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"We were at this crossroads" – When imagined futures make or break transformative dialogue between social representations

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Abstract

People and societies are guided by what they imagine to lie beyond the present, by what can and should be the case in the future. Yet people do not always agree about the form, content or path to realisation of a given imagined future. As a result, conflicts can arise over something that does not exist yet. In this paper, I propose to integrate theories of social and alternative representations with a sociocultural psychological interpretation of imagination, in order to explore the addressivity of futures and to call for more studies that explicitly take into account the future's role in the present. I draw on a dialogical case study that was carried out on the Faroe Islands, more precisely on the island of Suðuroy. Whereas the Faroe Islands are experiencing a rapid acceleration in growth, Suðuroy has failed to keep pace and has witnessed decades of emigration and a worsening of its population's relative socio-economic situation. Islanders liken the current situation to standing at a crossroads, while being unable to agree on which path must be taken in order to reinvigorate a shrinking future. By analysing how one of the two major social representations constructs the other – its alternative representation – I suggest that the absence of transformative dialogue results from incompatible futures. Furthermore, in line with a sociocultural psychological perspective, I also attempt to move beyond the homogenising force inherent in social representation theory by introducing Ingolf and Karin, whose stories illustrate how social and alternative representations are not uniformly shared and enacted, but take different forms in light of unique life experiences.

Keywords: Imagination, social representations, social change, futures, Faroe Islands

Introduction

People and societies are guided by what they imagine to lie beyond the present, by what can or should be the case in the near, far or de-temporalised future. Imagining the future is, simultaneously, a social process and an individual process, taking place at the juncture of

material and structural circumstances, social representations and individual life trajectories. For this reason, people do not always agree about or have the same power to sway the form, content or path to realisation of a given imagined future. Conflicts can arise over something that is yet to be, a phenomenon epitomised by social movements (Hawlina et al., 2020). In this paper, I explore how imagined futures influence whether the dialogue between social representations constitutes transformation or not.

My analysis starts from an ongoing research project conducted in a small, archipelagic country located in the North Atlantic Ocean – the Faroe Islands. I spent more than three months there, over the course of a year, on the island of Suðuroy, which, according to one of its inhabitants, is an island at the "periphery of the periphery". Following its heyday during the fishing revolution and industrialisation that began in the late 19th century (Holm & Mortensen, 2002; Joensen, 1987; West, 1972), the island's population has gradually declined since the 1920s. As of December 2020, the population is 4,660 or equivalent to 8.8% of the total Faroese population[1]. It is one of the last major islands to remain disconnected from the extensive network of road and sub-sea tunnels and currently faces demographic, as well as socio-economic challenges (Pristed Nielsen et al., 2020). While the growth of the country as a whole is accelerating economically, socially and demographically, Suðuroy is not keeping pace. The current situation has led many to imagine a bleak or non-existent future if nothing changes soon (cf. Bryant & Knight, 2019; Ringel, 2018), but the islanders differ in what they imagine the solution to be. Some of them use the island's long history centred around fishing as a model for the future (de Saint-Laurent & Obradović, 2019), while others imagine a radical break with the past, in order to embrace "progress" and re-open the future. Both temporal orientations and visions of the future are attempts to prevent the broken present from spilling into the future. In this article, I focus on those who wish to break with the inertia of the past and create a new, different future – a choice that reflects the fact that I had more access to people who sharing this social representation.

After briefly introducing sociocultural psychology and social representation theory (Moscovici, 2000), with an emphasis on alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008), I propose to integrate the concept of imagination taken from sociocultural psychology into this framework. This is an attempt to start a discussion about the role of the future in social representation research, where I find it often only plays a peripheral role. Each social representation points to a particular future, which has loosely been referred to as a project (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008), but it remains under-theorised and is not concerned with the adressivity of these futures or projects. This situation echoes Alex Gillespie's work on alternative representations as the dialogical structures that enable communication. To introduce the future and adressivity into this framework, I turn to the case of Suðuroy. First, I identify the two major social representations at issue, before focusing on one of them in order to unravel how it constructs the other – the alternative representation and its future. Here, I argue that the alternative representation and the future it is assumed to have is incompatible with – and therefore impedes – transformative dialogue between the two social representations. This absence of dialogue can have very real consequences when it comes to determining whose future will materialise. Second, I shift the analysis to the microgenetic

[1] https://hagstova.fo/fo/oki/suduroyar-oki/folkatal-i-suduroyar-oki

level and present the stories of Ingolf and Karin, which illustrate that social and alternative representations are not shared homogeneously, but filtered through personal experiences.

Sociocultural Psychology

I approach these questions from a sociocultural psychological perspective, assuming that humans only exist as social and cultural beings (Valsiner, 2007; Vygotsky, 1997). People and their environment are interdependent and mutually constitutive (Cole, 1996; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). Like any field, sociocultural psychology is home to many voices and I therefore adopt a dialogical epistemology (Marková, 2016; Marková et al., 2020, p. 2), of which three aspects in particular permeate the theoretical framework and analysis in this article. First, I assume that nothing is completely private, but instead that everything contains echoes and traces of other things and social meanings – past, present and future – and is always addressed to someone or something (Bakhtin, 1981; Marková, 2016). Second, I consider sociocultural psychology as a developmental science (Valsiner, 2004; Valsiner et al., 2009), which calls for special attention to processes and transformations over time (Valsiner, 2011). Third, I understand psychological events and processes to be unique and people agentic (Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Goncalves, et al., 2013), which therefore demands sensitivity to what people can do given the circumstances, their past experiences, and resources.

Social Representations and Different Futures

Serge Moscovici (2000) characterised the public sphere as consisting of multiple – and sometimes conflicting – social representations, a situation which is compatible with a dialogical epistemology due to the triadic structure and relational nature of these representations (Marková, 2003). He defines them as "systems of interpretation" (2008, p. 105) allowing people to orient themselves in, as well as to master and communicate about, the social world (1973, p. xiii). Each affords certain possibilities, imaginations of the future and paths of action. Social representations are "world-makers" and can provide a sense of temporal continuity from the past to the future and back again (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; de Saint-Laurent, 2018; Wagoner, 2015). In a sense, I understand them as providing answers to Bloch's questions: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?" (1996, p. 3). What concerns me throughout this article is the question "*where we are going*?", as well as the question of which futures social representations and alternative representations point to.

Moscovici has received some criticism for providing murky definitions of social representations (e.g. Jahoda, 1988), producing either overly cognitive or deterministic interpretations, as well as for losing sight of an important point, namely the process through which social representations are constructed and reconstructed (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Addressing these issues in detail lies beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that I follow others (e.g. Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008; Jodelet, 1991) in approaching social representations as symbolic entities "used by people to act upon the world, another person or themselves" (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2013, p. 1). Social representations are shared to an extent, but I contend that they are enacted and appropriated differently according to people's unique life experiences. Another aspect that has received less attention is Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) introduction of temporality into social representation theory (Foster, 2011). Bauer and Gaskel use the notion of projects (both past

and future) to stretch social representation across time. I understand these projects to be the outcomes of collective acts of imagination and practices emanating from the social representations, with the caveat that, although a group of people share some general directionality, project or imagined vision of the future, there still exist "internal" differences or fractions (Manley, 2019). I want to explore whom these futures are adressed to and how the (assumed) futures proper to other social representations impede transformative dialogue. It is for this reason that I find the concept of alternative representations useful.

According to Gillespie, all social representations contain an alternative representation – "representations of other people's representations" (2008, p. 380) – whose function is to facilitate communication across social representations. These alternative representations exist only within social representations, as shadows of other social representations, and have either stablising or destabilising potential (Gillespie, 2008). Take the representational landscape on Suðuroy: those who enact the social representation pointing to a new future, while breaking with the past, at the same time also inevitably establish a conception of the the rival social representation and its future. Then, depending on how the alternative representation is constructed, it can either facilitate or block transformative dialogue. Thus, I want to highlight the fact that these alternative representations must also be studied and theorised as existing in time.

When is dialogue between social and alternative representations transformative?

Alternative representations can function to keep other social representations at arm's length psychologically (Gillespie, 2008). In order to describe this process, Gillespie proceeded from Moscovici's (2008) notion of semantic barriers, which "are used to neutralise the transformative and dialogical potential of these alternative representations" (Gillespie, 2008, p. 377). He compares them to a psychological immune system that ensures a degree of continuity amidst sociological diversification (Gillespie, 2012). Semantic barriers are not figments of the individual's imagination, but are rather socially available tropes springing from alternative representations (Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O'Sullivan-Lago, 2012, p. 701). The focus of this paper is not on the specific types of semantic barriers deployed, but rather on the construction of the alternative representation in time and how imagined futures influence semantic contact and the juxtaposition of views (Gillespie, 2020).

Moscovici (2008) suggests that the transformation of social representations happens through the processes of anchoring and objectification, while Duveen and Lloyd (1990) argue that this occurs through accumulated microgenetic changes. Here, I want to focus on what Kadianaki and Gillespie (2015) have called semiotic dialogicality, that is, the internal relation of social representations to their opposites. The dialogue between social representations can be either transformative or non-transformative (Gillespie, 2008, 2020), although it is always dialogical. Transformation happens when the alternative representation offers a viable alternative to the main representation (Gillespie, 2008), whereas the absence of transformation occurs when the alternative is constructed as threatening, ridiculous or, as I propose, grounded in an incompatible imagined future (Obradović, 2018).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in alternative representations and semantic barriers (e.g. Gillespie et al., 2012; Sammut, Clark, & Kissaun, 2014; Sammut & Sartawi, 2012), but the temporal orientation of the studies rarely incorporates imagined futures. I propose that the compatibility between the future of the social representation and its alternative is central to understanding in which cases transformation does or does not happen and, ultimately, whom the future will cater to.

Does the future matter at all?

People and societies can explore what was and what is yet to be by means of imagination, in order to create a sense of continuity and direction, giving meaning to the past, the present and the fleeting future. Sociocultural psychology defines imagination as a social and psychological process enabled, guided and restricted by past experiences, symbolic resources and socio-material conditions (Bartlett, 1928; Vygotsky, 2004; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Imagination can be described as an expansion of one's experience, in which groups or individuals can imagine alternatives and possibly redirect the present by creating new future orientations (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). Imaginining the future has been shown to guide development along life trajectories (Zittoun & de Saint-laurent, 2015; Zittoun et al., 2013), to lead people on perilous journeys (Kleist & Thorsen, 2016; Vigh, 2009), to expand or reduce the possible (Glăveanu, 2018a, 2020), to mediate perspective-taking (Glăveanu, de Saint-Laurent, & Literat, 2018; Glăveanu & de Saint-Laurent, 2015), to accompany construction and to make use of infrastructures (Appel et al., 2019), to start revolutions (Mareek & Awad, 2018) and much more. Recently, anthropologists have also challenged their discipline's backward-facing orientation and have started to ask what role the future plays and how it is constructed (e.g. Appadurai, 2013; Bryant & Knight, 2019; Hirsch & Stewart, 2005; Munn, 1992; Pels, 2015). Thus, in opposition to older assumptions, this increasing attention to imagination (in relation to the future) reflects a fundamental change from its being considered disconnected from material and sociocultural reality (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010) to being considered inseperable from – and having a generative role – in that very reality (Zittoun, Glăveanu, et al., 2020).

Social representation theory does, to some extent, account for temporality, albeit mostly the past, but echoing the shift towards understanding the role of the future in the present, I suggest further exploring this topic by integrating the concept of imagination. I therefore seek to explore if and how imagined futures facilitate or impede dialogue between social representations. Furthermore, a sociocultural psychological interpretation of imagination also allows me to unearth some of the ambiguities within seemingly uniform social representations.

Methodology

The "empirical examples" presented below were purposefully selected because they were partly responsible for triggering these theoretical reflections. They are a small part of a larger interdisciplinary research project that explores mobility and migration in smaller localities, in this case the island of Suðuroy in the Faroe Islands. Part of the fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with Emmanuel Charmillot. Our point of departure was the increasing advocacy for case studies in sociocultural psychology (e.g., Marková et al., 2020; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010), as well as calls to de-migranticise migration studies (Dahinden, 2016). We wanted to capture the polyphonic nature of the case work across different levels of analysis (Cornish & Gillespie, 2010; Zittoun, 2019b) and to avoid falling into the trap of the a priori categorisation of people into groups (Gillespie, Howarth, et al., 2012; Hui, 2016). This study is idiographic, which allowed me to track the phenomena through time, as they unfolded in relation to their context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Molenaar, 2004; Valsiner & Sato, 2006), following the principles of sociocultural psychology outlined out above. We started from a geographically defined region, rather than a homogenising sample of people (Sato et al., 2018).

We conducted more than three months of ethnographic field work on Suðuroy over the course of a year. We visited the island several times and at different seasons, in order to get a sense of how things change over time. We witnessed the much debated *grindadráp*,[2] attended language classes and watched Smyríl[3] come and go, in an almost ritualistic fashion. We recorded more than 30 qualitative interviews with people from all walks of life, arranged two focus groups and conducted extensive archival research in order to establish an overview of the island's demographic and socio-economic development in relation to the broader Faroese societal acceleration. This enabled us to combine the "first-person" perspective and the "third-person perspective" (Zittoun, 2019).

Already while living on the island, I started to identify two major social representations locked in a polemical relationship. Although they were both responses to a bleak future, each seemed to trigger different imagined visions of the future. One used the past as a model for the future, while the other led people to imagine a radical break with the past in order to foster social and economic diversification. As mentioned above, due to issues surrounding access, I do not have the same degree of insight into both of these social representations and I will therefore focus on the latter one and explore its alternative from within it. The reconstruction of the social representation, and the alternative representation it contains, is based on interviews, observations and archival data.

Introducing the Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands is a small archipelago consisting of 18 islands, 17 of which are inhabited, located in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. These rugged islands have been under foreign rule for 1000 years (Sølvará, 2020). In 1949, the Faroese government was re-established through a home-rule system, acquiring responsibility for some aspects of governance, while others remain under Danish control.

The Faroese population has grown and diversified significantly over the past decades. Its overall population reached 52,924 inhabitants as of December 2020,[4] while the foreign-born population has risen from around 1% in the mid-1990s to 4.2% in 2020. The economy is also booming, with GNP and wages both at record levels (Johansen, 2020). Since the mid- to late 19th century, the main pillar of the Faroese economy has been fishing-related industries (Holm & Mortensen, 2002; Joensen, 1987; West, 1972), accounting for up to 95% of all exports (Johansen, 2020). In 2012, the Faroese parliament decided to increase investment in tourism, as a strategy for diversifying the economy – with the goal of reducing susceptibility to fluctuations triggered by geopolitical embargos, fish stocks, global prices, and more – and to strengthen early educational opportunities on the islands. The digital and physical infrastructure was also improved. For instance, an extension of the sole runway in 2011 enhanced connectivity to the world beyond, reducing both prices and travel time. The impressive and still expanding network of subsea tunnels now connects about 87% of the population by road. Mobile broadband covers all of the islands and even the surrounding sea. These infrastructural developments, together with a rebranding of the Faroe Islands

[2] The centuries-old practice of killing pilot whales.
[3] The ferry serving as the main point of connectivity to the other islands: it makes two to three trips per day.
[4] https://hagstova.fo/fo/folk/folkatal/folkatal

spearheaded by Visit Faroe Islands,[5] appear to have changed experiences of being a place where you are "stuck" to being somewhere "cool", as well as opening up new futures. In other words, social and economic life on the Faroe Islands has accelerated, but the process has not been even or uncontested – the opening of some futures generally means the closing of others, and not everyone has the same say. Suðuroy, along with a few of the outer areas, moves at a different pace.

Suðuroy: "The Last Frontier"

Following a round trip in the dark and windy month of January 2019, Emmanuel and I decided to establish a case study centred around Suðuroy[6] – an island with about 4,600 inhabitants still only accessible by ferry (if you discount a weekly helicopter shuttle). It is the southernmost island and feels somewhat isolated.

Historically speaking, Suðuroy has shifted from being peripheral, in relation to the other Faroese islands, to being central, and then back to being somewhat peripheral in terms of socio-economic development, connectivity to the outside world and what futures remain open and closed on the island. Before the maiden voyage of Smyríl 1st (islanders call the ferry by its name) in January 1896, travelling to other islands was often tiresome and dangerous. With the advent of fishery, the villages of Vágur and Tvøroyri on Suðuroy grew to become industrial and economic powerhouses in the Faroe Islands (Holm & Mortensen, 2002). At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of the population was directly or indirectly employed in fishing or processing (Guttesen, 1996). This made Suðuroy a site of high mobility and migration. The population peaked in the first half of the 20th century, accounting for more than 20% of the entire Faroese population in the early 1950s (Holm, 2007), but this situation did not last.

While there has been an increase in population in many places around the Faroe Islands, Suðuroy has experienced decades of decline in its population, which has slowly stagnated in the last few years. The islanders now account for 8.8% of the total Faroese population. This is partly due to emigration on the part of the younger generation for whom fishing-related jobs are not necessarily a desirable path to pursue, while alternatives remain scarce on the island and commuting to the central labour market is not feasible (Pristed Nielsen et al., 2020). Mobility is a prerequisite for people seeking education or who want to be within reach of social and cultural opportunities, such as going to the cinema. According to some people I spoke with, young people do not discuss "if" they want to move away but rather "when". Many left a generation ago during or in the aftermath of the worst economic crisis in Faroese history in the early 1990s (Justinussen, 1997) – during which nearly 10% of the total population emigrated and unemployment hit 20% (Guttesen, 1996; Larsen, 1996) – and had no clear explicit plans of returning. Again, this had a disproportionally negative effect on Suðuroy (Holm & Mortensen, 2002). As a consequence, the population is ageing and more at risk of poverty, while the portion of the inhabitants with tertiary education (and who can make use of it) remains lower than in the rest of the country. While the campaigns have mainly attempted to recast young people's vision of a hopeful future in Tórshavn, it appears that Suðuroy is still not the first choice for many – and much rests on the promise of becoming connected in the not-too-distant future.

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[5] National tourist agency.
[6] In an ongoing dialogue with Janine Dahinden and Tania Zittoun.

Fishing has shaped Suðuroy (and the country) for the better part of the century and it is central to life there. However, new institutional initiatives, enhanced mobility and opening futures have appeared to accelerate the growth of Faroese society, but the lifting of fatalistic bonds is happening more slowly on Suðuroy and the islanders are now locked between two dominant social representations of what life should be.

Representational Landscape on Suðuroy

I was standing outside in Vágur on a cold, but not too windy day in January 2020. I had missed the last bus and could not get ahold of a taxi. Luckily a couple kindly offered to drive me back to Tvøroyri. While driving, the man explained that whenever the future was discussed, it tended to be in rather black-and-white terms and without much willingness to enter into any meaningful dialogue. This comment in many ways marked the beginning of this paper. I immediately thought of Ib – a man who had moved back to Suðuroy after living in Denmark – who used a crossroads metaphor to describe the predicament during my visits back in 2019. He eloquently portrays people as standing at a crossroads between an old and a new reality:

> We were at this crossroads, and we really had to move just to survive and prevent further stagnation, continued decline in population, to create new jobs, to create a new reality for us. So, we really had to move. We had this stupid American movie that […] It was a war movie where they say something about you have to move to survive. So, actually that was a real situation for our society, we had to move to survive. It was impossible for us to keep on standing at the crossroad, so we really had to do something. (Ib)

The crossroads represents different imagined futures. For Ib, standing still and waiting for the future to happen is not an option. He believes the community must move forward, which requires a break with the status quo and inertia of the past. If nothing changes and the future remains centred around fishing, Ib imagines that Suðuroy will lose even more of its pace and its future will vanish – the island will not "survive" and the "war" will be lost. This crossroads metaphor signifies the presence of different social representations, which creates conflicting ideas of what life and the future should be like – their horizons of possibility differ (Glăveanu, 2018; Zittoun et al., 2019).

I will now try to spell out, in brief, each of the two major representations as I have come to understand them. The first social representation is best illustrated by a story. Following a walk in the mountains with a friend, I was invited into a house to have a cup of coffee. There, I met a kind and hospitable Faroese woman in her late 50s to early 60s, who had lived on Suðuroy since she was young – her husband is from the island. When we talked about the changes taking place on the island, she explained:

> […] that her husband is a bit melancholic about the development because he feels the place is dying. He grew up here and has witnessed the massive emigration. He thought that the new Varðin [fish-processing] plant would change that but it hasn't had the desired effect. (edited field notes)

Her husband, who is about her age, I would guess, has witnessed substantial emigration and expresses grievances about it. I suggest that this brief story reveals that her husband uses

the past as a model for the future (de Saint-Laurent and Obradović, 2019; Obradović, 2018). This model manifests itself in the practice of investing in fishing-related industries to ensure the continuity of what has been the organising principle of economic and social life for over a century. Infrastructure, such as a new processing plant, promises a certain future (Appel et al., 2019; Larkin, 2013), although there is a slight disenchantment noticeable insofar as the promise has to some extent failed to be kept. This temporal orientation towards the past might stem from the nature of fishing itself. Fluctuations are intrinsic to the industry, because of its high degree of susceptibility to geo-political events, fish stocks, global markets and other factors. While there have been crises in the past, the industry always overcame them. The same applies in the present. Such temporal circularity and hope in the future triggered the construction of the fish-processing plant and heralded it as the solution to demographic and socio-economic challenges. The intermeshing of past and present (and future) also extends to other areas and, as Wylie observes in another small Faroese village, "the past helps to define the present and charter the future" (1982, p. 457). Skills (e.g. sailing, sheep-herding) and values (e.g. egalitarianism) once important for survival are similarly also projected into the future.

By contrast, those individuals who enact and orient themselves around the second social representation imagine the future of Suðuroy quite differently. Halfdan, a man in his 20s planning to emigrate in the near future, embodies those who no longer find life as an angler compelling and seeks an opening of possible futures that cannot be realised on the island:

> You want education, so that you can get a better job – something that you really love doing. I refuse to believe that anyone loves to work in a fish factory their whole life. (Halfdan)

Halfdan and other members of the younger generation imagine taking a sharp turn at the crossroads in order to latch onto the acceleration of Faroese society and shift away from relying on what was and what is to determine what could be. For him, resolving the current predicament on Suðuroy requires a future that supports new ways of life, including diversification of educational and professional opportunities, and an expansion of what is sometimes depicted as a restrictive and fatalistic imaginative horizon (Crapanzano, 2004; Kristiansen, 2005; Zittoun, Hawlina, et al., 2020). This vision not only orients people towards a different future than the first social representation presented above but, I propose, is also directly addressed to it.

An alternative representation

I will now present a general interpretation of how the people who orient themselves according to the second representation construct the first one – i.e. the alternative representation and its future. The alternative representation is often said to be enacted and personified by an older and more conservative part of the population. These indviduals are portrayed as being less mobile, espousing a parochial outlook (Stacul, 2003) and acting as advocates of the fishery. This outlook extends to cover what food people ought to eat, what sports they should play, what professions are desirable (and for which gender) and more.

I invited Karin, a "returnee", to imagine an alternative version of herself, one who did not have to move away – a shadow of a bygone future:

> I actually do not think that I would be a good version of myself, considering how I was before I moved. I just think that one quickly gets caught in certain streams here, which are not as positive, and one does not reflect about why one has this opinion about this person: “I just have it.” It is as if people here do not stop and think about “why am I speaking and behaving this way?” (Karin)

Here, Karin associates her geographical mobility with an expansion of her capacity to imagine life and the future differently (cf. Pedersen and Zittoun, Submitted; Zittoun, 2020). This situation stands in stark contrast to the imagined scenario where she stayed put on the island and as a result of which she would have remained trapped in certain “streams” without reflecting on them. Imagining how things might have been otherwise constitutes a central part of the alternative representation. Those who enact the second social representation have often lived elsewhere for a time and, as a consequence, tend to cast the (presumed) immobile others as belonging to a community of fate (Kristiansen, 2005) and exhibiting a more impoverished imagination.

The construction of the alternative representation and its future is described as having roots in history. For centuries, geographical mobility was quite limited, living conditions were harsh and villages were, to a large extent, self-sustaining entities, factors which all nourished parochialism. Such an outlook is seen in contrast to contemporary practices, where people travel more and have access to the world digitally. The acceleration and expansion of the imaginative horizon through physical and digital infrastructures is making previously unimaginable ways of life imaginable and opening futures up to contestation (Appadurai, 1996). This is not, however, occurring in an equal manner (Crapanzano, 2007; Ellis, 2018). The way in which the second social representation constructs the first one echoes what Fabian (1983) calls temporal othering. Whereas the first social representation had been dominant from the fishing revolution onwards, the second one has slowly become dominant and institutionalised, meaning that its voice is now louder. The alternative representation also incorporates a meta-perspective (Gillespie, 2006), as Karin puts it: “I think, some [people who enact the first social representation] think, that people are a bit crazy if someone thinks this way outside the box”. In other words, those who propagate the first social representation are also perceived to be actively contributing to maintaining the dialogical impasse, by maintaining that people, like Karin, who imagine a radically new future are crazy.

This construction of the first social representation by the second one leads the latter to dismiss the future that the former is assumed to be striving for:

> If you have been supporting Manchester United all your life and Manchester United get relegated to the second-best division, it’s really sad. It’s the same thing that’s happened to us: this was a proud fishing society, and we aren’t a fishing society anymore, so the mindset has really, really been challenged. (Ib)

Ib compares the break with a circular future to relegation in soccer. The first social representation is constructed almost as if it involved being trapped in a bygone past and resisting the inevitability of “progress”. He does not believe that the past can be a viable model for the future, and, in fact, explains a shift in temporal orientation as something that “happened to us”. This shift therefore acquires the quality of being an unavoidable acceleration, outside his or anyone’s control. The big wheels of progress – which have been

criticised by scholars (cf. Ferguson, 1999) – are set in motion and appear to be incompatible with a way of life and a future that build upon the past. The alternative representation can be described as a strawman using tropes of traditionalism, temporal othering and inevitability.

The creation of this alternative representation and its future impedes transformative dialogue, because it is assumed to be incompatible with the direction sought by Ib, Karin and others. The alternative representation is construed in opposition to survival and the "natural" development of society, and presented as being trapped in a fatalistic, yet hopeful temporal loop. I suggest that such constructions of an alternative representation must contain a temporal dimension and, in this case, impede transformative dialogue between the social representations. The adressivity enabled by the alternative representation is tainted and not perceived to offer a viable future. At this stage, it is worth mentioning that changing power relations within the wider Faroese society is likely also giving the second representation a louder voice – one closer to an imaginative vision *for others* rather than *with others* (Glăveanu, 2018a).

Life Trajectories and Unique Constructions of an Alternative Representation

How, then, do people navigate, use and appropriate social and alternative representations? In this section, I will show how people filter these representations through their past experiences and imaginings, as exemplified in the stories of Ingolf and Karin. I have selected them, because they both returned to the island after living abroad for a time, they both orient themselves according to the same social representation and they both imagine a future that is incompatible with the alternative representation.

We will stay if the demographics change – Ingolf's story

Ingolf was born and raised on the island, but lived abroad for several years. Ingolf worked for a couple of years at the local fish-processing plant after finishing high school. The Great Recession then led to an increase in unemployment, which triggered a vision of a different path and eventually of geographical mobility. Moving back to the Faroes was always a part of Ingolf's imagined future but, as for most people, Tórshavn was the first choice. As luck would have it, Ingolf explains, he found an opportunity that led him back to his roots on Suðuroy.

Ingolf's imagination of a future, where the past models the future, is rather bleak. He imagines that the skewed demographic and socio-economic situation will worsen, perhaps even passing a threshold where living on Suðuroy becomes practically impossible – where the future disappears (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Bryant, 2016). The materialisation of this dreaded future is the likely outcome should the first social representation end up dictating what path is to be taken at the crossroads. Investment in fishing and hopes that things will be better – on the grounds that they always have improved in the past – do not solve the structural changes that Ingolf deems essential for diversifying and expanding the realm of possibilities on Suðuroy:

> If we can change the demographics […] then we can see ourselves working here. If not, then people will move away and unemployment will rise again and other professions won't have a foundation to work here, so, as you say, there's a cascading effect and the cascading effect will

> only grow larger in other strata of society. It could get really, really bad, which could force people [...] say, "yeah, I see a better life for myself somewhere else", and then they move closer to the mainland (Ingolf)

Ingolf imagines that structural changes are the key to avoiding this bleak future and tackling the island's current challenges. As mentioned, young people move away for a variety of reasons – whether claustrophobic social control or limited opportunities – but the population on Suðuroy has stagnated in the last few years. Nonetheless, for Ingolf, this does not change the fact there are too few options outside fishing and related industries. He does not believe the jobs on available on Suðuroy appeal to people with broader interests or skills and therefore unemployment might once again be a threat in the near future. He bases this conclusion on his own experiences of leaving after the 2008 crisis, having witnessed most of his friends move away with little intention of returning and the difficulties of finding a job on Suðuroy that matched his interests. These experiences inform his unique enactment of the social and alternative representation. Should the "wrong" path be chosen at the crossroads, Ingolf would no longer be able to imagine a life on the island and would possibly opt to become geographically mobile once more.

Ingolf's vision of the future centres around opening up new material possibilities – an issue that he experienced firsthand, which prevented him from staying and made returning difficult. This future directly addresses – and is incompatible with – the future of the alternative representation, because the latter is assumed to rely on the past to find a solution and hence fails to produce the structural changes Ingolf desires. Ingolf's own experiences determined what form the social representation and its future took and, by extension, how the alternative was constructed and dismissed.

We will stay if I feel inspired – Karin's story

Karin was born and mainly brought up on Suðuroy. Upon finishing high school, she decided, like many of her friends at the time, to move abroad to study. Here she had a transformative experience while writing an assignment for university. During a feedback session, Karin was told that her reflections were insufficient and, as a person who had always done well in school, this stayed with her. After discovering what "reflections" entailed, they became her favourite form of writing. Years later, Karin started to consider moving back to the island, recognising that the marketing campaigns had influenced the decision. When she moved away, Karin had never imagined returning, but, as with Ingolf, she happened to find an opportunity on Suðuroy.

Karin's vision of the island's future is rather optimistic. The perceived material and social shortcomings do not lead Karin to imagine a bleak future, but rather they prompt her to imagine how things might be otherwise. The very idea of being able to influence the future provides her with a feeling of inspiration and a desire to stay. While she acknowledges that the island did not remain at a complete standstill during her absence, Karin still finds that the "streams" trapping people in prescribed paths too restrictive. Her excitement for and desire to create a new future hinders transformative dialogue between the two representations, because she, too, enacts an alternative representation grounded in images of unwillingness to change and interest in what was, rather than in what could be:

> For me, it has always been important to live in a place where I feel inspired, and right now I feel very inspired here, because I think there is a lot one can make and do – some things here can really be changed […]. It just that they are way behind here (Karin)

The future Karin imagines is addressed to and contingent on – yet still incompatible with – how the opposing social representation is constructed as the alternative representation. This is reflected in the statement "they are way behind here", which creates temporal distance and an evaluation of limited "progress". Karin's imagined future builds on a desire for a new reality – taking an unexplored turn at the crossroads – and if the other social representation gets to decide, the path leads to the past. However, despite being optimistic about the future, she still expresses some concerns:

> […] but I can be a bit worried for my [children]. For example, my oldest, [he/she] is very much in touch with [his/her] emotions and is, perhaps, a little sensitive […] [he/she] loves to dance and sing. How is [he/she] going to fit in here? (Karin)

Here Karin relies on her own experiences of growing up on Suðuroy to imagine what might happen in the future – what might happen if her children do not fit into the prescribed "streams", that is, a future in which the first social representation has determined the path. She is worried that if her children want to sing and dance, they might not find an outlet. As a teenager, Karin recalls having difficulties finding a platform and recognition for her alternative hobbies. For instance, sports consisted almost entirely of swimming, football and handball – beyond those, she found little recognition. These experiences influenced Karin to emphasise the more symbolic aspect of the social representation and its future, which also manifests in the alternative representation. However, even if the first social representation comes to dictate the path chosen at the crossroads and even if her children will potentially encounter the same issues she faced when growing up, this is not a sufficient reason for her to become geographically mobile. As she sees it, parenting can mediate these future limitations. When, as a teenager, Karin pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable, she was always encouraged by her mother.

Taken together, I suggest that Ingolf's and Karin's stories indicate that the social representations orienting their imagined futures have constructed the alternative representation in such a way as to make it incompatible with and to impede transformative dialogue between the two major social representations. Through alternative representation, images of people "stuck in time", who use a model of the past to imagine the future in a way that runs counter to narratives of "progress", stand in contrast to their desires to break with the past to open the future. Furthermore, these two cases also emphasise that the enactment of social and alternative representations are filtered through unique life experiences.

Discussion

In this paper, I have proposed to further explore semantic contact between two (or more) social representations, by considering the imagined futures they point to – i.e. their projects. The Suðuroy islanders seem locked in a dialogical impasse, unable to agree on which path at the crossroads has the power to avoid an unviable future characterised by demographic and socio-economic challenges. By analysing the alternative representation within the now-

dominant, institutionally legitimised social representation, I showed that it was constructed around tropes of temporal othering and using the past as a model for the future. This results in the creation of incompatible futures and thus impedes transformative dialogue between the two social representations. For the second social representation, continuing along the same path as before (which is assumed to be the future of the other social representation) is imagined to spell demise and is therefore rejected. This is to be understood in the context of uneven levels of growth in Faroese society or speed differentials, where Suðuroy is not moving as quickly as some desire and, as a consequence, is seen to have a shrinking future (Ringel, 2018) or a future that is in the past (Ferguson, 1999). This leaves open the question of who has the power, or at least the loudest voice, at the crossroads, since taking one path inevitable closes off the other. The ongoing social transformation of the Faroe Islands suggest that the power to determine the path into the future is shifting towards those who desire a break with the past.

Thinking about social representation theory in light of imagined futures may provide an entry point, enabling the exploration of the dialogue and adressivity between social representations, in a manner that follows a broader scholarly approach towards asking what the future does in the present (Pels, 2015) and for whom. Studies on social representations tend to focus on the role of the past or the present, but rarely provide an explicit account of why transformative dialogue might facilitate or be impeded by what lies beyond the threshold of the present – i.e. how collectives and individuals imagine the future and in relation to what. The "what" here reflects both the internal construction of competing social representations and the wider context in which dialogue unfolds. This can also bring research closer to considering the power relations that influence which social representation becomes dominant, as well as setting the course for what can and should be imagined. In addition, I also propose that a sociocultural psychological approach to imagination can help future studies unravel how social and alternative representations are used and enacted by individuals according to their unique experiences, thus transcending the homogenising force of using social representation theory. Analytically, the concept sometimes becomes synonymous with a group defined a priori and might risk clustering people together without capturing individual differences and nuances.

This approach is naturally not an attempt to discredit or downplay the importance of the past or the present, but rather a call for more studies on social representations that explicitly take into account imagined futures, the compatibilities between social representations and the question of to whom or what they are addressed.

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