CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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Self-Other positioning: Insights into children's understanding of risks in new media.

Lorleen Farrugia

Abstract

This work uses Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1961) to identify how pre-adolescent children understand and represent online risk. Adults often mediate children's online experiences, but their understanding of risk in the context of new media might differ from what really worries children online. This points to the importance of acknowledging the child's world view when making sense of risky situations online. Data were collected using six focus groups with Maltese children (n=49) aged 9 to 12. Participants were asked to talk about what children should be careful about when they go online and why. One of the themes identified through thematic analysis of the data was that children position themselves and others differently in relation to content, contact and conduct risks online. Since one way of analysing social representations is through dyadic oppositions in language and thought (Marková, 2015), the Self-Other is used as an epistemological thema via which to analyse the children's representations of risk. The analysis shows evidence of cognitive biases and distortions in the way children situate themselves and the way they situate others. The perception of self-invulnerability could place children at the risk of miscalculating the dangers they come across in the online environment. Shedding light on these distortions helps identify which digital literacy skills children need to learn so that practices and policies can target their needs specifically.

Keywords: Self, Other, online, risk, pre-adolescents

1. Introduction

Children develop in a 'media-rich' environment (Chaudron, 2015) where mobile, Internet and face-to-face communication are seamlessly integrated, and their digital footprint starts taking shape at a very young age. Aside from providing children with several opportunities, such as access to information and possibilities for self-exploration, new media can present them with content, contact and conduct risks (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). The pre-adolescent years between 9 to 12 have the potential of being both formative and detrimental to the development of digital citizens, and there is less research on this age group in comparison to adolescents. Their prolific use of new media does not automatically result in digital skills and cognitive capabilities to understand and assess risky situations online. This chapter presents a section of the author's doctoral research. It adopts a child-centred perspective to understand how pre-adolescent children represent online risk using Social Representations Theory as a framework.

1.1 New media and risks

New media can be defined as "technologies that people use to connect with one another" (James, 2009: 6), with particular emphasis on the interactive, dialogical and participatory activities possible through devices that can access the Internet. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2012) found that the most popular activities with children between 9 and 12 years were content-based activities, such as schoolwork, playing games and video clips. Participatory activities, such as content creation, were those least engaged in. Findings show that for this age group, there are few gender differences in online activities, except in the case of boys playing more games with others in comparison to girls. Children below the age of 13 also use social networking sites as they lie about their age to be able to gain access to these sites (Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz & Palfrey, 2011).

While some risk-taking could be considered as contributing towards development and resilience for adolescents, it might not be so for younger children (Buckingham et al., 2007). When younger children encounter online risk, they are more distressed in comparison to older children (Straksrud & Livingstone, 2009) and they are less aware of online safety strategies (Cranmer, Selwyn & Potter, 2009). This implies that the chances that younger children will be harmed by online risks may be higher. For instance, girls aged 9 to 12 were those bothered most by encountering sexual material online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Such material is often stumbled upon while doing other activities online and children did not always feel

comfortable discussing this with an adult for fear of the consequences it could have (Smahel & Wright, 2014). In comparison to such content risks, contact risks such as cyberbullying and harassment are less commonly experienced by pre-adolescents, but they have an increased likelihood of exposing children to harmful situations (Livingstone et al., 2011) and children have negative associations with this kind of risk (Smahel & Wright, 2014).

Children acquire social representations as part of their developmental processes (Duveen, 1996), through their interactions and systems associated with representations (Ivinson & Duveen, 2005). Representations of these online risks develop through their own and peers' experiences, mediation by parents and educators, their social context and the media, amongst others. Understanding pre-adolescents' representations, their sense-making and emotions related to risk, enables researchers and policymakers to create targeted interventions to address their digital literacy needs.

2. Theoretical framework: Social Representations

The theory of Social Representations was put forward by Moscovici in 1961 and since then has become an important theoretical framework in Social Psychology. Social representation is the process of shifting the unfamiliar to the familiar through the use of metaphors and codes. Representations are a form of 'common sense' used to assign meaning and to relate to the environment (Sammut, Andreouli, Gaskell, & Valsiner, 2015). These dynamic thinking systems are agreed upon and generated through social interaction and communication, and in return they facilitate communication. Wagner et al. (1999: 103) explain that "childhood offers a particular arena for the study of social representations, since those very things which are most familiar and taken for granted in the adult world are themselves the focus of children's cognitive reconstructions".

Moscovici (1984) discusses two operational processes that transform what is unfamiliar into the familiar: anchoring and objectification. Through Anchoring, what is new is classified and named through comparisons with what is already known about other 'old' things or prototypes and "incorporating the new or strange into existing representations" (Krause, 2002: 607). If the characteristics match, the features and characteristics of the prototype are generalised and, in the process, what is old is also changed. Naming something to recognise and comprehend it also implies a process of evaluating it. Through Objectification, what is new is transformed into concrete and objective common-sense reality and thus loses its

newness and abstract qualities, by becoming formed in everyday reality and common sense. The notion of 'common sense' as containing the reality of everyday life can also be found in Berger and Luckmann (1966), where common-sense knowledge is considered crucial to discussing the social context within which thoughts and meanings develop. Complex information is usually simplified through the process of objectification, and knowledge becomes part of the representation by being linked to a specific person or group, through metaphors or by giving physical properties to the construct. According to Krause (2002: 607), this social knowledge produced though anchoring and objectification "makes it possible for us to function in the network of relations and situations involved in everyday life". Anchoring and objectification processes occur constantly as new elements are incorporated into old representations and what is abstract is given a solid base. The shared nature of new media also brings about shared meanings and this is why and also where representations are communicated.

Children's shared meanings are different from those of adults, particularly because "to some extent, the view of the child at risk stems from the adults' sense of exclusion from children's digital culture" (Buckingham 2007: 85). Apart from feeling excluded, often, adults and parents express a sense of loss of control when caught between moral panic and their children's developmental needs. These anxieties are where social representations of risk start to germinate (Joffe, 1999), but a parent's anxieties can differ greatly from children's anxieties. In her PhD research, the author aims to uncover children's cognitions related to online risk within the social contexts in which they go online using a mixed-methods approach. For this chapter, qualitative data are being analysed using the Self-Other as an epistemological theme to explore how children position themselves in relation to others when discussing online risks.

2.1 Self-Other as an epistemological thema

Marková (2015) presents thinking in dyadic oppositions as one of the ways in which social representations can be explored. These oppositions develop implicitly during everyday life and influence lay thinking. A shift in these dyadic oppositions brings them into consciousness and they turn into a thema that breeds social representations. The 'Self-Other' thema is the way one positions oneself with respect to others. When assuming a position in relation to the 'other', one attributes (or misattributes) qualities to the 'other', and in the process also identifies oneself. The different self-other relations bring about varied forms of communicative action through which social representations are developed and also transmitted, creating

knowledge in the process (Andreouli, 2010). In turn, these representations influence behaviour. Marková (2015: 28) considers the Self-Other as "the thema that underlies thinking and imagination" and brings about other thematic concepts to be explored. For this purpose, the Self-Other as an epistemological thema will be used for the present data analysis.

3. Methods

The percentage of children aged 8 to 15 with Internet access in Malta was slightly above 98 per cent in 2014 (Lauri, Borg & Farrugia, 2015). Considering that children are avid users of new media, they will be familiar with the subject. This made focus groups an appropriate tool to delve deeper into the way children make sense of the risks present in the online world. Focus groups were also chosen because of their relevance for exploring social representations, as the conversations highlight the participants' context and their shared meanings (Heary & Hennessy, 2002: 53).

After attaining ethical approval from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee, schools were contacted to enlist their cooperation in forwarding parents the researcher's request for their child to participate in a focus group. Six schools accepted to forward the information to parents, and if they agreed that their child could participate in the research, parents were asked to return a consent form to the school. During October 2016, six focus groups with children aged 9-12 were conducted. Three focus groups were held with children aged 9 to 10 and another three with children aged 11 to 12. Children were grouped into these two age groups to avoid large age discrepancies in the focus groups that might inhibit the participation of younger children (Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore & Wildson, 1995). Moreover, the younger age group were in primary school and children over 11 were in secondary school, and thus it was also more practical to conduct each focus group in one school. For each age group, one mixed-gender and two single-gender focus groups were conducted – one with boys and one with girls. The focus groups were all held in state or church schools in Malta, and children could speak in either Maltese or English, since both languages are spoken on the island. Table 1. Participant Demographics presents the participants' demographics and pseudonyms.

In the focus groups, participants were first asked to describe their online activities and to discuss issues that children should be careful about when they go online. They were also asked to explain what they considered was the worst thing that could happen online to children their age. During the discussions, children often mentioned risks spontaneously, before the researcher got to the point of asking

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Mixed 9-10			Boys 9-10		Girls 9-10	
Niamh	F	10	Ivor	9	Erin	10
Jennyfer	F	10	Niall	8	Elis	10
Jeannette	F	10	Gilroy	10	Fiona	9
Kieron	M	10	Jac	9	Treasa	10
Jarlath	M	10	Conor	9	Norah	10
Jana	F	10	Darragh	9	Janette	9
Grady	M	10	Brennan	10	Ainthe	10
Jean	M	10	Greagoir	10	Aoife	10

Mixed 11-12			Boys 11-12		Girls 11-12	
Kelly	F	10	Donal	12	Kathleen	11
Aidan	M	11	Dougal	11	Kiera	11
Justin	M	10	Jacob	11	Sinead	11
Nolan	M	11	Barry	12	Kaitlin	11
Kevan	M	11	Desmond	12	Sheila	11
Maeve	F	11	Jamie	11	Aisling	10
Siobhan	F	11	Declan	11	Aileen	11
Mahon	M	11	Sean	11	Lean	11
					Alannah	10

direct questions about them. This was already an indication of the salience these matters hold for children. When the participants described issues related to risks, the researcher probed them to clarify and explain further, in order to gauge the meaning that these held for the children. The focus-group sessions were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Thematic Analysis as described by Braun and Clark (2006) was chosen for analysing the data from the focus-group discussions. This flexible approach for qualitative analysis is useful for identifying and analysing patterned meanings across a data set to provide an answer to the research question. Using NVIVO, the researcher first familiarised herself with the data by re-reading the transcripts and annotating sections that were relevant to the research question. Following this phase, and driven by Social Representations Theory as an analytical framework, deductive coding was used for a constructionist thematic analysis where latent meanings were identified and coded to unravel the content of the participants' so-

cial representations of risk in new media. This chapter will focus only on one section of the findings. Using the Self-Other as an epistemological thema, instances where the children positioned themselves vis-à-vis the 'other' were collated. These data were analysed to understand how the positions children assume reflect their thoughts and actions related to online risks and safety.

4. Analysis

Children referred to others in several ways while discussing their online experiences and expressing their thoughts about risks in new media. They spoke of other children in terms of their own peers, younger children and also older children. Adults also had a significant role in children's discussions. They spoke of adults who were known to them, such as parents and other family members, and also adults who were strangers to them. Occasionally, children also spoke about famous adults and how they used new media to connect with them. Table 2 - Self-Other Positioning presents the Self-Other positions taken by participants and their stances towards the other in relation to risk behaviours, together with some quotes from the discussions to illustrate the findings.

Table 2 - Self-Other Positioning

Others as…	Stance towards the other	Sample Quotes[1]
Peers	Double standards	Mahon: And on Facebook, there was a friend of mine who was insulting me … insulting me because I posted a photo (…)[2] Researcher: And how did you feel about this thing? And what did you do? Mahon: Then I was steaming miss, when I saw that comment on Facebook. And I started … I started insulting him back.
	Critical	Mahon: And I add friends [I know][3] only, I don't add … as there are those who add friends to see who has the most, to have the most…
Younger children	Vulnerable	Ainthe: Like a small child is listening to a song, or playing a game, a pop up can come and then … and then … and then like (…) they will say write this … write that … and … and … and she would write it because she would think probably it's of … part of the game or … or something

1 When children spoke in Maltese, excerpts have been translated into English
2 Indicates that some text has been omitted from the quote for the sake of continuity
3 Information in [square brackets] is added for context or explanation

Others as…	Stance towards the other	Sample Quotes[1]
Older children	Privileged	Treasa: and to my brother … [aged 13] to my brother she [my mum] doesn't check, and to me she checks.
	More knowledge-able	Sheila: And … my sister watches them … I don't know why but Kaitlin: Oh, but she's y- … she's older Sheila: 15 Kaitlin: She knows
Known adults	Experts / Authority	Jennyfer: I tell my mum to check [the information I find] (…) and she says "this does not make sense". Grady: Because sometimes, when I think I'm making a mistake (…) I ask my dad
	Safety	Aileen: I only … I only add people which I know (…) Because I know that they're not gonna do that to me
	Annoying	Treasa: I don't really like it when she [my mother] checks
Unknown adults	Danger	Nolan: Umm … eh … I agree that you don't need to add friends like that, carelessly, because if you don't know him Researcher: Why? Nolan: Because if you don't know him, you don't know what he's going to do. It could be that if you add him, he can hack you…
Famous adults	Para-social rela-tionship	Siobhan: when I had Music.ly, I had started adding, for example some stars and so on, that would be … and after it was like everyone trying to add you, you always add, add, add, and … there were … there were some comments that I didn't quite like.

4.1 Peers and siblings

When referring to their peers, participants seemed to be biased against them. They were often critical of their peers' behaviours, such as collecting friends or likes and befriending strangers. They seemed to imply that their peers had less insight into such dangers and thus were positioning themselves as knowing more about such risks and distancing themselves from them. At the same time, there seemed to be some double standards. Participants expressed disdain regarding some behaviours carried out by others, but if they sometimes engaged in such behaviours themselves, they considered it differently. As the quote from Mahon shows, he got angry when he was insulted, but at the same time, he behaved in a similar way towards this boy. This finding corresponds to the "not me – others response" which Joffe, (1999: 35) describes as customary when people face potential threats. As some literature (e.g. Sjöberg, 2007) indicates, emotions might also influence the child's ability to assess the situation adequately and act rationally rather than impulsively.

This contrast is also evident in the way they speak defensively of some questionable behaviours they engage in. When they mentioned behaviours such as talking to strangers, they often specified that if they do it, they don't do it much or that they are careful. When they spoke of accessing dubious links or content, they often explained that it happened by mistake or that it was not on purpose. This seems to indicate the presence of some self-serving biases in the way they conceptualise risk for themselves. Their position seems to be implying that they are better able to take care of themselves online in contrast to their peers. However, as Joffe (1996: 126) argues, this feeling of invulnerability has an adaptive function when facing risks. These perceptions of self-invulnerability might impair children's judgements when assessing potentially risky situations and possibly decrease their chances of taking preventive measures.

Participants were often referring to their siblings when they spoke of younger or older children. They seemed to associate being younger with a naivety and vulnerability that called for them to protect their younger siblings. This also seemed to perpetuate their position as being better at dealing with risk because of their greater age, even if at times the age difference between them and their siblings was only a few years. In the case of older children, participants spoke of them as having a better vantage point because they were more knowledgeable and had more privileges. Generally, participants were jealous of them and expressed a desire to be treated by their parents in the same way.

4.2 Parents, strangers and famous people

The expert and authoritative status attributed to known adults was quite evident. Participants mentioned on several occasions, and in all focus groups, that they asked adults, these often being their parents, for help. Participants perceived adults as knowledgeable and referred to them when they needed to, and this helped them feel safe online. They also had expectations of them, because they spoke with disillusionment when these adults did not behave according to the status they attributed to them. This is a positive finding, but it also highlights the importance of the children's reference points having adequate and sufficient knowledge (Kim & Davies, 2017: 7), so that the expertise children attribute to adulthood is warranted and the adults can help children adequately when the need arises.

Yet, despite the expert status assigned to them, there were instances where children found their parents' involvement in their online behaviour annoying, especially when this involved checking on them or checking their profiles. It could be

that the children's desire for increased peer interactions (Kim & Davies, 2017: 7) brings about conflict with parents about new media use. Children might dislike their parents' snooping out of fear of the consequences (Smahel & Wright, 2014) if their parents discover they are breaking the rules. Often punishments involved the withdrawal or restricted use of devices. Children have the right to access and make use of digital media (Livingstone, Carr & Byrne, 2016), but to be able to access these opportunities, they also require the support of adequate media literacy or the ability to think critically about media content and reflect on its impact. Being a social process, media literacy "encompasses skills that foster autonomous decisions and supports the development of a coherent self" (Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016: 166).

When children spoke of adult strangers, these were consistently associated with danger, as the quotes portray. Often, the danger children perceived was related to hacking or data theft and their position towards strangers also perpetuated stereotypes, as often the perpetrator was portrayed as male. Participants did not always seem to connect strangers with the danger of grooming and sexual abuse. Educating children about this can be a delicate matter as, on the one hand, it can protect them from harm, but at the same time it exposes them to the darker side of human nature and does not preserve their innocence, which is already a concern because of the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood (Bailey, 2011). Ideally, this education would be part of a larger programme that includes timely media and sexual education based on the child's readiness and experience.

In contrast, when children referred to celebrities, they did not consider them as strangers, even though they did not know them. Children might develop para-social relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with these personalities, and even though the interactions often remain one-sided, when seeing one-off occasions where famous people interact with their followers, children might hope that, one day, their heroes would talk to them. This desire might be why children sometimes put themselves in harm's way and connect with popular people on their profiles, not knowing whether they really are whom they claim to be.

4.3 Limitations

While focus groups were considered the ideal tool for this research, like all tools, they have some limitations. Primarily, the focus-group dynamics could have influenced the participants to respond in ways that they thought were desirable by the researcher or that were in agreement with the general atmosphere of the group. Another limitation relates to the participants. Only those participants whose parents

consented to their participation were included in the selection, and additionally some of the schools selected the students themselves rather than by ballot. These factors might have excluded some children's voices from the research. For the purposes of this chapter, only the representations related to Self-Other positioning are included. A comprehensive discussion of children's social representations of risks in new media will be forthcoming once the doctoral work is completed.

5.   Conclusion

The relations and interactions of the self and the other generate a social reality (Marková, 2017). The ways in which children position themselves with respect to others when reflecting on online risks gives insights into their conceptualisations of these risks. Children consider their peers and younger children to be more prone to online perils, while they have a sense of self-invulnerability to these risks. In comparison, older children and known adults have a better vantage point because of their knowledge and expertise. Despite this, some children react negatively to their parents' mediation because they value the possibilities afforded by new media. These fallacies in thinking can be dangerous as they limit the child's ability to assess risk and engage in adequate safe behaviours. Children might "make cognitive errors due to the limitations of their information processing skills" (Joffe, 1999: 14), and their cognitive development should place them in a better position to assess risk. However, as children grow older and start exploring their identity and intimacy during adolescence, there can be other biases that interfere with adequate risk assessment. This makes media literacy crucially important for children to learn how to be aware and overcome these cognitive distortions. Such skills need to start developing at an early age and ideally should continue to accompany children throughout their development, based on their online activities and interests, so as to remain relevant to their needs.

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Biography

Lorleen Farrugia is a PhD researcher at the University of Malta. Her doctoral work focuses on pre-adolescents' social representations of risks in new media technologies. She has researched young people and self-disclosure on Reality TV as part of her Master's Degree in Youth and Community Studies. Lorleen has been a member of the EU Kids Online Network (www.eukidsonline. net) as part of the Maltese team since 2012. She is also a member of the Advisory Board of the Maltese Safer Internet Centre BeSmartOnline! (besmartonline.org.mt). Her research interests include children's understanding of online risk and safety, ethical issues in research with children, Social Cognition and Media Psychology.

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