: the testimony of an authority regarded as unassailable; reduction of information, allowing a new representation to be associated with an already validated representation; and the imputation of positivity to a representation, giving it an impersonal origin – “in so far as it is no longer possible to impute a representation to a specific person, the representation is imputed to something factual or existing”<sup>8</sup> (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1984: 564). This article analysed the intergroup differentiation of variability as an expression of the wider process of imputing positivity to a representation.

As we know, each society constructs its own criteria for validating beliefs or for establishing truths (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). The distinction established by Festinger (1954) between “physical reality” and “social reality” reflects a salient distinction in our society between what can be tested individually and what implies the support of others. One of the expressions of others’ support and of the validity of this support would be the perception of their variability. This perception contributes to transform the subjective into something external, and therefore objective and valid.

The construction of the variability of those who defend a certain position as a criterion for the validity of that position may be understood as a validation heuristic. In this hypothesis, this heuristic, like others, would be opposed to another form of treatment of information – systematic processing. Only the latter would produce beliefs which are stable and resistant to counter-arguments, while the validation of a belief through a heuristic such as that of variability would be much more susceptible to invalidation (see Eagly and

Chaiken, 1993). Results reported here do not allow us to look further into this hypothesis. They do, however, allow us to suggest that, at least in intergroup settings, the validation of beliefs, attitudes or representations through consensus and variability may be more than simple heuristics, they may be criteria inherent in the systematic processing of information. How otherwise can we justify their constituting one of the foundations of democracy? Are not democratic institutions legitimized by the individual vote of different and autonomous individuals, and by the (consensual) positions of majorities? And within the scientific field, are not the consensus and diversity of those who defend a given theory invoked as criteria of plausibility, at least within the frame of a positivist thought? And in commonsense thinking, would not these strategies correspond to a form of popular positivism, in which common sense, just like the scientific community, would seek to validate its positions through the consensus and diversity of those who share a given position? It is in the context of these questions that it seems plausible to study these forms of validation as hegemonical social representations which provide criteria of validation of polemical representations.

(2) The analytical approach to polemical SRs and validation processes we adopted belongs to the line of research which proposes a connection between SR theory and social identity theory. The rapprochement between these two analytical approaches has been from both sides: by seeking to show how the structure and content of SRs are determined by social identities and by seeking to show how SRs structure identity categories and actual relations between groups (Breakwell, 1993; Elejabarrieta, 1994; Vala, in press; Wagner, 1995). Empirically, this connection has revealed above all justification, differentiation and evaluation strategies (see Amâncio, 1993; Echebarria et al., 1994; Lima, 1995; Millward, 1995; Poeschel, 1994). Our research has sought to show that, in intergroup polemic concerning the groups' respective representations, social groups also develop strategies to validate their own representations and to invalidate the other groups' representations. However, it should be noted that the link between social representations and social identities has been constructed from the theories of Tajfel (1972) and Turner et al. (1987), leaving aside the interdependence approach (Doise, 1992; Rabbie et al., 1989; Sherif et al., 1961/1988). It was from this latter approach that, in the third study, we took the perception of positive versus negative interdependence and an independent variable. This study shows that, in certain circumstances, the

perception of positive interdependence between groups can produce doubts as to the validity of the prototypical representations of the ingroup. Likewise, the first and second studies taken together show that moving from a situation of simple differentiation to a context of open conflict has consequences for the strategies used to validate representations: in the first case, it is sufficient to psychologize the outgroup, whereas in the second case a more radical invalidation strategy is called into play – psychologizing the outgroup and assigning them a variety of positions on a single topic. This strategy is more effective because psychologization appears not to be sufficient when dealing with large groups (Papastamou, 1986). The context of intergroup relations (simple differentiation versus conflict, or negative versus positive interdependence) is therefore a variable which requires further study in the form of research into validation strategies and polemical representations. But this question is equally important for understanding the origin of emancipated social representations (Moscovici, 1988). Representations of this type are constructed in a context of intergroup cooperation. Now the results obtained show that it is probably this type of relations which allows uncertainty and ambivalence to emerge and consequently the negotiation of meanings needed to create representations shared by different groups.

(3) Our findings also give us cause to reflect on the place of rhetoric and argumentation in the validation of social representations. We should recall that one of the groups in the third study, the PSD, did not differentiate the consensus of the ingroup from that of the outgroup. In other words, when confronted with a proposition typical of the outgroup they acknowledged equal consensus on the proposition in both groups.

This result may indicate that the statement chosen to identify PS was not the best, that is, that a methodological error was made. For those who followed the political debate during the parliamentary elections and analysed the parties' electoral propaganda, this explanation is not really adequate. In our view, the results obtained do not reflect a methodological error, but have a meaning in themselves which we should ponder. In fact, PSD respondents, by not differentiating the consensus within the outgroup from the consensus within the ingroup on the statement regarding education, place this statement within the scope of enlarged consensus, while simultaneously denying its differentiating character, its novelty, its efficacy of persuasion and its political pragmatism which had been attributed to

it by the PS. If this interpretation proves acceptable, it will mean that, in analysing social validation strategies of group knowledge, we should take into consideration not only intergroup relations and the processes which derive from those relations, but also the context and the aims with which a certain knowledge is put forth. This leads us to distinguish between epistemic validity and functional validity. This hypothesis suggests, then, that the strategies of validation of collective knowledge are not independent of argumentation rhetoric (see Billig, 1987) and communication objectives (Moscovici, 1994) of conflicting groups.

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## Notes

1. The false consensus effect occurs when individuals with a given attribute or a given opinion tend to estimate that the same attribute or opinion is shared by a higher percentage of persons than that estimated by those without the attribute or opinion in question.

2. Measurement of identification with the categories selected: after choosing the groups, the subjects indicated the degree to which they identified with the ingroup (from 1 – “I belong to this group, but this is of little importance to me”, to 4 – “I belong to this group, and this is of the greatest importance to me”) and the degree of rejection of the outgroup (from 1 – “I do not belong to this group, but this is of little importance to me, to 4 – “I do not belong to this group, and this is of the greatest importance to me”) (Monteiro, 1994). In order to control the relevance of the groups chosen the following two questions were asked: “Do you think that under the same circumstances another person like you would have chosen the group you chose?” (answers from 1 – “very likely”, to 7 – “highly unlikely”) and “Do the people who do not belong to the group you have chosen speak about this group?” (answers from 1 – “never”, to 7 – “very often”). The reply to the first question is an indicator of intragroup salience of the categories chosen, while the reply to the second question is an indicator of the intergroup salience of the categories chosen (Deschamps and Clémence, 1990).

3. Measurement of heterogeneity: the index of heterogeneity or variability is derived from information theory (Attneave, 1959) and it measures, in bits, the uncertainty associated with the presence or absence of the spontaneously mentioned characteristics in a random group member. Thus the index is sensitive to both the

percentages and the number of attributes indicated (Garcia-Marques, 1994). The index was as follows:

$$\sum_{i=1}^c (p_i \log_2 1/p_i) + [(1 - p_i)(\log_2(1 - 1/p_i))]$$

where  $c$  = number of characteristics and  $p_i$  = percentage.

4. Identification with the ingroup and rejection of the outgroup: the degree of identification with the ingroup did not vary between groups, being 2.9 in the PS and 3.1 in the PSD ( $F[1, 107] = 1.5$ , n.s.). Likewise, the degree of rejection of the outgroup was very similar in the two groups: 2.9 in the PS and 3.2 in the PSD ( $F[1, 107] = 2.3$ , n.s.).

5. Representational propositions: the propositions were as follows. One proposition typical of the Social Democratic Party was taken from a leaflet on the reasons for voting for this party: "Ten years of investment in highways is a clear sign of the country's development". The second proposition, typical of the Socialist Party, was one of the main points of its electoral campaign: "Education spending must be increased as a proportion of government spending".

6. Perception of the relations between the ingroup and the outgroup: the subjects were presented with two statements (adapted from Roux et al., 1994) and asked to choose which best expressed their own opinion. Perception of negative interdependence: "The interests of these groups are in conflict or incompatible. The objectives of one group are opposed to those of the other." Perception of positive interdependence: "The interests of these groups are complementary. By working together they will more easily achieve their objectives." Perceptions of interdependence between the parties fighting the election were of great ecological sensitivity, given that the PS and the PSD, although they have always campaigned separately, have a history of cooperation in governmental coalitions, and together represent the centre of the Portuguese party political spectrum.

7. Measurement of heterogeneity: subjects were asked to answer the following question in respect of their estimates of party members: "party members who agree/disagree are very different or very similar in terms of social status, age, lifestyle or personality traits", with answers ranging from 1 – "very similar" to 4 – "very different". The index of heterogeneity is probably less informative than the one previously used. However, this index is simpler to collect and specifically targeted at the questions addressed in this study.

8. Our translation. The original text in French reads: "dans la mesure où on ne peut plus l'imputer à quelqu'un, on l'impute à quelque chose de factuel et d'existant".

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