

12 Social representations and economic psychology

Erich Kirchler and Erik Hoelzl

Economic psychology

Like psychology, economics is interested in human action. In his essay on economics, Robbins (1932) defined economics as a discipline that studies human action against the backdrop of finite and limited resources. Using the metaphor of the 'homo oeconomicus', economics study actions undertaken to satisfy human needs in the face of scarce resources. It is assumed that individuals and groups decide rationally and always seek to maximize utility for themselves. Economic psychology investigates the extent to which individual behaviour and group behaviour correspond to economic assumptions and concludes that human action, thought and feeling often contradict economic assumptions. Lay theories about economic interrelationships also often deviate from the postulates of economics yet they are the basis of actual human behaviour in economic contexts.

According to Kirchler (2003), the research priorities of economic psychology include the following topics: (a) rationality and utility maximization as the presumed basis for human behaviour and the psychological criticism thereof; (b) lay theories on economic phenomena; (c) decisions in private households; (d) marketing decisions by companies; (e) employment and unemployment; (f) entrepreneurship; (g) economic development and welfare; (h) psychology of money and (i) taxes; and (j) economies operating parallel to the regular economy, e.g. housework and shadow economy. Social representations theory is particularly useful as a concept in studying lay theories, i.e. the views of economic phenomena held by children, by adolescents and by adults without any special training in economics. The social-psychological branch of social representations research also provides valuable techniques for studying these issues.

The development of lay theories as well as collective knowledge about economic phenomena can be studied effectively by examining social representations related to them. Social representations are defined as ideas, thoughts, images, and knowledge about a 'social object' (Moscovici 1984). They constitute the commonly held knowledge of members of a collective or social category that allows mutual communication and behaviour. Social representations integrate individual experiences, while at the same time presenting social norms, values, and knowledge of the collective involved. If people lack information and

experience about a new social object, the concepts they generate and the attitudes they adopt are influenced by social knowledge – communicated mainly by the mass media and through discussions with other people.

Social representations are generated and shaped by social discourse and are therefore in a constant state of flux. According to Moscovici (1984: 13) ‘... they lead a life of their own, circulate, merge, attract and repel each other, and give birth to new representations, while old ones die out...’. According to Abric (1993), the structure of social representations consists of central and peripheral elements. Central elements can be understood as a central core that expresses the general meaning of a social representation. The central core or nucleus (e.g. de Rosa 1995) is rather stable and is shared by most members of a collective. Central elements are surrounded by peripheral elements specific to parts of the collective or even individuals. Peripheral elements are more context-dependent and less stable than central elements, and are therefore more subject to change when new information is processed. Since economic psychology often studies attitudes rather than social representations and does not make sharp distinctions between the two, it should be emphasized here that attitudes and social representations are seen as interrelated because of overlapping contents and evaluations (Moliner and Tafani 1997). Social representations encompass social and culture-based knowledge concerning a social object and are generated by social discourse and shared by the members of a social category whereas attitudes are individual evaluations (Allport 1935) of a social object based on social representations.

In the following, two studies are presented that demonstrate the usefulness of social representations theory in economic psychology. The first study on unemployment demonstrates that self-evaluations of unemployed people are problematic with regard to identification with their own social category. This, in turn, might explain why it is so hard for the unemployed to form groups to pursue their own interests within society. The second study on taxes demonstrates that citizens’ representations about tax paying are rather negative and tax evasion is not perceived as a major offence. These results help to explain why the incidence of tax evasion is high in many countries and is still socially accepted.

Social representations about unemployment

A large part of studies on lay theories focuses on the presumed causes of unemployment. Kirchler (1993) asked 179 Austrians to indicate what they felt to be the main reasons for unemployment. A large percentage of the reasons produced (altogether 37.3 per cent) referred to personal traits of the unemployed: 18.9 per cent of the causes related to a lack of motivation to work, lack of interest, complacency, lack of endurance and lack of willingness to work, attitudes that hindered employability, dissatisfaction, alcoholism, illness and high age. Lack of mobility, narrow preferences with regard to acceptable jobs and a lack of flexibility accounted for 6.3 per cent of the causes mentioned, whereas the lack of willingness to undergo retraining for another occupation for 9.5 per cent.

Inadequate professional training was mentioned in 2.6 per cent of the causes. Common to all these factors is the notion that personal (internal) causes are seen as responsible for unemployment. It follows that the unemployed themselves are perceived as being personally to blame for their situation.

External causes were indicated to a lesser extent and accounted for 26.8 per cent of the causes mentioned. Here, company management and restructuring were cited as possible causes for unemployment. Another 23 per cent of the factors named related to the economic situation and politics (loss of purchasing power, decline in demand, inflation, cyclical problems in the economy and economic crises, poor fiscal policies, excessively long work hours, reckless policies regarding specific groups, particularly foreign workers). The remaining reasons were related to the demotivating effect of excessively high unemployment benefits and to the possibilities available to earn money through illegal work.

Interviews with expert staff at offices of the Austrian Labour Market Administration yielded similar results (Kirchler 1993). These advisers are responsible for helping the unemployed to find jobs. Their daily experiences in coming to terms with the concerns of these job seekers solidify into a wealth of facts, judgements and opinions that reflect both the collective suspicions about the unemployed and the empathy society has with them. Sixty-six per cent of reasons for unemployment mentioned by these advisers had to do with intrapersonal problems (mental or cognitive disabilities, age, physical handicaps, motivational problems, etc.); 10 to 13 per cent of the reasons related to problems of social integration, internal company problems or the general economic situation, respectively. It is not surprising that employment office staff indicated primarily personal causes, for they are confronted daily with the unemployed and do not concern themselves with the overall economic situation. However, it is disquieting that these attitudes reinforce the belief that the jobless are personally to blame for their plight.

The unemployed are a source of discomfort. Their fate calls for empathy and assistance from society, yet many question whether their situation is the fault of individual failings or collective factors. If joblessness is blamed on the unemployed themselves rather than on a slumping economy, it is easier for people to dissociate themselves from the ‘fate of unemployment’. In other words, when the problem is individualized on the basis of objective, logical arguments, it is easier to justify a lack of assistance being given to the unemployed. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), it can be assumed that the sense of belonging to a particular group or social category is an important component of an individual’s identity and that belonging to a group with high social status can enhance self-esteem. ‘Individuals can fulfil their esteem needs by increasing the status of groups over out-groups to boost, by association or “reflected glory”, their own personal status and self-esteem’ (Shah *et al.* 1998: 383). Positive social identity thus arises when individuals identify with their own group and when their group fares well in a comparison of relevant criteria with other subjectively important groups. What this means in the study on the unemployed is that if entrepreneurs, blue-collar workers, students, etc. have a positive social identity, they can be expected to give

a positive characterization in describing typical representatives of their respective social category. One would also expect the unemployed to describe a typical jobless person more positively than, e.g. an entrepreneur or a member of one of the other groups would.

Kirchler (1993) studied social representations of unemployed people among seven occupational groups (social categories): entrepreneurs, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, civil servants, students, housewives and the unemployed themselves. Each group was asked to describe typical representatives of its own category and of each of the other social categories by writing down everything that spontaneously came to mind. Afterwards, these free associations were categorized by independent judges according to whether they were positive, neutral or negative. The results demonstrate what appear to be alarming differences between how the unemployed evaluate themselves and how the other groups evaluate them: typical unemployed persons received negative evaluations from all groups, including the unemployed themselves. Figure 12.1 presents a summary of the average evaluations about the typical representatives of the seven social categories.

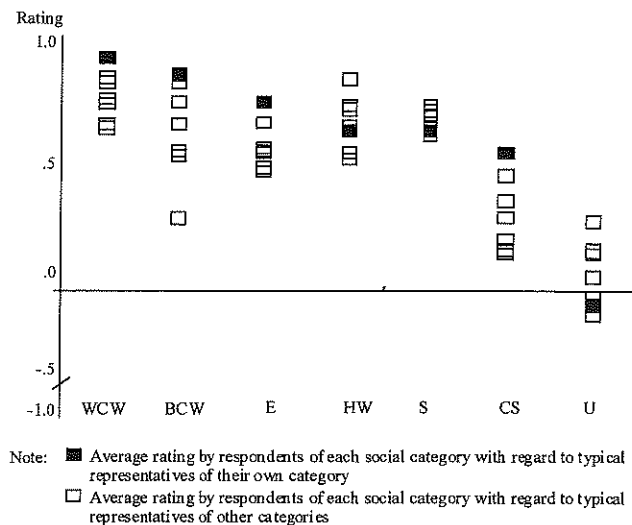


Figure 12.1 Respondents' average rating of a typical representative of seven social categories (adapted from Kirchler 1993: 105)

Whereas blue and white-collar workers, entrepreneurs and civil servants gave the typical representatives of their own category the top score, and housewives and students as well rated a typical representative of their own category positively, the unemployed rated a typical member of their own group very negatively. These results suggest that the unemployed do not identify with their own plight and that of their fellow unemployed. On the contrary, they make a distinction

between themselves and the rest of the members of their group. They blame their own unemployment on outside factors while charging that the others in their group are personally responsible for being jobless due to unreasonable demands, insufficient willingness to compromise, and unwillingness to work. The unemployed further believe that typical members of their own group are too demanding and too preoccupied with maximizing their own advantage to accept a new job being offered to them. They rate their own group or social category more poorly in the comparison processes, indicating that their social identity is negative.

In cases of negative social identity, people can seek to change their situation through personal mobility or by altering their social standing. Among the possibilities for change, Brown (1988) listed the following: (a) leave the group; (b) limit comparisons to groups with a lower status; (c) change the significance of the dimensions being compared; (d) fight directly against the dominant group. The non-identification by unemployed individuals with their own category is an attempt on their part to protect their self-esteem and is thus a major aspect of their social identity. On the individual level, non-identification creates possibilities for a jobless person to escape the 'danger' of belonging to the stigmatized class of the unemployed by showing friends and acquaintances what a clear distinction he or she makes between the unemployed and the working population, even though he or she actually belongs to the former. On the societal level, non-identification prevents the unemployed from forming political associations to represent their interests and contributes to a situation in which a few individuals may successfully fend for themselves while the others turn into resigned victims. This weakens the socio-political influence of the unemployed and instead of acting politically to improve their situation, they run the risk of becoming a tool of political machinations.

Social representations about taxes

Lay theories about economic systems are relevant because they guide behaviour; in the case of the tax system, they guide tax compliance or tax evasion (Kirchler 2007). Two main psychological approaches can be applied to explain why social representations about taxes may differ between subgroups in society: reactance theory and exchange theory.

Paying taxes is often accompanied by feelings of loss of individual freedom. People respond to a real or perceived loss of freedom with reactance and with attempts to re-establish the control they feel they have lost (Brehm 1966). Reactance and non-compliance are assumed more likely if people cash their gross income and pay taxes out of their own pocket. Entrepreneurs and the self-employed, who want to re-invest their profit and have to cope with an uncertain future, may perceive taxes both as a loss of personal freedom to decide about their finances and – according to prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Schepanski and Shearer 1995) – as a loss of a considerable amount of money already in their possession. Employees, on the other hand, cash their monthly

net income and are only informed about their gross salary but never receive it. They may be less aware of their tax payments and may consider taxes less of a concrete loss of their own money. According to prospect theory, the self-employed and entrepreneurs are therefore more likely to try to recoup their losses: they may run the risk of tax evasion and develop anti-tax sentiments. Anti-tax sentiments may be both the consequence of a perceived loss of money and a means to justify non-compliance. In fact, Dumais *et al.* (1991) reported that non-compliance by small businesses is responsible for a huge proportion of the US-income tax gap; and Kirchler (1998a) found that entrepreneurs in business for only a short time are especially likely to oppose taxes.

Tax payments to the state and access to public benefits can be viewed as an exchange relationship between the citizen and the government. Research on attitudes towards taxes, tax avoidance and tax evasion shows the importance of perceived vertical fairness of citizen-government exchanges as determinants of tax morality. Perceived imbalance leads to anti-tax sentiments and non-compliant behaviour (Cowell 1992; Elffers *et al.* 1987; Falkinger 1988; Kirchler 1997; Lewis 1979). Since progressive taxation is a means of attaining a more egalitarian distribution of income, wealthier people may perceive their contributions and benefits to be out of balance whereas the poorer are likely either to perceive exchange as being in their favour or in balance. Thus, attitudes towards taxes should vary across employment and income groups.

Kirchler (1998b) studied social representations of taxes and attitudes towards tax compliance among blue and white-collar workers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and students. It was hypothesized that the five groups would have different representations of taxes and that these differences would be explainable in terms of reactance theory and exchange theories. Participants completed a questionnaire consisting of two parts. In the first part, respondents were asked to think about taxes and to list all thoughts on the subject that came to their mind. Respondents then evaluated the resulting free associations as positive, neutral, or negative, and recorded the order of their production. The technique was similar to de Rosa's (1995) 'associative network technique'. The second part of the questionnaire aimed at measuring attitudes towards tax compliance. Participants were presented with Peabody's (1985) semantic differential, consisting of thirty-two adjective pairs, and asked to judge 'typical tax payers', 'honest tax payers', and 'tax evaders'.

The associative task evoked 1,003 associations; 547 were different words. First, the different associations were categorized by two independent judges who were asked to establish as many homogeneous categories as necessary. Finally, twenty-five categories resulted with inter-judges agreements of 92 per cent. Frequencies of twenty categories varied significantly across employment groups. Only these were used further in a correspondence analysis that yielded three dimensions explaining 38, 30, and 17 per cent of variance, respectively (Figure 12.2). The first dimension distinguished between blue collar workers and the other employment groups. The second dimension divided students and entrepreneurs from white-collar workers and civil servants, and the third dimension grouped together

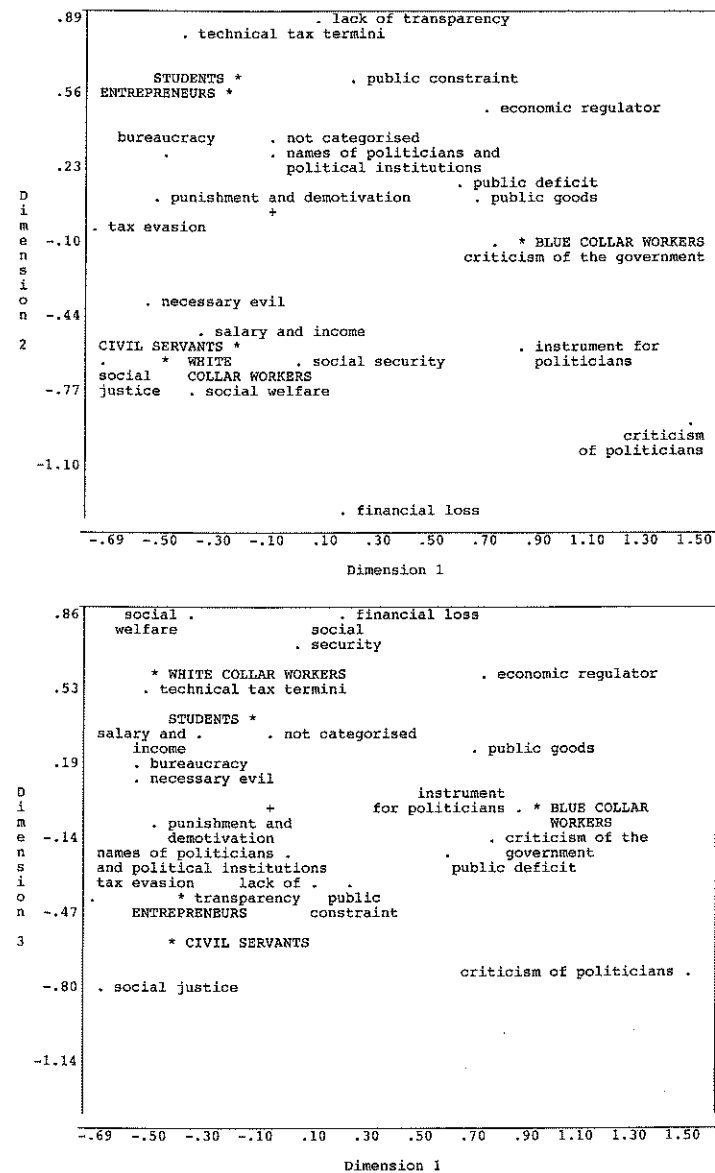


Figure 12.2 Correspondence analysis of twenty categories of associations by five employment groups (adapted from Kirchler 1998: 124-5)

entrepreneurs and civil servants on the one hand, and white collar workers and students on the other. Results show that entrepreneurs think of punishment and de-motivation, public constraint, a lack of transparency in tax law and in the public use of taxes, and complex bureaucratic rules. Entrepreneurs perceive taxes as a form of pressure and as a hindrance to their work. Moreover, they charge that bureaucratic laws and rules are too complex and that fiscal policy is unclear. Blue collar workers were the most frequent critics of government and politicians in general whom they saw as using taxes strategically to reach their own selfish goals, and as being responsible for the huge public deficit. This group, however, is also aware of public goods that are provided through public investments of money. White-collar workers mention social security and social welfare, which are safeguarded by taxes. They also perceive taxes as a necessary evil that is associated with income and signifies a financial loss. Civil servants indicate the usefulness of taxes to re-distribute wealth and attain greater social justice; taxes therefore also have a negative connotation because non-cooperative individuals try to avoid and evade taxes and thus profit in two ways, namely, their individual gain through withholding and their access to public goods. Finally, students, the only group not paying taxes, list theories and technical concepts, mention names of politicians, and sometimes the names of famous fictional or comic characters, such as Donald Duck, or nonsense terms.

The results fit well with reactance theory and exchange theories: entrepreneurs seem to perceive taxes as a loss of freedom when they describe taxes as a way of punishing them for working, or as force and constraint. Blue collar workers, white-collar workers, and civil servants may have in mind exchange relationships when mentioning public goods, welfare, social security, and justice. Students, the group not affected directly by tax payments, gave the most answers associated with theories of public finance.

The ratings of 'typical tax payers', 'honest tax payers' and 'tax evaders' in the semantic differential were analysed separately into descriptive and evaluative aspects, according to Peabody's (1985) theory. Multivariate analyses revealed that the three groups are evaluated and described in different terms. The most striking result was the rather positive description and evaluation of tax evaders. Whereas typical taxpayers were rated most negatively and honest taxpayers most positively, tax evaders were evaluated rather positively. Tax evaders were described as highly intelligent and rather hard working, whereas typical taxpayers were perceived as being lazy and rather stupid. Honest taxpayers were hard working but not as intelligent as tax evaders were. Tax evasion, it seems, was not perceived as a serious offence: people able to deceive the government and thereby to betray the whole community are perceived as clever and their non-compliance does not translate into a negative evaluation (Kirchler, 1998b).

As far as tax evasion is concerned, the study on social representations of taxes demonstrated that non-compliance was not perceived as a crime but only as a minor offence. Tax evasion is a 'clever game against a strong faceless foe' that is won by the clever and the intelligent. All employment groups had equally strong negative attitudes towards taxes and were equally lenient regarding tax

evasion; however, the contents of their social representations are considerably different.

Conclusion

Social representations are a useful theoretical framework for economic psychology. On the one hand, they help to examine lay theories of complex economic phenomena. Contrasting such lay theories with expert theories from economics can contribute to a better understanding of differences between normative predictions and actual behaviour of people. On the other hand, the focus of social representations theory on shared meanings and collective understanding highlights the importance of thinking about economic phenomena not only from an individual perspective, but also from the perspective of social groups within the society. As illustrated by the examples of unemployment and taxes, social representations help to understand complex economic phenomena, by showing that people think differently and in a more socially embedded way than assumed in the metaphor of 'homo oeconomicus'.

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13 Social representations of the economy

Pierre Vergès and Raymond Ryba

Introduction

Economic science uses a set of concepts, notions and explanatory constructions. Its principles became normative, e.g. the balance of supply and demand, the rationality of the behaviours, the necessary counterparts of money supply. Economic knowledge allows the existence of an economic language. This one is used, or at least heard, by all. It is transformed in social representations of the economy, which we will call economic representations. These last are thus partly the fruit of a diffusion of this language by the set of the tools of the knowledge's mediation and by the set of speeches where it organizes the behaviours. While being diffused, it undergoes a certain number of transformations related to a double constraint, that of the interpretation of decisions (or behaviours) partially economic, and that of popularization, that is a loss of specificity. This economic language, used in everyday life, does not indicate the same referents: the words do not refer exactly to the same thing, in particular when the ordinary meaning of the term differs from the scientific definition. The working population, for example includes the unemployed because they are looking for a job and do not include the housewives; however, *vox populi* said that the first are idle and second quite occupied. The economic reasoning of the social representations calls upon causes or consequences that are not economic or reinforces a social argumentation by giving him the attributes of the scientific authority of the economy (Vergès *et al.* 1995).

All these transformations can be seen like deformations. They are in fact only the fruit of the necessary insertion of the economic reasoning in the set of modes of explanation of the social phenomena. This insertion is necessary if economic knowledge wants to acquire a real effectiveness. In this process of diffusion, the economic language acquires an operational value and a symbolic value; its principles become prescribers and symbols of scientific rationality. However, by doing this it takes place in the concert of the languages of the society. There, it becomes, as well as others, a means of explaining reality and of envisaging its evolution. Not completely on the same basis, because one must currently note its pre-eminence. The propagation of the economic language is made to the detriment of languages that previously constituted the principal links of the collective thought (moral, political, religious).

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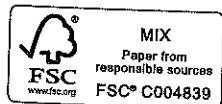
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