

# **CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE**

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## Why Representations Are Interesting

**R**epresentations are nothing more than the symbols by which we communicate; however, they are of immense interest beyond the symbolic space they inhabit; that is, graphic or auditory or internally visualized or other sensory form they take, or the system of differences and similarities they together comprise. They exist additionally in cognitive and social spaces. Indeed, representations mediate between private spaces of cognition and public spaces in which intersubjectivity is negotiated; moreover, they mediate among the various discourse circulation systems that comprise different areas of human activity.

From the cognitive side, whatever is inside our heads takes shape in the form of various representations as we feel impelled to communicate with others through symbols. Moreover, from Vygotskian and Bakhtinian perspectives, what exists inside our heads has formed both out of and in dialectic with those representations already presented to us (as resource and prompt) in our personal communicative histories. Those special kinds of representations that cognitive psychologists evoke by inquiring about how people picture knowledge in their mind do not escape from this social embeddedness for they are formed out of experiential and social resources as much as our dreams, and their presentation to psychologists (or the self in the process of managing complex tasks) is of course a communicative act, trying to describe internal states. This makes them of no less interest or importance but only contexted in particular communicative acts.

Once uttered, drawn, written, sung, danced or otherwise enacted, the representations become open to interpretation by others and thus create a space for intersubjective negotiation of meaning. How loosely or narrowly the representor and representee might agree on the meaning enacted with the representation depends on many factors of individual and shared histories, access to shared social typifications and conventionalized representations, the practices of which the communications are part, immediate states of mind and interests, orientation toward the other, continued interaction that negotiates meaning,

and so on. Moreover, we can only judge the degree of meaning shared through further representations by the participants (in the form of either further statements and actions or reports to an evaluating researcher). Nonetheless, whatever degree and kind of intersubjective meaning occurs (including misapprehensions and mistakes) form the basis of continued action among the parties meeting across the representation. Thus, representations are the basis of social understanding, part of the cognitive experience of each party, with each aware to some degree of the other's recognition.

Within fairly tightly organized discourse systems where individual roles and interests are aligned through institutions, regularized symbol uses, conventionalized practices, and so forth, representations can provide shared information, perception, orientation of large numbers of people engaged in coordinated activities. Thus, tax accountants share many representations of the law and finances, allowing them to carry out their business with a large degree of mutual understanding. Although they may interpret the shared representations from somewhat idiosyncratic and personally motivated perspectives, and although they may represent their client's financial positions somewhat variously within the surrounding professional and legal representations, their range of interpretive flexibility is severely limited by professional and legal constraints and practices. Their representations of their clients' finances are conceived on paper and in their heads as they try to formulate various other financial representations into the most advantageous yet legally secure representation within the tax system. These representations then transmitted on paper help form both client's and tax examiner's representations of the client's financial position and tax liabilities. In deciding how to interpret and evaluate the implications and veracity of these representations, many other cognitive factors of client and examiner may enter into the balance. Thus, representations circulate to a variety of different people within discourse circulation systems, not all of whom are like-minded or even of similar roles.

Representations, moreover, may go from one discourse system to another, no doubt with reinterpretation, even largely systematic reinterpretation and reevaluation, as they move from one kind of venue into another. Financial representations may move into the tax courts or the divorce courts or even into the pages of *New York* magazine. Nonetheless, the representations, as the vehicle of meaning, form the grounds of intersubjectivity, even as the ranges of intersubjectivity may become multiple and complex. So the IRS, the courts, the magazines, and many other centers of interaction and communication adjust to each other,

and the individuals attending to each system achieve some degree of shared orientation and meaning through these representations that circulate about the world. And in sociocognitive recursion, their minds reshape around the representations they attend to as part of their continuing life activities.

The position I have taken suggests the importance of representations at the highest degree of generality but does not tie itself down to particular characterizations of representations, for these are only instantiated at each locale of cognition and social exchange, even when that locale may be spread rather widely through various devices of social regularization and typification. These regularizing devices create cognitive similarities (or at least shared loci of cognitive attention to which individuals may orient variously) among large numbers of people across a range of occasions. At each locale there are many detailed and important issues of symbol system, social organization and dynamics realized through representational practices, and cognitive activity in representational interpretation and creation enacted on a ground of representationally constructed mentality. That is why representations are interesting to us as social scientists, but even more as humans. We attend to them constantly. They are how social knowledge and material activity go in and out of our heads and how we share them with others. If we did not attend to representations we could not think alone, nor together.

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