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The Conception of Laziness and the Characterisation of Others as Lazy

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Abstract This paper is a theoretical investigation of the common conception of laziness. It starts from constructing a tentative definition of laziness, defining laziness as a negative term referring to people who do not show an effort corresponding to their abilities and/or prerequisites, and/or the difficulty of the task in question. Jerome Bruner's folk psychology is applied to emphasise how the conception of laziness serves as a narrative re-establishing meaning when people do not act as they are expected. Furthermore, two perspectives concerning the characterisation of others as lazy are presented. First, Tversky's and Kahneman's Heuristics and Biases Approach, and second Moscovici's Social Representations Theory. Common for the ways in which the concept of laziness is understood and applied is that the actual motivation, abilities and qualifications of the person being evaluated are hardly never assessed. Thus, the concept of laziness can easily function as a reductionist explanation why others are not acting as expected, with the purpose of making the act of not acting as expected more comprehensible.

Laziness seems to be a pervasive concept in everyday human social life, used for explaining the behaviour of encountered individuals, or one's own behaviour in a given task or activity. Additionally, laziness is often found in the media and the public debate, attributed to numerous groups and individuals, including unemployed people, students and many more. The concept seems to imply that an individual not acting or performing as expected is not doing so because of causes controllable to herself, often referring to individual effort.

In an educational context, Reyna and Weiner (2001) argue that teachers generally have more sympathy for students failing because of uncontrollable factors (low aptitude or external factors), while the opposite goes for students failing because of factors within their own control

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(low effort). An emphasis on the individual's effort is also evident in research concerning attitudes towards the unemployed, where a distinction is often drawn between individuals who are "genuinely unable to work" and individuals who are lazy and should just "get a job" (Furnham 1982b; Gibson 2009; Petersen et al. 2012). Therefore, it makes a big difference, whether acts of not corresponding to what is expected from you is attributed to laziness or something external and/or uncontrollable. For the student, the attribute of laziness can be associated with less proactive and more punitive interventions by teachers when failing or not performing as expected (Reyna and Weiner 2001). For the unemployed, people who explain unemployment in individualistic terms such as laziness are more inclined to think that the demands and conditions for the unemployed must be enhanced, by for example lowering unemployment benefits (Furnham 1983; Gibson 2009; Petersen et al. 2012).

Despite its apparent pervasiveness in everyday life, research concerning laziness seems hard to find. This could be related to the fact that the concept of laziness is not easy to examine, as it refers to the absence of something—activity or action—rather than the presence of something (despite the laziness itself) (Hviid-Jacobsen 2015). However, the concept seems to be rather interesting, as it connects the personal experience of individuals with a long range of societal norms, values and circumstances. Therefore, this paper will examine how the common-sense concept of laziness is used and understood in two contexts in which the concept is often appearing, namely the context of unemployment and formal schooling.

The inquiry will be exploratory in nature, taking its starting point in literature concerning the before mentioned groups (students and unemployed), which will result in a tentative definition of laziness to be used in the rest of the paper. When a tentative definition of laziness is produced, a theoretical suggestion to how the concept works will be presented. In this theoretical inquiry, an eclectic approach will be used, applying different psychological theories with different epistemological approaches, to detect the nuances and complexities of the phenomenon (Sonne-Ragans 2013).

The examination of how the concept of laziness is understood will be approached from a cultural psychological perspective, drawing on Jerome Bruner's folk psychology (Bruner 1990), since the understanding of laziness seems embedded in cultural and historical ways of talking about the effort of oneself and others in a given task. To investigate how this "collective imagination" is dealt with on the individual level, a study by Pultz and Hviid (2016), examining how young unemployed Danes make sense and cope with their situation as unemployed, will be included in this section. Moreover, these ways of speaking about one's own and others' effort will be further examined, by looking at the Christian concept of *accidia*, related to the seven deadly sins (Lindhart 2001), Max Weber's Protestant Work Ethic (Weber 1972 [1920]) and the "new work ethic" focusing on self-realisation and the fulfilment of one's hidden potential (Bovbjerg 2003; Brinkmann 2008).

Subsequently, the processes involved in characterising others as lazy will be analysed, from two different perspectives: First, representing a cognitivist information processing perspective, Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) heuristics and biases approach will be applied. According to this perspective, human beings carry out everyday judgements based on the information accessible when the judgement is carried out. The knowledge needed to carry out judgements whether someone is lazy or not is expectedly characterised by this, as this kind of judgement requires knowledge about the feelings, thoughts and motivation of the person being judged, which are not very accessible. While accounting for these processes, studies regarding attitudes towards the unemployed will be examined, to display how the representativeness and availability of specific information regarding the person being judged will influence whether that

person is conceived as lazy or not (Furnham 1982b; Furåker and Blomsterberg 2003; Gugushvili 2016; Gibson 2009).

Secondly, a social constructivist perspective will be included, to examine how individuals are being characterised as lazy, through social interaction and negotiation in a specific culture and society, in the form of Serge Moscovici's Social Representations Theory. This theory will be applied, to examine how groups of individuals are characterised as lazy based on the symbolic coping of a majority group, in relation to historic, cultural and macro-social circumstances. This will be done by looking at studies regarding attitudes towards unemployment (Gibson 2009; Pultz and Mørch 2014), to explore how the social representation, linking laziness and unemployment, is constructed in the societies of the studies (Denmark and The United Kingdom). Additionally, the construction of an *emancipating representation* (Moscovici 1988), challenging the hegemonic will also be examined. This part of the paragraph will be based on a study investigating the experience of young Danes who purposefully chose to be unemployed to pursue careers in creative fields such as art, music or acting (Pultz and Mørch 2014). This is included to explore how the social representation of the "lazy unemployed" can be resisted by the person being characterised.

At last, the implications of the different issues raised in the paper will be discussed, along with the implications of the epistemological differences related to the eclectic approach applied.

The goal of the paper is to introduce a theoretical perspective on the common-sense concept of laziness and give a suggestion to the psychological processes involved when individuals characterise others as lazy. Consequently, the purpose of the paper is to illuminate how the concept of laziness is constructed and applied in the aforementioned social practices in which it frequently appears, to explore what is meant when an individual or a group is labelled lazy, which cultural myths consolidates the concept, how we decide, who are "the lazy" and who are not.

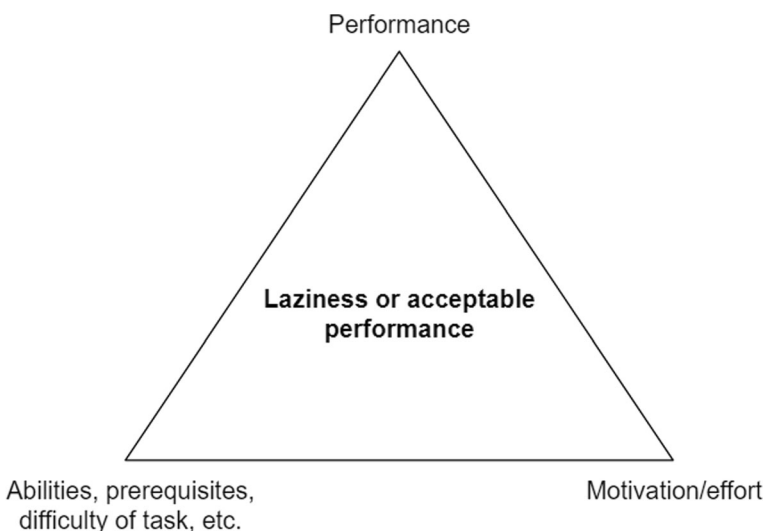## Laziness: a Tentative Definition

In our quest for a definition of the concept of laziness, we will start by looking at early twentieth century school psychology. In the early twentieth century, a low academic performance was often deemed as an expression of moral shortcomings attributable to vices such as laziness or lack of responsibility. Partially inspired by this, Alfred Binet, amongst others, develops the *metric intelligence scale* (1905), set out to measure whether a student has "intellectual problems", in the hope that students with difficulties would no longer be exposed to moral biases, and thereby get the assistance needed to improve (Walsh et al. 2014). Thereby, a low academic performance could be interpreted in terms of laziness if nothing measurable could explain the student's inadequate performance, for which reason the intelligence test could be used as an instrument to separate students who did not "make an effort" to perform academically from those who genuinely did not have the abilities to do so. This is in line with Reyna and Weiner's (2001) findings that teachers are more sympathetic to underperforming students, if visible factors explaining the student's academic difficulties are evident, which will also prevent teachers from attributing underperformances to factors controllable to the student, such as their own effort or motivation.

As mentioned earlier, the distinction between people who do not have the abilities and people who do not make an effort is also recognisable in studies examining attitudes towards the unemployed, where a distinction is often made between people who are genuinely not able to work and people who are just lazy (Furnham 1982a, b; Gibson 2009; Petersen et al. 2012). In a classic study by Adrian Furnham (1982b), a range of interesting differences in explanations for unemployment was found based on employment status and political orientation. The study proposed that employed people tended to focus more on individualistic explanations such as laziness, which was also the case for individuals with a conservative voting preference.

In a newer study from 2009, Stephen Gibson examines how unemployed in England are portrayed as lazy and irresponsible through common-sense psychological assumptions about the responsibility, effort and motivation of people on unemployment benefits on the BBC news website. Gibson names this *the effortfulness repertoire*, through which distinctions are made, concerning who are entitled to receive unemployment benefits, and who should stop oneself from being lazy and find a job.

A common characteristic of the above-mentioned literature is that a strong dichotomy is often drawn between individuals who do not perform or act as expected because of lacking abilities and/or prerequisites and individuals who are just lazy. Therefore, a common-sense conception of laziness seems to be, that a person is lazy, when she has the abilities to do well in a certain task or activity but does not do so because she does not bother.

Accordingly, a model has been worked out, describing three elements constituting laziness. These are as follows: (1) an individual's performance (e.g. in a school test or in looking for work), (2) an individual's (perceived) abilities, and/or prerequisites and/or difficulty of the task in question and (3) an individual's (perceived) motivation and/or effort in a given task. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 A visualisation of the tentative definition of laziness

The Concept of Laziness as Folk Psychology

In this section, the meaning and understanding of being lazy, which was defined in the paragraph above, will be elaborated in accordance with Jerome Bruner's culturally oriented social constructivism. According to Bruner (1990), the comprehension of common-sense concepts, like laziness, is found in what he calls *folk psychology*. Folk psychology is a powerful tool found in every culture, containing a long range of normative descriptions of what drives human beings and what one's own and others mental life looks like. These descriptions are found in narratives, often holding a moral position on how individuals are expected to act in different situations and contexts. Common-sense concepts are epistemologically regarded as "real", through lengthy processes of construction and negotiating, deeply embedded in culture and history. Accordingly, Bruner's folk psychology is based on a social constructivist approach to the creation of knowledge and meaning, for which reason an examination of the folk psychological assumptions underlying a concept like laziness can help us make sense of the way the concept is understood, and which values and perspectives are constituting it (ibid.).

The construction and negotiation of meaning are found in narratives expressed before, during and after human beings act, and deal with the conditions that makes living together possible and satisfying, which is specifically found in constituent beliefs, representing the "normal" or expectable. When constituent beliefs are violated, a narrative is needed to explain why. In this situation, a narrative is used to tell a story containing reasons why expectable behaviour is not displayed, through which the violator is given a state of consciousness explaining the violation (ibid.). The usage of the concept of laziness seems to be exactly this—a culturally understandable and current explanation why a person is not acting in the expected and desirable way.

Narratives are constituted of (1) a sequential ordered range of events and occurrences with a human actor, acting towards a certain object or goal; (2) an element perceived as normal, expectable or canonic within a given culture; (3) something violating the normal and (4) a narrator's perspective, as narratives are never voiceless, often using a third person perspective with the words "she", "he" and/or "they" (Bruner 1990; Ratcliffe & Hutto 2007).

An example of a narrative concerning laziness could thus be the narrative of "the lazy student". A statement like "the student handed in the school paper too late because she was lazy" contains an occurrence with a person deliberately acting towards a certain object (a student and a school paper), a constituent belief in the form of something expectable (school papers are expected to be handed in on time), something violating this (the school paper was turned in too late), which is explained by something culturally understandable (laziness can make students turn in school papers too late). As can be concluded from the example given above, it would be hard to comprehend if a shared knowledge and meaning of what it means to be a student, what it means to be do a school paper, etc., was not shared between the implicated (the student, the teacher, the parents, society, etc.). In a narrative like this, the folk psychology is not concerned with the truth value in explanations (e.g. if students really turn in school papers too late because they are lazy), but rather whether the explanation is culturally understandable or not, which is determined by how recognisable the narrative is in the culture where it is expressed (Bruner 1990).

However, folk psychology implies a reciprocal relationship between a person's perceived states of the world and desires, each affecting the other (ibid., p. 40). Therefore, individuals whose situation is potentially explained in terms of laziness naturally have the possibility of

acting and thinking differently, and as a result distancing themselves from this narrative. A Danish study by Pultz and Hviid (2016) implies that unemployed people are perfectly aware of the collective explanation of unemployment in terms of laziness. The participants in the study recount deliberately applying different strategies to distance themselves from this image, even though none of them actually conceive themselves as lazy. For example, this is done by demonstrating productivity as a counter-image (ibid., p. 18) to narrate a different and more positive story about themselves. Yet, even though they deliberately attempt to distance themselves from the narrative, they are subjected to a daily dialogue with the discourse of laziness. As one of the participants say: "If you don't get up in the morning then you easily feel lazy or you begin to feel that thing about not being a decent citizen or whatever it is called" (ibid.). Therefore, from the perspective of the person, it takes a daily struggle to prove this image wrong and remind themselves that they are not "some sort of careless dude" (ibid.).

"No pain, no gain"

Certain indications exist that the narrative of laziness might be quite understandable in many Western contexts, which has resulted in these specific ways of talking about one's own, and others' effort and motivation in a long range of tasks and/or activities.

An example of such narrative can be found in Christianity, where laziness is regarded as one of the seven deadly sins, under the Latin name *accidia*, representing sloth, bluntness, boredom and the like. To avoid living in sin, a human being should avoid accidia, by being active, enterprising and striving, unfolding and flourishing through a long range of activities (Lindhart 2001).

Christianity's force to make human beings strive and make an effort is also stressed by Max Weber (1972), who argued for a specific Protestant Work Ethic (PWE). According to Weber, the PWE can be dated all the way back to the reformation, where the masses were taught, that salvation was to be found through hard labour and exertion. The PWE was therefore deemed as a cultural force, calling for the masses to make an effort and work hard (Weber 1972 [1920]). Some authors claim that the PWE is still a powerful force today, affecting people's relation to work and effort in protestant countries (Hoorn and Maseland 2013; Furnham 1982a). Furthermore, it is argued that the PWE can be recognised in ways of speaking about one's own and other's effort and performance, for example through popular slogans like "no pain, no gain" and folk fairy tales like the three little pigs, linking a satisfactory outcome to hard work and great effort (Schrift et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, some authors similarly argue for a "new work ethic", built on the desire to grow and improve, rather than understanding work as a calling and an activity carried out for the monetary profit itself. In the new work ethic, the individual is seen as enterprising, responsible and oriented towards self-realisation and development, with inexhaustible resources for fulfilling hidden potentials. Salvation is no longer in the afterlife, but in the earthly success, both as a private person and in the work-life (Bovbjerg 2003). Furthermore, one of the characteristics about the "classic" work ethic is the separation of work and leisure—you worked in a factory instead of your own home. In the postmodern consumer society, some argue that the boundaries between work and private life is more unclear, which to some degree erases the distinction between the "working self" and the "private self" (Brinkmann 2008). This could expectedly imply that the before mentioned striving for effort and hard work, and the linkage of the opposite to laziness, is no longer something, which are only related to an individual's working life, but something that have invaded the private sphere as well, making

the concept of laziness even more present. Yet, the actual process involved in the characterisation of individuals and groups of individuals as lazy will be further covered in the following two sections of the paper from both an information processing and a social constructivist perspective.

Characterising the "Lazy" Through Processing of Information

As mentioned earlier, Tversky and Kahneman's information processing perspective is included based on the assumption that judgements whether an individual, or group of individuals, are lazy or not, are often carried out on insufficient information to do so. This is also one of the main rationales in the heuristics and biases approach, namely that judgements and decisions are often based on the information available when judgements are being made, even though that information might not be sufficient to carry out a correct and valid judgement. Tversky and Kahneman are thereby strongly inspired by Simon Herbert's notion of Bounded Rationality (1947), emphasising the natural boundaries to human beings' ability to carry out rational decisions (Gilovich and Griffin 2002). Consequently, judgements are often based on *heuristics*, relying on both conscious and unconscious strategies, making human beings capable of quickly making judgements that appear correct, and mostly are (Tversky and Kahneman 1984). However, the use of heuristics can also contribute to systematic errors, as the strategies primarily function unconsciously, for which reason individuals are not always aware of their limitations in making judgements and making decisions (Matlin 2009b).

In Tversky and Kahneman's heuristics and biases approach, information is processed by the individual, and hereby appearing as actual knowledge. This process can lead to both correct and incorrect judgements, for which reasons the theory's ontology is in line with the classic positivist notion, that the world is out there to be perceived and experienced by the individual (Boolsen and Jacobsen 2012). A judgement whether someone is lazy or not is, according to this perspective, therefore either correct or incorrect.

Originally, Tversky and Kahneman presented three all-purpose heuristics. These are the availability-, representativeness and anchoring/adjustment heuristics (Gilovich and Griffin 2002). However, the anchoring/adjustment heuristic will be left out in this inquiry, since anchoring is one of the main processes of social representations theory, which will be examined in the next paragraph. Furthermore, the availability heuristic will be given the most attention since a social phenomenon like the attitude towards unemployed people and students is strongly associated with biases related to the availability of information, reflecting where you live, who you talk to, what you read, etc. (Pronin and Puccio 2002).

The Representativeness Heuristic

Research concerning how human beings cognitively categorise objects and events are often stating that information is stored and processed in relation to mental models, in the form of prototypes or schemata. According to the cognitive information processing perspective, these prototypes are found in the part of the long-term memory called the semantic memory, which is where descriptive knowledge about the world is stored (Matlin 2009a), including the comprehension of a concept like laziness. Are we therefore to judge a well-known social category, we are quickly, through our semantic memory, able to recollect a stereotype of the given category, which will affect our judgement, and at the same time erase alternative explanations (Kahneman

2002). Consequently, a judgement whether a person is lazy or not, carried out via the representativeness heuristic, will therefore be affected by how representative the person being judged are of one's mental model of a typical lazy person. Accordingly, Reyna (2008) argues that teachers show a higher risk of relying on cultural stereotypes when judging the performance of a student if the teacher is exposed to a high cognitive load. Hereby, the teacher runs the risk of making a judgement based on the prototypical features of the student such as language, physical appearance, etc., and thereby possibly making an erroneous judgement based on representativeness. Consequently, individuals who are under cognitive stress can have a greater risk of erroneously characterising others as lazy, if such a stereotype is existing, which must be an important lesson for teachers and other people who are daily making such judgements.

The Availability Heuristic

The second heuristic presented in this section is the availability heuristic. Decisions made using this heuristic will be determined by the information available at the time of the judgement. Judgements, whether an individual is lazy or not, will therefore be determined by drawing on comparable examples in memory (Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

In an information processing perspective, the availability of information on a given phenomenon is affected by its distinctiveness or recognisability. Phenomena appearing often will have a larger recognisability and will consequently affect the judgements of an individual more than rarely appearing phenomena, as the amount of declarative information in memory is larger for phenomena appearing often (Schwartz and Vaughn 2002). In a Danish context, you can imagine that the huge focus on unemployment with reference to laziness by the Danish politicians can have influenced how available the connection between unemployment and laziness appear in public. As a result, Danish people might have a greater tendency to judge unemployment as a consequence of laziness and insufficient effort, rather than an expression of unfortunate societal and economic conditions.

Additionally, the availability of information on a given phenomenon is affected by an individual's personal experience with it (Tversky and Kahneman 1984). In studies examining attitudes towards the unemployed, differences in how unemployment is explained are found between individuals who have personal experience with unemployment and individuals who have not. These differences can be seen in a tendency to explain unemployment in terms of societal conditions for people with personal experience with unemployment and in explanations related to individual motivation and effort for people without experience with unemployment and people who are currently employed (Furnham 1982b; Furåker and Blomsterberg 2003).

In this respect, it seems plausible that the employed group, with no experience of unemployment, is interpreting how hard it is to find a job, in the light of their own success of finding a job, for which reason the conception that unemployed people are lazy, are interpreted through an "if I can do it, so can they-logic". This kind of logic is also present in the study by Gibson (2009) presented earlier in this paper, where a person responds: "I have been working full time, nonstop since finishing my education in 1981, if I can do it, so can everybody else!!". A study by Gugushvili (2016) supports this by stating that individuals who have experienced upward social mobility, and thereby improvements in socio-economic status, are more likely to blame poverty on individual characteristics such as laziness and lack of effort, than individuals who have not experienced upward social mobility.

One mechanism explaining the above-mentioned tendency can be found in the way recollections are made from the part of the long-term memory called the episodic memory, where personal memories regarding events and situations are stored. A characteristic of the episodic memory is that events with a positive outcome are generally recalled easier than events with a negative outcome (Matlin 2009a). For this reason, the before mentioned "if I can do it, so can they-logic" will be reinforced, making personal recollections regarding success more available, than recollections regarding failure. Consequently, it seems fair to believe that individuals generally tend to underestimate how hard a given task really is, for which reason the perceived performance and effort from another individual in the same task will be deemed as unsatisfactory, resulting in a tendency to erroneously attribute failure to lack of effort or laziness, instead of the task being demanding or hard to accomplish.

Characterisation of the "lazy" Through a Social Representation

Serge Moscovici's social representations theory is based on the idea that social psychological phenomena and processes can only be comprehended by being regarded in relation to historic, cultural and macro-social circumstances. Moscovici is sceptical towards viewing individuals as passive recipients of information, as in Tversky and Kahneman's heuristics and biases approach. On the contrary, Moscovici's claim is that representations are constantly produced and communicated, effecting human relations, judgements, choices and attitudes. According to this theory, the characterisation of a group as lazy will take place through social interactions and negotiations, through which the judgement of an individual's effort/motivation and abilities/prerequisites, in a given task, will be the result of a collective interpretation of this, within the specific group within which one interacts (Moscovici 1981). Epistemologically, interpretations of the world are socially understandable because of their representations, for which reason subject and object are never functionally separated. Our comprehension of the social world is reciprocally related to our ways of talking about it and acting in it (Wagner et al. 1999). The epistemology in social representations theory must therefore be understood as an ontological constructivism (Collin 2012). Accordingly, the determining factor regarding whether a group is characterised as lazy or not is how the specific group is socially represented, and because of the representation, acted towards in a given society or culture.

Familiarising the Unfamiliar—Making Unemployment Comprehensible

Social representations are often constructed as a symbolic coping, when an event or a phenomenon is disrupting the life cycle of a group and is thus perceived as threatening or unfamiliar. Social representations can therefore emerge when the identity of a group is endangered by something novel and unfamiliar threatening to undermine the socially recognised rules of the group (Wagner et al. 1999). One of these social rules, as argued in an earlier paragraph, is that human beings should do their best and work hard. Moreover, Luechiniger et al. (2010) argue that unemployment is not only affecting the well-being of the unemployed, but is also affecting the well-being of employed individuals, as high unemployment, to a greater extent than low unemployment, is making employed people fear losing their job as well. Understanding unemployment as an act of laziness thus takes the focus away from the perceived threat unemployment can pose on society, by placing the responsibility with the individual alone. This results in the possible to classify a phenomenon like unemployment,

which might seem subversive, and thereby making it less threatening and more understandable (Moscovici 1981, 1988).

Anchoring a Social Representation—Individuality, Responsibility and Effort

The first step in the process of gaining a common understanding of a given phenomenon within a social group is to name it, and assign its attributes, that makes it possible talking about it. This is done by anchoring novel phenomenon in already existing categories and pictures, and hereby anchoring it in a shared reference point. Consequently, new objects are incorporated in a network of already existing categories, whereupon they become an integrated part of the existing category, taking on their specific features and characteristics (Moscovici 1981). This results in a prototype, an archetypical symbol of all the individuals belonging to that specific category. In social representations theory, the prototype is not the product of information processing, but of social interaction within a group. Hence, for a specific individual or group to be associated with an attribute like laziness, it requires a significant majority at a given time in history to start connecting that certain attribute with that certain individual or group.

Larsen (2013) argues in a historic analysis that the opinion on unemployment has changed from being something that can happen to everyone in the middle of the twentieth century, to something caused by the individual herself in the start of the 1990s and onwards (Larsen 2013, in Pultz and Mørch 2014). Consequently, it seems fair to assume that from the beginning of the 1990s and onwards, a social representation has been constructed, connecting unemployment with the attribute of laziness. This claim can be backed up by the increasing focus on individuality in postmodernity, which is also seen in the rising focus on individual responsibility and effort in many neo-liberal welfare states (Brinkmann 2010; Pultz and Mørch 2014; Gibson 2009).

The essence of the anchoring process in constructing a social representation is attributing a group of individuals with a specific category and giving them a familiar name, and through this process, suggesting that they will behave in a certain way, making their actions predictable, understandable and familiar (Moscovici 1981). Accordingly, the act of calling an unemployed person lazy makes the phenomenon of unemployment comprehensible, and less threatening, by detecting its cause in explanations already existing and understandable in society, as laziness seems to be a culturally understandable narrative, why someone is not acting as expected from them, as was suggested in the paragraph of this paper regarding Bruner's Folk Psychology.

Objectifying a Social Representation—from Abstract to Concrete

Through the process of objectification, socially represented knowledge is given its specific cultural form, by constructing specific icons, metaphors and pictures (Wagner et al. 1999). The process consists of transforming categories from something abstract to something concrete—from something that exists in our minds, to something existing in reality (Moscovici 1981).

First step in this process is matching abstract concepts with specific pictures or symbols. This is done by a group acquiring what is called a figurative nucleus, merging the essence of a social phenomenon with the common-sense assumptions of a group. This makes a specific way of talking about the phenomenon possible, with which different clichés, simplifications and generalisations are uniting us with pictures and symbols of something we earlier did not

understand (Wagner et al. 1999). This is seen in Gibson's (2009) study, where strong generalisations are made, making it possible talking about "legitimate" and "illegitimate" unemployment, through the before mentioned assumptions about responsibility and making an effort.

Next step in the process of objectification is taking place, when a concept has thoroughly become part of the shared reality of a group, by which the representation of the concept is no longer deemed as an element of the joint thinking in the group, but as an element of reality (Wagner et al. 1999). Regarding the characterisation of unemployed people as lazy, this is manifested through concrete pictures and actions like "laying around on their backsides" (Gibson 2009)—an example of the way phenomena is embodied without considering how specific sayings arises (Moscovici 1981).

Another concrete way objectifications are expressed in society is through personifications. A great example of this is "Lazy Robert[1]", who have been personified in Danish media as the ultimate lazy unemployed person. Through this process, the social representation linking unemployed people and laziness is no longer exclusively a product of our thoughts or the way we speak, but something that exists in reality, and can even be invited into a TV debate to discuss the topic of unemployment.

In Gibson's (2009) study, the welfare state is also objectified as a contributor or even inciter of laziness. Accordingly, the common-sense conception that unemployed people are not making an effort to find a job is reinforced by the fact that people without jobs are granted unemployment benefits, which is seen in the following quotation: "I think Britain's welfare state is a complete joke. Hardworking, honest, tax paying people like myself continually subsidising all these lay people! I am sick of it!!" (Gibson 2009). Furthermore, this seems to affect a sense of community for the employed group, as they are constructing the idea that they are paying for the unemployed peoples perceived right to be lazy and not work.

Challenging the Hegemonic Representation—Unemployed, Young and Hard-Working

The social representations covered above are *hegemonic representations*, which are dominating most symbolic and affective practices. They often reflect homogeneity, stability and consensus and are an expression of a social representation shared by the majority (Moscovici 1988).

Yet, the hegemonic representation is not the only representation existing in a society— *emancipated representations* are existing in parallel. Emancipated representations are the product of ideas and knowledge produced and shared between sub-groups in society who are in contact with each other. These representations contain an autonomy and are interpretations and derivations of the hegemonic representation (Moscovici 1988).

An interesting example on this is found in a Danish study, examining how young people, intentionally choosing to be unemployed to pursue a career in creative fields such as music, art,

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[1] Lazy Robert (in Danish "Dovne Robert") is a Danish media personality, who became nationally known after appearing in a television debate in 2012. He caused a great public clamour by claiming, that he would much rather be on unemployment benefits than working a low paid job, firing the ongoing political debated whether it is really worth one's while taking a low paid job in Denmark, when you cannot-work and get paid from the state. Lazy Robert was frequently figuring in debates regarding tax and unemployment benefits, personifying the political arguments why unemployment benefits should be lowered by representing the typical lazy work-shy unemployed worker.

acting, etc., are understanding themselves and their situation as unemployed (Pultz and Mørch 2014). Despite being unemployed, the authors claim that these young people are driven by postmodern and neoliberal rationales about responsibility and making an effort. However, they are projecting these rationales in the direction of their own interests and desires of self-realisation, rather than the societally expected (e.g. payed labor). They conceive unemployment benefits (in Danish 'dagpenge') as a subsidy for following their dream, in the same way students in Denmark receives a state education grant (in Danish 'SU'), and are thus justifying their unemployment by the fact that there are simply no institutionalised ways of landing a career in their desired field of work. The participants in the study are emphasising that they do not recognise themselves in the hegemonic representations of the lazy unemployed. On the contrary, they associate themselves with hard work and effort, as reaching their desired goal requires exactly this. The participants in the study are thus combining the hegemonic representation about unemployed people, with another culturally understandable representation, namely that of the "competent and upcoming artist". Hence, these young people are contextualising their situation and social category, and hereby reinterpreting the hegemonic representation, and resisting it in their path towards their desired future.

Discussion

The concept of laziness has a clear cultural function. It can account for deviances from the normal and expectable by telling a story regarding why a person does not do her best, do not make an effort and are not motivated to perform as is expected from her. For this reason, it seems sensible to start this discussion by asking what the difference between being lazy and being "not-motivated" is, as motivation is a concept that is actually highly researched in mainstream psychology.

Referring to a person's motivation instead of her presumed laziness seems to be more open for interpretation, as motivation in psychology is often defined as a range of both inner and outer forces, initiating and effecting the form, direction and intensity of the activities and actions of an individual. These inner and outer forces could be different needs, personality traits, goals, etc. (Woods and West 2015). Motivation, and with it non-motivation, hence has a long range of explanations. Laziness on the contrary, as it is defined in this paper, seems to be explained by one thing only, namely that a person does not bother exerting herself in doing a specific task or activity. Are we thus trying to explain *why* a person does not bother putting in the effort expected from her, i.e. are lazy, we are most likely talking about the persons motivation related to the specific task. This seems to trigger a long range of possible explanations, not only related to the individual in question, for which reason it might be hard to define her lack of effort as the result of her being lazy.

Are we as an example told, that a student who turned in an assignment too late had just lost her grandfather, and because of this was very upset, most people would presumably agree that the student was not motivated to do the assignment because of her grandfather's death, while a few would likely agree that it was an act of laziness. Are we on the contrary told that she did not do the assignment because she played her computer instead, most people would probably agree that doing the assignment too late was an expression of laziness, even though it is naturally also a token that she was more motivated playing computer, than she was doing her assignment. If you, in relation to the last statement, ask *why* the student was more motivated playing computer than doing her assignment, you can once again end up with explanations all

containing reasons whether this is an act of laziness or a culturally acceptable break of motivation (as in the case of the dead grandfather)—maybe she feels lonely and found a great comfort playing with friends online?

I am not trying to advocate that students do not have to turn in their assignments on time, off cause they do. My point is, that if you deem a person's lack of effort as an expression of laziness, you have a great possibility of overlooking important circumstances prohibiting the person to act and as a result end up blaming the person, instead of offering the help needed. In this way, laziness can easily be used as a reductionist explanation why human beings are not acting in ways expected from them. Off cause, it is positive if a teacher can identify a student, who for some reason do not show an effort matching her abilities, and thereby has the possibility of helping her do better and gain a greater yield of her education. However, explaining the mismatch between abilities and effort in terms of laziness only places the responsibility on the student alone, with the result of overlooking a long range of other possible explanations. Consequently, calling certain people lazy and explaining societal phenomenon like unemployment as an expression of laziness can potentially maintain a negative status quo. By exclusively focusing on the effort of individuals, we risk missing important flaws and problems in the system they are a part of. This apply to the teacher criticising the motivation and effort of a student instead of focusing on the educational system or the student's environment, or the politician or citizen focusing on the effort of the unemployed person instead of criticising the labour market and its institutions.

Characterisation of the Lazy—Social Construction and Information Processing

In this part of the discussion, the implications of using an eclectic approach will be discussed by considering the differences between Tversky & Kahneman's cognitivist information processing perspective on the one hand and Moscovici's social representations theory on the other.

In the cognitive perspective, as mentioned in the respective paragraph, focus is on the information effecting the judgement being made and posits an epistemology, in which the realisation of an object is made through processing an input from the environment. This is in great contrast to the epistemology in social representations theory, where interpretations of the social reality are the result of a process of construction rooted in social interactions and negotiations. Thus, where Tversky and Kahneman are focusing on *processing*, leading to a specific *judgement*, Moscovici is focused on *interaction* and *communication*, leading to specific *ways of talking about* a given social phenomenon. The characterisation is thus taking place in two different ways, with two different purposes. In social representations theory, the characterisation of others has an evidently social/cultural purpose, which is making the object in question more comprehensible, or as in the example of the emancipated representation to alter a hegemonic social representation. So, in social representations theory, there is a sense dialectics, where a majority group are constructing how another group is represented, which can be negotiated and resisted by the specific sub-group in an effort of representing themselves in a different way. According to the information processing perspective, judgements whether someone is lazy or not is simply the result of impartially processing information to make a judgement which, even though it might characterise a person as lazy who is really not, is more or less neutral. Furthermore, the relationship between how the social world is conceived, and how we discursively construct is also rather different it in the information processing perspective when compared to the reciprocal relationship in social representations theory, as

the availability of information regarding a social phenomenon, is determining how it is understood in society. Off cause, to some degree, this also applies to social representations theory as well. However, information processing leaves little room for resistance, negotiation and agency to the phenomena itself. The available information, and the computation of it, is determining how a phenomenon appears, and that is as far as it goes.

Finally, it seems fair to ask, whether a concept like laziness, that seems so constituted by social and cultural meanings, can be thoroughly understood in terms of information processing. The experiments carried out by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) usually contained judgements that seem a lot less arbitrary, for example whether a person is an engineer or an architect. An example like that contains a correct and an incorrect answer—either the person is an architect, or she is not an architect (off cause in specific cases, she might be both). Even though the definition of laziness used in this paper implies a rather dichotomous view on laziness, this does not mean that there is necessarily a right and a wrong answer to the question whether a person is lazy or not. Information processing has no room for ambiguity and has difficulties computing information according to the context in which it is encountered. Say the word "unemployed" is the input to be processed—how can the system determine what "kind" of unemployed person we are talking about? For the system to determine which meaning of unemployed is needed, the system would need a way of encoding all possible contexts in which the word might appear. In Jerome Bruner's expression, that would take a "contexicon" with an infinite number of contexts (Bruner 1996, p. 7).

Yet, the heuristics and biases approach is an interesting perspective when examining how human beings characterise others as lazy, as the perspective seem to possess a heuristic power itself—the perspective serves as a practical method for bringing into focus the specific biases that human beings are exposed to when judging someone as lazy, even though the perspective do not succeed in detecting the nuances and complexity of the phenomenon and the potential resistance to the attribute on both the individual and collective level. However, the theory has a pragmatic application. It focuses on the specific process of the actual judgements and emphases personal factors and the biases, such as judging the difficulty of a task based on how well you did on a similar task. Therefore, the perspective serves as a supplement to the other theories in the paper and serves as a useful tool for exploring the concept of laziness, which was the purpose of this paper.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the concept of laziness and the processes involved when human beings characterise others as lazy. This is done from three theoretical perspectives.

Through Jerome Bruner's narrativized folk psychology, it is argued that the conception of laziness follows a narrative logic, by telling a story about the person in question, making her behaviour (or lack of behaviour) sensible. Hence, the understanding of the concept is appropriated through participating in culture, where it is found as a common-sense folk psychological concept for understanding the individuals one encounters. This narrative is used to make sense of specific social phenomena and is also affecting how the person makes sense of her own situation on the individual level. The narrative is recognised in the Christian story about the human species, where laziness is found as one of the seven deadly sins, in the Protestant Work Ethic and "new work ethic" conceives individuals as enterprising, responsible and with exhaustible resources for realising one's hidden potential.

Subsequently, the characterisation of others as lazy is explored from two different theoretical perspectives. First, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's information processing perspective is applied, to shed light on some of the biases human beings can be exposed to, when carrying out judgements whether others are lazy or not. When carrying out these judgements, people are relying on information stored in the semantic and episodic memory, which can lead to erroneous judgements.

Secondly, Serge Moscivici's social representation theory is also applied, to explore how a social representation has been constructed, connecting unemployment and laziness. This construction is the result of the symbolic coping in a majority group. By blaming the individual for not having a job, and thereby ignoring societal factors (e.g. the labour market and its institutions), unemployment is made less threatening and more comprehensible. This social representation regarding unemployment seems to be rooted in postmodern and neoliberal rationales regarding individuality and personal responsibility and effort. Yet, the hegemonic representation can be resisted by the construction and negotiation by another sub-group in society, resulting in an emancipating representation serving to represent a specific social phenomenon in a more positive way, which was shown in a Danish study examining the experience of young Danes who deliberately choose to be unemployed.

Common for the three theories is that laziness is understood and assigned through processes embedded in cultural, social and personal circumstances, which is why characterising others as lazy is a process where the actual effort and motivation of the person is hardly never examined. In Bruner's perspective, the concept of laziness has the function of restoring meaning, when expectations about the persons behaviour are violated. In Moscovici's perspective, meaning is also central as the attribution of laziness is negotiated by the people involved (the characterisers and the characterised). In Tversky and Kahneman's perspective, the decisive factor is the availability and representativeness of similar information, for which reason the actual meaning of the concept is not deemed as very important.

Additionally, it is finally discussed that judgements whether a person is lazy or not is merely a too complex and arbitrary cognitive operation to be carried out and understood through Tversky and Kahneman's heuristics and bias approach (even though the perspective serves as a useful tool for exploring the topic of the paper). Therefore, it can be concluded that laziness is a highly arbitrary and complex phenomenon prescribed to human beings based on a long range of factors seldomly regarding the persons actual effort and motivation in the specific task except for their potential display of acting "non-lazy" to resist associating with the attribute. Thus, by characterising other people lazy, the characteriser discloses more about oneself and one's culture, than about the person being characterised.

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