

# MAKING THE UNFAMILIAR FAMILIAR - SOME NOTES ON THE CRITICISM OF THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

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**Abstract.** The article analyses the critical reception of Serge Moscovici's theory of social representations in Anglo-Saxon literature (Harré 1984; Potter and Litton 1985; Jahoda 1988 and Billig 1988). The criticism is examined with regard to three themes: the unclarity of the theory, the definition of the group and the concept of consensuality, and the process of formation and development of representations. It appeared that the 'social' in Moscovici's theory, however, though largely held to be its chief contribution, is not discussed by these critics, with exception of Harré. The criticism mostly concentrates on pointing out the unclarity of the concepts and the problems of operationalization which derive from it. One may ask whether the aim is to make Moscovici's thoughts familiar by anchoring them onto the individualism of our culture and by objectifying them into the demand for operational definitions. The question is raised, however, as to how lonely a paradigm the theory of social representations actually represents. Finally it is proposed that the 'social' promised by Moscovici's theory should be approached as a problem of the relationship between scientific and everyday conceptions, i.e. in the context of specific aspects of social reality.

This article discusses the critical reception in Anglo-Saxon social psychology of the French social psychologist Serge Moscovici's theory of social representations. The theory belongs to the new paradigm of social constructionism in social psychology (Rijsman and Stroebe 1989). Consequently, Moscovici's theory represents socially oriented social psychology; therefore it is the definition of 'the social' that is the crucial point to observe. Is the theory seen to bring a long-awaited alternative to the individualistic mainstream of social-psychological research, or are the representationalists seen to wave - in McGuire's (1986) phrase - "the social flag" in contemporary European social psychology? The article attempts, then, to analyze the criteria of assessing the new theory that social-psychological discussion has adopted. Thus its aim is to interpret and evaluate this discussion rather than Moscovici's theory as such.

Moscovici's theory of social representations is a theory of social thinking and communication. It is an attempt at unifying problems located at the crossroads between psychology and other social sciences. Social representations are seen as a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communication; "representations are the outcome of an unceasing babble" (Moscovici 1984b, p. 950). Social representations are a sort of environment consisting of concepts and images which, like environments in general, both influences and is influenced by people. The influence of representations, unlike that of the physical environment, is 'invisible' and therefore more fundamental. Social representations are historical: "... they are forced upon us, transmitted, and are the product of a whole sequence of elaborations and of changes which occur in the course of time, and are the achievement of successive generations. All the systems of classification, all the images and all the descriptions which circulate within a society, even scientific ones, imply a link with previous systems and images, a stratification

in the collective memory and a reproduction in the language, which invariably reflects past knowledge, and which breaks the bounds of current information" (Moscovici 1984a, p. 10).

Unlike Durkheim's concept of collective representation, social representations are characteristically a phenomenon of modern society, a society in which changes are too rapid to precipitate into permanent traditions. Their essential feature is the effect of science, a reified universe, on everyday consciousness. Social representations have their origins in the abstract, technical concepts of science, which are transformed into comprehensible, familiar and safe ones in the consensual universe. It is the main function of social representations, in fact, to make the unfamiliar familiar by anchoring new ideas into a pre-existing system (naming and classification) and by objectifying something abstract into something almost concrete (personification and figuration). In his own research, for example, Moscovici (1961/1976) investigated how the theory of psychoanalysis has diffused into French society.

From the point of view of Anglo-Saxon social psychology, the study just mentioned remained concealed behind the language barrier long after its publication in 1961. Soon afterwards, Moscovici (1963) published a critical review of attitude research in the *Annual Review of Psychology*. This article has not been included among the standard references of Anglo-Saxon attitude research, either. The preface to Herzlich's book (1973), however, has been referred to widely (Moscovici 1973), and so has her study of the social representations of health and illness (e.g. Farr 1976). The theory of social representations broke the language barrier into Anglo-Saxon literature in the early 1980's. That is when Moscovici's article in the book 'Social Cognition', edited by Forgas, was published (Moscovici 1981). Since then, Moscovici has published regularly on his theory (Moscovici and Hewstone 1983; Moscovici 1984a; 1984b; 1987; 1988; 1989).

The reception of the theory of social representations took place in the context of the crisis of social psychology and the longing for 'the social' arisen from it. In particular, the so-called European social psychology sprang up in the 1970's as a reaction against the predominant individualistic paradigm. The common denominator of European social psychology has been held to be the social dimension, "a more fully social view of human behaviour" (Tajfel, Jaspars and Fraser 1984). From the outset, Serge Moscovici was among the leaders in European social psychology (Moscovici 1972). The general reception of Moscovici's theory in Europe was enthusiastic, and the theory was praised for its sociality. Recently, even cognitive social psychology, often regarded as sterile, has given Moscovici's theory some glimpses of positive recognition. For instance, Graumann (1988) argues that the social psychological view of knowledge cannot be based on individual psychology. In the last sentence of his article, Graumann throws in the theory of social representations as a promising approach. Social representations have also been seen to offer a fruitful social connection for the processes of attribution (e.g. Hewstone, Jaspars and Lallje 1982; Hewstone and Jaspars 1983).

Besides cheers, however, Moscovici's theory has also been met with criticism. This article examines the content of that criticism and the ways in which the new approach has been received - how the unfamiliar is made familiar.

### THE CRITICISM

In the criticism, at least three stages can be discerned: Rom Harre's (1984) rather neglected but important assessment, the discussion initiated by Jonathan Potter and Ian Litton

(1985), the criticism by Gustav Jahoda (1988) and the coinciding assessment by Michael Billig (1988). In addition, the theory of social representations was discussed in the special issue 4/1987 of the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. The discussion has raised some important questions, but, as usual, the commentators have tended to talk cross purposes. Still, no matter how positive or negative is their final assessment of the theory, they praise it for its sociality. According to Potter and Litton (1985, p. 81), "its promise is to elucidate the social processes involved in the everyday, active construction of the world by participants, and to show how attitudes, beliefs and attributions are formed in terms of these socially derived frameworks". Billig (1988, pp. 1-2) sees the theory as comprising an intellectual revolution, and Moscovici is "both the Marx and the Lenin" of this revolutionary movement. Its goal is a reorientation of social psychology into an anthropological and historical science. Jahoda (1988, p. 195), too, sees the theory of social representations as a "distinctively European challenge" intended to bring about a radical transformation in individualistic social psychology.

In the same breath - and again fairly congruously - the commentators rush to point out the internal inconsistencies of Moscovici's theory and the problems arising from them. In what follows, the criticism is discussed selectively, in terms of three themes: the ambiguity of the theory, the definition of the group and the concept of consensuality, and the processes of formation and transformation of representations.

### **The Inconsistencies**

Gustav Jahoda (1988) aims his criticism mostly at pointing out the conceptual contradiction and obscurity of Moscovici's theory. Moscovici has repeatedly argued that rigorous and testable predictive theories will easily result in theoretical fragmentation; clarity and definition should be an outcome of research instead of being its prerequisite (see e.g. Moscovici, 1985, p. 91). One target of Jahoda's criticism is the unclarity in defining the distinction between collective and social representations; how general or specific the social representations are, and whether they are dependent or independent variables; and what is the relationship of a social representation to culture and ideology and to the concept of the group mind explored by early social psychology. In other words, according to Jahoda the concepts must also be defined in respect to other theories, which Moscovici fails to do; he scarcely ever refers to others' theories.

Jahoda suggests two alternative solutions for remedying the theory, a "hard" one and a "soft" one. The soft option would involve dropping those claims that cannot be adequately substantiated. What would remain is a generic label which would be useful because of its covering a wide range of phenomena. The concept 'social representation' would then describe a given phenomenon in the same way as the concept 'development', for example. The hard option would call for considerable changes in the conceptual formulation and associated methodological approaches so as to meet the requirements of consistency in a scientific theory. The present situation seems to be an unhappy mixture of the two options: a conceptually undefined theory which, while stimulating empirical research, cannot be tested through the results of such research because of the obscurity of its concepts.

The "unhelpful ambiguity" of the notion of social representations is discussed by Potter and Litton in terms of the empirical realization of the theory (Potter and Litton 1985; Litton and Potter 1985). They point out that in the empirical research up to now, no attempts have

been made to develop Moscovici's theoretical formulations, and that the terminology differs from study to study. Apparently, the theory of social representations has brought about no marked changes in the research paradigm. And, as Jahoda (1988) points out, most of the research reports could be presented equally well without the label of social representations. Litton and Potter's criticism is largely a general methodological account of problems which beset psychological research across the board (e.g. the context specificity of accounts).

It is the "grandiose" claims in Moscovici's theory that irritate Potter and Litton. They regard modern discourse analysis, with its more modest aims and its conceptually more analytical approach, as a more suitable instrument for empirical research, too (see e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987, pp. 155-157). What is particularly 'old-fashioned' in Moscovici's theory is its cognitive reductionism where linguistic behavior is seen as a product of underlying mental entities or processes. Potter and Litton suggest that the concept of a social representation should be replaced with the concept of interpretative repertoire, which explores the forms and functions of linguistic behavior.

Billig (1988), too, criticizes some central concepts in Moscovici's theory, similarly from his own - rhetorical - point of view, but his aim is to clarify rather than reject them. According to Billig, Moscovici speaks of social representations in two senses, the universal and the particular. A universal representation is the kind of common sense and practical knowledge that is possessed by all societies and social groups and used to make the world comprehensible. According to the particular interpretation, representations in modern society consist of socially held beliefs which are qualitatively different from those of previous societies; social representations are a specially modern social phenomenon. Today, science is an important source of everyday consciousness: Now "common sense is science made common". Billig suggests that social representations should be talked about in the particular sense only.

### **Group and Consensuality**

Moscovici associates social representations with social groups. The consensual adoption of representations creates the group and its identity, i.e. the boundaries of the representation are the boundaries of the group. Potter and Litton (1985) regard Moscovici's concept of a group as overly unproblematic and point out its risks of circularity. There is a vicious circle of identifying representations through groups and assuming that groups define representations. Moscovici offers no explicit analytic technique for identifying the group regardless of its own representations and characterizations.

The problem of the relationship between the group and the representation also involves this question: To what extent are social representations shared and in what sense are they consensual? Litton and Potter (1985) criticize Moscovici for the staticness of his concept of consensuality, which is further emphasized by empirical studies. Potential intragroup differences are obscured by reliance on mean scores, and the empirical criteria of consensuality are not always stated; consensus appears to be presupposed in empirical analysis rather than allowed to emerge through analysis. Jahoda (1988), too, demands a clarification of the role of statistical frequency as a criterion of consensuality. The statistical identification of consensuality seems, however, to be a sidetrack. As a representative of "dynamic" and "holistic" consensuality - as he describes himself - Moscovici does not, of course, support the statistical line of thought. All the same, this criticism may reflect a

general problem of defining the social, with staticness as one of its consequences. At least in empirical studies, there has been difficulty in making "the babble" heard.

In Harré's (1984) opinion, Moscovici's theory has not managed to get away from the individual paradigm. Moscovici's point of departure, similarly to the statistical view of consensuality, is distributive plurality, i.e. members of the group share an attribute with the others. This is an individualistic conception, since it is concerned with shared individual attributes. The opposite of this view is collective plurality. It is based on the idea that the group, as a supraindividual, has an attribute which no individual member of the group has. Social representations boil down, then, to individual representations, which, according to Harré's analysis, is due to the concept of the group. In Moscovici's theory, the group is a taxonomic aggregate formed on the principle of an attribute being shared by individuals. Only structured groups are real groups, in which human relationships are organized by rights, duties and roles.

Potter and Litton (1985) find Moscovici's view of consensuality as the "social cement" of groups unconvincing. They consider it necessary to specify the particular level of consensus. By means of such specification, one can avoid the naive approach of trying to interpret an expression as such, out of its context and goal. The specification is also a concretization of what "the babble" emphasized by Moscovici might consist of. In other words, explanatory schemes (social representations) define the scope and the limits of disagreement rather than eliminate it. There have even been some empirical attempts (Hraba, Hagendoorn and Hagendoorn 1989) to clarify the interpretation of social representations as dynamic processes, as suggested in the criticism.

Here we find a point of contact with the criticism voiced by Billig. From his rhetorical point of view, Billig (1988) emphasizes that the thinking society in Moscovici's theory must be an arguing society, in which the "voices of dispute and controversy are ceaselessly heard". The pitfall of the theory of social representations is the general tendency in cognitive research to identify thinking with categorization and forget the equally necessary and adaptive counterprocess, that of particularization (cf. Billig 1985). Argumentation is based on contrary themes within social representations. It is precisely the contrary themes that provide the content for discussion and thought.

The criticism dealing with the relationship between the group and the representation has definitely influenced the theory of social representations. In the latest version, Moscovici (1988, pp. 221-222) distinguishes three kinds of representations: 1) hegemonic, or uniform and coercive representations, which prevail in all symbolic and affective practices, 2) emancipated representations, which derive from the circulation of knowledge and ideas belonging to subgroups, and 3) polemic representations, or those which are expressed as acceptance and resistance and created in social conflicts. The classification is elucidatory but raises new questions. How does it change the description of representations as processes: Will each type of representation require its own psychology, perhaps?

### **Psychological processes and the transformation of representations**

According to Moscovici's theory, the unfamiliar becomes familiar through anchoring and objectification. Semin (1985) sees research on the social psychological processes which are involved in the production and reproduction of social representations as a prerequisite for progressing from the phenomenon to theory. There is the danger that the empirical research

will concentrate mostly on the description of social content. Even worse, Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 145) have asserted that Moscovici's formulation of the dual processes of anchoring and objectification is "little more than an exercise in speculative cognitive psychology", whose metaphorical language will not provide the means of even identifying the processes involved.

There is the question of the transformation of social representations. If all cognitions are based - as Moscovici seems to assume - on social representations, if "memory predominates over logic and the response over the stimulus", how can a new social object be recognized and how can the process of anchoring begin at all? Jahoda (1988) points out that Moscovici also fails to adduce any arguments for the motive of making the unfamiliar familiar. People are also curious, interested in new things. Jahoda's own suggestion is to investigate the genesis of representations in the Piagetian way, through assimilation and accommodation. Moscovici's theory is being criticized, then, for its one-way view of social influence, while elsewhere Moscovici himself (1976) has levelled detailed criticism at the traditional approach to social influence for its conservative presuppositions.

Billig (1988) applies his universal-particular dichotomy to the description of representation processes. He posits that anchoring is a typically universal activity, in which information is rapidly processed on the basis of pre-existing schemata and in a generalizing way that is susceptible to certain distortions. Anchoring is a common constituent process of thinking and perceiving, for all groups and societies possess systems of naming and classifying. Objectification, making the abstract material, on the other hand, is a particular process. Any idea, regardless of its content, can be anchored, but only certain ideas can be objectified. These include non-religious abstract ideas, prototypically represented by scientific theories. It is through objectifications that modern consciousness, permeated by social representations, has developed. With objectified consciousness, the transcendental or abstract elements have been made concrete, and the ultimate reality is a perceptible reality. Billig's thesis is then that only in the case of objectified consciousness can we speak of a social representation.

All critics come, each in his own way, to demand the particular point of view proposed by Billig. Social representations must be investigated in their concrete and historical contexts. Moscovici himself will hardly object; he has in fact emphasized the same point (Moscovici 1985).

### **MAKING THE UNFAMILIAR FAMILIAR?**

To sum up the different issues brought forward by the critics: Harré is the only one to explicitly discuss the concept of the social in Moscovici's theory; Billig applies his universal-particular dichotomy to the processes of representation; Potter, Litton and Jahoda concentrate on problems in the concepts and in the empirical implementation of the theory. The rhetorical point of view proposed by Billig is complementary, not an alternative as Litton and Potter's discourse analysis is. Moreover, Billig is the only one to give specific attention to the dependence of the theory of social representations on society. His question is: Under what conditions is the theory an adequate approach to describing reality, i.e. modern consciousness? The other critics are more concerned with the validity of the theory of social representations as a general scientific theory.

Despite the differences, the various criticisms also share common traits which characterize the reception of Moscovici's theory within European social psychology. Firstly, the discussion typically goes cross purposes; secondly, the most distinct target of the criticism is the difficulty of operationalizing the concepts of the theory; thirdly, the question of different research paradigms is not addressed; and fourthly, there is an astounding silence regarding the crucial point of the theory of social representations, i.e. sociality, which is only received with a general hum of approval.

It is on these four common traits that we shall focus in this final section.

1) The criticism of the theory of social representations demonstrates once more that the starting-point of any assessment is the author's own predilections. The result is more of a monologue than a dialogue striving after a common goal. There seems to be a tendency to translate Moscovici's ideas into the language of each commentator's own theory and preferred methodology. Is the talking cross purposes a more general symptom of the way in which a new issue is dealt with in scientific discourse? The field of the discussion is, after all, European social psychology, in which the initial flush of excitement was followed by a stage of reorganization characterized by a struggle for positions. The commentators strive to stand out, to emphasize their own contribution to the field - to impress their own colors on the social flag. Moscovici participates in the discussion by stressing his own originality, by proclaiming to represent a "lonely paradigm". The new issues put forward by him, just as anyone else, must be tamed by placing them in the recipient's own conceptual framework. Moscovici's originality can be refuted simply by stating, for example, that the X in his theory is the same as the Y in the theory of myself or somebody else, which has, moreover, been formulated earlier and much better.

2) The main source of irritation in Moscovici's theory is the ambiguity of its concepts. The commentators see it as unfamiliar and proceed to make it familiar and manageable through demands of operationalization and through criticizing the empirical research. The conceptual problems of the theory emerge as problems of empirical realization. The theory cannot be tested through the results of empirical research because of the ambiguity of its concepts. The consequence is, as Jahoda (1988) pointed out, that most of the research reports could be presented fairly well without the label of social representations. Thus the relationship between theory and empirical research remains vague and problematic. From the point of view of dealing with the unfamiliar, however, this lack of correspondence between the empirical studies and the theory is a "good" thing. It does prove that Moscovici's theory is not, after all, unfamiliar and unreachable. Social representations are investigated with familiar methods, the use of which involves all the generally known problems. By directing its attention and steering the discussion into the issue of operationalization the criticism itself may silently fuse the theory of social representations into the dominant mode of empirical research, methodological individualism.

3) Moscovici refutes the criticism of the ambiguity of his concepts by continuously arguing that the theory of social representations comprises a completely different research paradigm. In his article in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Moscovici already stated that the issue is not the scientific status of a certain method; the issue is the function of the methods: Are they aimed at verification rather than discovery (Moscovici 1963, p. 254)? Despite Moscovici's repeated reminders, the question of different research paradigms is not addressed - or even noticed? - in the discussion. The reason may be that discovery is the

generally accepted, self-evident goal in all research. Even so, the logics and means of discovery are widely different from each other.

In comparison with both the traditional positivist theory and modern discourse analysis, Moscovici's conception of discovery appears to be at least somewhat undisciplined, because his theory is not a strong one in the sense of defining methodology. It seems evident that the issue of discovery versus verification requires a discussion of research paradigms. The most essential topic would have to be: What is meant by theory? An interesting beginning for such a discussion is the articles published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* 5/1989 concerning different notions of theory and the methodological and epistemological questions in contemporary social psychology.

4) It is the promise of the social that has made Moscovici's theory important. Unfortunately, this issue gets little specific attention in the criticism. The social is dealt with only at the level of declaring common good intentions, waving the banner to rally the troops. Does the lack of discussion reflect a fundamental individualism, showing as a lack of words and concepts to describe the social, in European culture too? Are the Europeans, too, living "in a culture that offers no alternative to individual representations, no language for expressing needs and concerns that transcend those of individuals and express those of groups", as Moscovici describes the situation of his American colleagues (Moscovici 1988, p. 245)? What about Moscovici himself? Harré is the only one to give explicit attention to the social in the theory of social representations, and his assessment is the most devastating: Moscovici's social representations are basically individual representations.

The discussion that has been carried on raises two crucial questions. Firstly, is Moscovici's theory and its promise of the social being made familiar by anchoring it to the individual representation prevailing in our culture and by objectifying its unfamiliar ideas into the demand for empirical operationalizations? The established mode of empirical research not only makes Moscovici's theory familiar in scientific discourse; it may also constitute a real danger to the theory itself. Research which just waves the banner of social representations, without having broken loose from the conventional methodology with all its implicit commitments, faces serious difficulties. Similarly, stereotype and attitude research has evinced a tendency of the established methodology living on and stubbornly resisting all change. No matter what new conceptual developments occur, stereotypes and attitudes are simply measured with the traditional methods, i.e. the analysis is conducted and the results are expressed in terms of individual responses. Consequently, the individualistic bias of attitude research is maintained and even reproduced.

Secondly, is Moscovici's theory really such a lonely paradigm as he makes it out to be? If it is basically an individualistic theory, as Harré suggests, it is subject to easy digestion through this common permeating heritage. As far as actual empirical research is concerned, the research on social representations has not proved to be particularly "lonely", unlike e.g. research orientations representing strong social constructionism. Adherents to the latter have difficulty in getting their results published in the traditional journals of social psychology precisely because of their methodological position, which - contrary to Moscovici's - calls for the use of constructionist methods based on the same social epistemology as their theory (Gergen 1989; Stroebe and Kruglanski 1989).

How should the concept of the social, then, be discussed within the field of social psychology? Rijsman and Stroebe (1989) place the current orientations in social psychology into the dimension strong psychologism - strong social constructionism. In this dimension,

different positions vary with regard to the unspoken paradigms of the discussion sketched above: epistemology, their methodologies, and their notions of theory. However, the central factor in the dimension described by Rijsman and Strobe, as we see it, is how the social is understood and defined. According to the strong social constructionist approach, both scientific concepts and social representations are formed in the same manner. Gergen's description of the formation of scientific concepts, for example, bears a striking resemblance to Moscovici's description of the formation of social representations (Gergen 1985; 1989). We find that a crucial point in the criticism of the theory of social representations. One central notion in Moscovici's theory is the relationship between science and everyday thinking - a characteristic feature of modern consciousness. It is in this notion that the promising as well as the weak points of Moscovici's theory lie. Contrary to what the strong social constructionist approach suggests, the problems of the formation processes of scientific and everyday conceptions cannot be solved by assuming them to be similar. This is because the social conditions under which the conceptions are formed are different, depending on the power structures of the society. Scientific and everyday conceptions differ, for example, according to the legitimacy, the authority and the publicity they receive. In this respect, Moscovici's theory has the merit that it offers a possibility of investigating the dynamics of these socially different representations.

This very issue was the starting-point of the theory of social representations (Moscovici 1961/1976), as far as its content was concerned, and the theory was thus directed towards a particular, definite realm of reality. And it is precisely in this manner - tied to specific aspects of social reality - that the concept of the social should be approached. A return to the roots of the theory of social representations, i.e. concentration on issues of the relationships between scientific and everyday conceptions, would seem a rational solution. This is also what Billig's criticism seems to be basically aimed at. From this point of view, Moscovici's theory could perhaps be critically reviewed with respect to the following questions:

1) Is the division between the scientific world and the consensual world too categorical, and is research activity completely outside social representations? 2) Is Moscovici's view of science overly generalized, e.g. does all research aim at making the familiar unfamiliar - have not the social sciences in particular been accused of reproducing common knowledge? 3) Do the worlds of bureaucracy and politics, occupied with their abstract and technical concepts, also create social representations? 4) How is the power structure of society reflected in the creation and establishment of social representations?

At any rate, the theory of social representations is likely to retain its significance as a challenger. An eventual focusing in the research on studying the relationships of scientific and everyday conceptions in modern consciousness would by no means result in Moscovici's theory losing its significance as a general approach: the theory is, after all, quite uncompromising in its insistence that social phenomena be investigated in their historico-cultural contexts. As Moscovici says, "For all 'cognition', all 'motivation' and all 'behaviour' only exist and have repercussions insofar as they signify something, and signifying implies, by definition, at least two people sharing a common language, common values and common memories".

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