Social Representations of Threatening Phenomena: The Self-Other Thema and Identity Protection

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ABSTRACT

Themata are the antimonies or dyadic oppositions that lie at the root of common sense and shape how we make sense of issues in the social world. This paper showcases and extends understanding of the role played by themata in the social representations literature, with specific reference to their role in structuring public responses to threatening phenomena. To this end the paper reviews empirical research examining how publics engage with a range of contemporary risk issues, namely climate change, earthquakes and emerging infectious diseases (EID). It demonstrates that a core thema, that of *self/other*, underpins public engagement with these diverse risks. By drawing together insights from the three risks it demonstrates not only that a single thema can drive a diverse set of representational fields but also the consequences of this thema both for a society's

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insiders and its outsiders. Primarily, it has the consequence of identity protection and complacency for insiders and potential spoiling of identity for outsiders.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the building blocks that structure people's common sense thinking regarding the dangers that they face. Research on social representations of risks has revealed that a single thema, *self/other,* shapes public engagement with a diverse range of threats. The current paper leverages this case to develop theorization of the role played by themata in the construction of common sense, and to advance understanding of the underlying drivers of social responses to contemporary risk issues.

The paper begins by identifying the role played by themata in structuring social representations. It then reviews a series of studies that demonstrate the centrality of the *self/other* thema in how publics conceptualise contemporary risks. The paper argues that this thema, and its concomitant identity-protective function, pervades the social representations of many, if not all, risks. The paper explores the profound implications this thema has for intergroup relations and risk-related thought and behaviour.

Social representations and themata

Social representations theory provides an important theoretical framework with which to understand how people construct their 'common sense' in the face of potential dangers

(Moscovici, 1976; 2008). Risks, or the potential dangers that sit on the horizon of people's awareness, need to be assimilated, taken in, by the individuals and communities confronted with them. Within the social representations paradigm, the process of assimilating such dangers has been most commonly understood in terms of anchoring and objectification (e.g. Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002; Washer, Joffe and Solberg, 2008).Yet there is a further dimension of the apprehension process that requires elaboration: that social representations are built upon a dialogical base in which certain themata underpin the scope of the representational field. Such themata not only structure the range of possible meanings concerning the particular risk, but also serve identifiable social psychological functions. In expanding upon this it will be demonstrated that the *self/other* thema, which underpins the range of meanings concerning many risks, serves an identity-protective function for hegemonic groups and a potentially identity-spoiling function for others.

Epistemologically, social representations derive from 'multifaceted and multi-voiced human minds' (Liu, 2004, p. 251) that are fundamentally reflexive as well as historically, culturally and socially embedded. Drawing on Bakhtin's (Bakhtin, 1981) principles of dialogism, Markova (2000) argues that social representations offer a valuable alternative to those concepts that derive from the individualistic epistemologies that characterise more traditional cognitive and information processing approaches. Rather than analyzing thought as a property of self-contained, isolated individuals, social representations theory seeks to provide theoretical and empirical insight into the thoughts and behaviors of people *in relation to others*. A further aspect of this dialogism is that the concepts on which people draw are not linear and unipolar but, rather, contain opposite polarities. The diversity of the social world is reflected in the individual mind,

such that people draw on a range of ideas within a representational spectrum in forming their social representations.

The theory of themata operationalizes the dialogicality of social representations theory (Markova, 2000, 2003). Themata are the antimonies or dyadic oppositions that lie at the root of common sense and shape how we make sense of issues in the social world. For example, a representation of AIDS as 'gay plague' is driven by antinomies of dirt/cleanliness, morality/immorality and life/death (Markova, 2003). Themata shape how people view and interact with the world, since new information is overlaid upon these deep-rooted cultural categories (Markova, 2003). They form the latent structures that mould and direct the content of our evolving common sense (Liu, 2004). This means that people can vacillate between different positions in forging social representations. This facilitates communication by ensuring that people have access to a range of different perspectives on the issue. Themata structure the plane within which discussion of a particular entity proceeds (Holton, 1975).

A relatively small number of themata can form the foundation for an infinite variety of surface content; for example, Holton (1996) contends that approximately one hundred themata (such as certainty/uncertainty and complexity/simplicity) underpin all scientific thought. This paper expands on this to demonstrate that a single thema is accountable for commonalities in how publics respond to diverse forms of threat. Specifically, it focuses on how the thema *self/other* manifests across social representations of three forms of risk: EID, climate change and earthquakes. Drawing on empirical studies in each of these spheres, the paper demonstrates that similar content underpins how publics engage with these different risk issues at an implicit level, even if the surface-level representations appear to be quite different. This advances theoretical discussion of the role that themata play in the construction of common sense by highlighting how

they can be harnessed by the identity-protective function of common sense. The paper also has practical implications for the design of risk communication initiatives, by affording a nuanced sense of what underpins risk representation and behaviour.

The following sections will discuss how the *self/other* polarity is manifest in common sense thinking regarding the three risks. By 'self' the paper refers to one's in-group as well as individual self, and by 'other' those one relates to as out-groups and not-self, reflecting the SRT position on the social nature of identity (Moloney & Walker, 2007).

A positively valenced 'self' and negatively valenced 'other'

Considerable research shows that social representations are intimately intertwined with social identity: social representations both arise out of and work to consolidate collective identifications (Breakwell, 1993). One key way in which social representation impinges on social identity dynamics is in the negotiation of boundaries between particular social groups. This is exemplified in the important role the self/other thema takes in representing risks. An important facet of the self/other thema is that it is valenced: namely, 'self' is associated with a positive valence and 'other' with a negative valence. This is particularly salient in social representations of EID, climate change and, to some extent, in those of earthquakes. At an implicit level, social representations of these risks are structured according to this valenced split.

In the social representation of EID the juxtaposition of a healthy self and diseased other is highly prevalent and illustrates the split particularly clearly. The early decades of the AIDS crisis provide a vivid example of the central importance of the self/other thema in how this risk was conceptualised. Social representations of AIDS were characterised by blame of marginalised groups, such as gay men, sex workers and drug users for the origin and spread of AIDS in many

cultures (Joffe, 1999). Groups associated with activities deemed morally unacceptable by mainstream society were blamed for 'leaking' the disease into the rest of the population (Joffe, 1999) in a wide range of contexts (e.g. Goodwin, *et al*., 2003). While this general pattern of attribution was pervasive, the particular groups blamed differed across societies, in accordance with prevailing cultural hierarchies. For example, in the highly patriarchal social context of Zambia, teenage girls and female sex workers were positioned alongside (Western) homosexuals as primary conduits of the virus (Joffe & Bettega, 2003). The constant characteristic of the social representations of AIDS across cultures was that the disease was associated with the 'other', which left the self uncontaminated or, if it 'leaked', blameless for the contamination.

The valenced self/other dichotomy is also manifest within social representations of myriad other EID. It is strongly apparent in social representations of zoonotic diseases (i.e. EID transmitted to humans via animals). Studies of social representations of recent epidemics of SARS, H1N1 ('swine flu') and H5N1 ('bird flu') confirm that marginalised groups within a society are frequently singled out as culpable for these outbreaks. For example, in a study of Hong Kong Chinese women's representations of Avian Influenza (Joffe & Lee, 2004), participants positioned the unhygienic practices of poultry-traders in mainland China as a principal cause of the outbreak. This reflected class-based derogation, where mainland Chinese market chicken sellers were construed as dirty and money-led. Furthermore, analysis of British media representations of SARS showed that blame was levelled at Asian farmers and the rural poor (Washer, 2004). Disgust and contempt characterised the ways the media described these culpable populations' lifestyles and living conditions, namely close proximity to animals and poor sanitation infrastructure. This pattern of explanation reinforces the stigmatisation of marginalised populations, and serves to distance the self/ingroup from the origin of the threat

posed by the virus. The threat of 'leakage' of the virus into the ingroup works to redouble the abhorrence with which affected groups are regarded. This was evident in the desertion of New York's Chinatown at the time of SARS due to generalised associations made between Chinese Asians and SARS (Eichelberger, 2007).

While the othering of EID risk can interact with epidemiological 'realities' (for example, sex workers, in many contexts, are indeed at higher risk of contracting HIV), the link to material circumstances may be wholly absent. In the case of the Swine Flu Pandemic of 2009/10, Malaysian pig farmers who were anxious about the risk of swine flu given the association between pig farms and swine flu, inflated the vulnerability to infection faced by 'moral out-groups' such as prostitutes, homosexuals and homeless people (Goodwin *et al*., 2011). Thus, these cultural 'others' continue to be positioned as receptacles of blame, even in the absence of any direct epidemiological connection to the disease in question. This strongly suggests a motivated dimension to this attributional pattern.

This is further illustrated in social representations of global warming and climate change. A self/other dyad or antimony underpinned the most prevalent themes regarding social representations of climate change among a sample of London-based British residents (Smith & Joffe, 2013). In the UK, the other is seen as perpetrator of climate change whereby developing countries, as well as the USA, are blamed for not doing enough to tackle climate change. Furthermore, the serious impacts of climate change are also located 'out there'. In contrast to how the other is construed, Self is manifest through descriptions of solutions to climate change, particularly recycling, which is experienced as giving one a 'little thrill' due to the sense of personal contribution to a healthier environment. Placing objects into a recycling bin help people to visualise their own contribution.

A similar trend was noted by Wibeck (2014) in a Swedish sample, where climate change was framed within an energy efficiency discourse. This discourse encouraged people to sort household waste, turn off unnecessary lights and limit unnecessary flying. While energy saving behaviours are treated with ambivalence by some who are caught between what they want to do and what is socially responsible (Castro et al, 2009), for those who are more environmentally conscious, and for whom recycling is an important aspect of their self-identity, self-esteem is boosted when enabled to conduct manageable, small-scale actions that are framed as helping the environment. These actions therefore buttress a sense of positive identity, in which the self is valued as a positive contributor to the wider world. However, this tendency of valancing 'self' as positive and 'other' as negative is not absolute in representations of climate change risk and in some instances can be subverted. Although generally not a majority position in most studies, Olausson (2011), for example, found that phrases such as "we humans have destroyed the planet" and "we're the ones to blame" appeared frequently in Swedish social representations of the causes of climate change. This suggests that blame for climate change had been internalised with this sample attributing responsibility to their own actions.

Self, other and power

The self/other thema not only protects the self and in-group from association with risks and/or their origins: it also has implications for relations of power. In many, if not all cases, 'self' and 'other' are groups locked in an unequal power dynamic (Joffe, 1995). Since more dominant groups have more power to shape social discourse, the absolution of 'self' and blaming of 'other' for risks often functions to perpetuate these intergroup inequalities. Symbolically associating a marginalised 'other' with disorder and contamination fuels their denigration by mainstream

society, while constructing them as the source of the threat legitimises steps to monitor and constrain their activity. For instance, the association of HIV/AIDS with homosexual men perpetuated their stigmatisation as unclean 'others' and justified authorities' attempts to control and cast judgement on their sexual practices. Joffe's (1995) interviews with homosexual men during the HIV/AIDS epidemic demonstrate how this sense of spoiled identity was internalised by many gay men in Britain and South Africa, who echoed mainstream representations of same-sex relationships as shameful and unnatural. In a global context, the close association of EID such as AIDS and Ebola with Africa persists in contemporary Western representations, reinforcing a stereotype of African populations as weak and primitive.

However, the self/other thema can also be marshalled in efforts to resist oppressive or derogatory representations (Joffe, 1995). Many African societies, for example, have not simply internalised Western theories of AIDS. Rather, they have engaged in their own othering processes, frequently directing blame at Western governments, science and immoral lifestyles (Joffe, 1999; Joffe & Bettega, 2003). Joffe's (1995) aforementioned interview study showed that the internalisation of a spoiled identity can be accompanied by efforts to subvert the discourses of the powerful. For example, invoking conspiracy theories that implicated scientific, military or intelligence establishments in the creation and spread of the virus functioned to mitigate the blame directed towards the homosexual community. The ubiquity of the othering of AIDS across cultures, despite the differences in the 'others' who were implicated, suggests that this may be a universal social psychological propensity, rather than an artefact of culturally-specific historical circumstances.

Thus, the self/other thema can be adapted to suit different groups' identity-protective ends. However, these processes must be considered in their socio-political context, in which

different groups have different levels of power over the evolution of social representations. Marginalised groups may indeed gain a sense of vindication from constructing representations that blame a powerful 'other', and a sense of common enemy may strengthen collective efficacy (Joffe, 1995). However, a relative paucity of material and social resources limits their access to the public sphere to publicise these representations, which makes genuine material empowerment more difficult to achieve. The othering dynamics intrinsic in social representations of risk are therefore more likely to entrench than undermine existing unequal power structures.

The contingency of EID explanations on the self/other thema means that explanations change in line with changing conceptions of 'self' and 'other'. In particular, many Western democracies have recently seen a growing alienation from political power (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), and a corresponding readiness to blame governments for health threats (Joffe, 2011). For example, Joffe *et al*. (2011) found that social representations of MRSA were characterised by an attribution of the threat to the British government's neglect of its National Health Service: ineffectual, dishonest and corrupt management were represented as to blame for producing dirty, disease-spreading hospitals. Here the blamed other is not a marginalised group but, rather, a more powerful entity. This is 'upward' rather than the more traditional 'downward' blame (Joffe et al., 2011).

Blaming of governments is also a common theme in social representations of climate change risk. In Smith and Joffe's (2013) exposition of how environmental harm was construed as perpetuated by other nations, blame was frequently laid at the feet of other countries' governments, including the USA, China and India. These were represented as "chief polluters" responsible for global anthropogenic warming (Smith & Joffe, 2013). In line with the finding that powerful elites are held responsible for many contemporary risks (see Joffe, 2011), British

respondents often criticised President George W. Bush for his administration's antagonistic attitude towards the climate. He was identified as a symbol towards which people could direct feelings of anger and frustration (Smith & Joffe 2013). The controversy concerning the unauthorised release of climate scientists' e-mails (dubbed 'Climategate') added a further aspect of 'upward' blame, that onto an 'expert other' (Leiserowitz, *et al*. 2013a).

A powerful, blamed 'other' is also a prominent feature within social representations of earthquakes, particularly in societies where corruption is deemed to be high (see Escaleras *et al.* 2007). In their cross-cultural study exploring social representations of earthquakes in the highly seismic areas of Izmir (Turkey), Osaka (Japan) and Seattle (USA), Joffe *et al.* (2013) found that members of the Turkish public, in particular, blamed corruption of the Turkish construction industry and an untrustworthy government for the extent of damage to life and property that earthquakes produce in Turkey. This Turkish data also revealed a unique dynamic in the operation of the self/other thema in risk representations. Joffe et al.'s (2013) analysis suggested that rather than absolving the self from blame, the attribution of earthquake damage to institutional corruption had been internalised by the Turkish public. The narrative of corruption fuelled a devaluation of their country and national character, and a sense of personal shame in participants for these national failings. This sense of spoiled collective identity inflated rather than mitigated their sense of their own culpability in and susceptibility to earthquake hazard.

This example highlights the importance of examining social representations of risks cross-culturally. The self/other thema may play out differently in more collectivist, rather than more individualist cultures. If one identifies heavily with the state, and it is deemed corrupt, that corruption may well spoil one's own identity rather sitting 'out there', as an accusation levelled at a separate entity, which absolves self from blame.

Self, other and distance

Notions of distance are prevalent in how the self/other thema is manifest in social representations of risk issues. *Social* distance, for example, is particularly prevalent in social representations of EID, with the healthy self juxtaposed with a derogated and diseased other. Yet distance is also manifest in two further ways in social representations of climate change and earthquake risk. First and foremost, *temporal* distance is a key way in which lay people conceptualise these potential catastrophes. This can have the effect of undermining action; the catastrophe is so far in the future that inaction is justified. Secondly, in studies of lay representations of earthquakes and climate change, these threats are construed as *spatially* distant from the self. This has similar action-inhibiting effects, since the threat is not seen as directed at one's own locality.

Smith and Joffe's (2013) study of British social representations of global warming found that climate change *impacts* were to the fore for most participants, and that the majority located these impacts in distant, overseas places. Since 'melting ice' was the dominant representation of global warming, objectified in vivid descriptions of icebergs crashing into the sea and polar bears struggling for survival, far-off places clearly lay at the heart of this representation. This has been echoed in a number of studies, including Wibeck's (2014) study of the Swedish public, who saw climate change as a global problem with severe but far-away consequences.

Beyond these more qualitative studies, several survey studies confirm that the belief that climate change is a more serious threat for other places, rather than one's home, is widespread across populations (Spence, *et al*. 2012; Leiserowitz, *et al*. 2013b). In a North American study that elicited people's free associations to the term 'global warming', for example, impacts associated with melting polar ice dominated. This was interpreted as evidence that North

Americans saw global warming as spatially distant from everyday experience (Leiserowitz, 2005). British survey studies have revealed similar results (Lorenzoni, *et al*. 2006).

In keeping with social representations of climate change, publics also physically distance themselves from earthquake threat by imagining that other places are more vulnerable. A cross-cultural study of residents of Seattle (USA) and Osaka (Japan), both highly seismic areas, showed that the citizens of each country saw their own threat from the effects of earthquakes as low relative to that of other countries (Joffe, *et al*. 2013). Instead of exclusively contemplating their own perilous position, they concentrated their attention on places that they perceived to be at higher risk than their own locality, such as developing countries, which were construed as having unsafe infrastructure. Such place-comparisons allowed people to sustain a view of their own home as a relatively safe place.

The othering detected by Joffe *et al.* (2013) corresponds with results from other investigations of earthquake beliefs and risk perceptions. Becker *et al.* (2013) found that members of New Zealand communities living in three separate earthquake-prone regions viewed other people and places as more vulnerable to disasters than themselves. Such beliefs fostered a sense of protection of the self from danger, which discouraged people from taking action to prepare themselves for earthquakes.

The tendency to distance self from threat gives rise to the paradox that Uzzell (2000) terms an inverse distance effect: Issues are seen as more serious when positioned globally rather than locally, yet distancing them geographically from the space of the self diminishes the sense of how personally-threatening they are. Such 'spatial optimism' lets people take comfort in the belief that 'here is better than there' (Gifford, *et al*. 2009). Although this trend is showing some signs of weakening in certain localised contexts (e.g. Capstick *et al.,* 2015 who found that those

with direct personal experience of flooding had heightened perceptions of climate change threat), a robust literature exists documenting the 'psychological distancing' effect which occurs in public representations of risk issues (Spence *et al.,* 2012).

DISCUSSION

This paper has identified the ubiquity of a core thema in social representations of three contemporary risk issues. The manner in which publics engage with EID, climate change and earthquakes is underpinned by a dyadic opposition of self vs. other. This can manifest in social distance where the self is represented as positively valenced and the other, negatively valenced. It also manifests in temporal distance in which the self is constructed as immune from the threat because those others in a future time will be affected. Finally, when representations are constituted by spatial distancing, the self is immune because the potential catastrophe affects those in different spatial locations, which are often deemed less able to handle the threat than the more powerful space of the self is.

Themata are 'historically embedded, deep-seated and taken-for-granted' (Liu, 2004: 255). Their enduring appeal requires themata to have an inherent dynamism in order to facilitate the integration of traditional ideas with modern ones (Moloney *et al.,* 2012). This paper contributes to understanding the durability of themata by highlighting their adaptability: the research reviewed above shows how the self/other thema can be adapted to suit the different socio-cultural contexts of the risks that are being represented. For instance, the workings of this thema may play out differently in individualist versus collectivist societies. In individualist social contexts the thema effectively leaves those whose representations are underpinned by it with a sense that

blame or vulnerability lies elsewhere, thereby absolving self from worry concerning the imminence of the threat. In more collectivist societies, however, it may be that since the boundaries between self and other are less clearly delineated, distancing self from a blamed other may not work to absolve blame but rather leaves one identifying with the blamed party and thereby spoiling one's identity.

Themata also persist across historical time. The use of the morality/immorality thema, for example, to thematise representations of Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) and then AIDS illustrates how themata can resurface to structure different representations within particular social and temporal contexts (Markova, 2003). A key historical change in dynamics of the self/other thema pertains to the groups and individuals who are positioned as the blamed other. Across numerous risk fields, there has been a recent switch from downward to upward blame; that is from othering existing marginalised groups to othering powerful institutions like governments, industry and health authorities. Representations of EID, for example, traditionally juxtaposed the healthy self with a disadvantaged and morally derogated other who was blamed for the disease's cause and spread. However, contemporary representations of contemporary pandemics often position the powerful rather than the weak as other. This resonates with the changing socio-political context captured in Beck's notion of the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), which posits that many of the risks that threaten public safety today essentially derive from modernization and industrialisation (e.g. climate change). The inability of scientific, political and economic expertise to contain the risks they have generated fosters growing distrust in industry and government. The thema of self/other endures these historical shifts by adapting the boundaries of who and what is considered other.

The self/other thema must also operate within the contingencies of social psychological

motives. According to Joffe (1996) and Wagner *et al.* (2002), social representations are employed as a mechanism of symbolic coping with threats. In parallel to the way that people cope materially with threat (e.g. by way of early warning systems or disease screening), we can also cope at the level of symbolism and representation. For publics who have to contend with the threats presented by EID, climate change and earthquakes, social, physical and temporal distance are employed to lend a sense of safety. Spatial distance is particularly prevalent in social representations of climate change and earthquake risk. Representing threats as distant, often objectified in striking visualisations of remote and faraway lands, can cultivate a sense of detachment for many individuals. Premising representations on the self-other thema thus facilitates the psychological drive to maintain a sense of comfort and safety.

Further constraints within which the self/other thema must operate relate to social identity and intergroup relations. Decades of social psychological research show that humans are motivated to enhance the relative status of their own group (Tajfel, 1981) and justify existing social hierarchies (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). The self/other thema allows for these identity functions to be satisfied in representing risk. Using the risk to vilify or denigrate the other, in particular, functions to perpetuate intergroup divisions and inequalities, and strengthen the ingroup's positive sense of identity. Most commonly, the self/other is valenced in terms of 'self=good', 'other=bad'.

Thus, exploring how the thema of self and other is manifest in representations of risk issues highlights the central role played by identity in common sense thinking. Several scholars argue that a sense of identity is negotiated and constructed through social representations (Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002; Jovchelovitch, 2007). Through the process of constructing common sense, social representations develop to enable individuals and groups to position

themselves within particular representational fields and thereby stimulate the process of identity construction (Rochira, 2014). Rather than treating identity construction as a static process, as reflected in mainstream theories such as social categorisation theory and to some extent social identity theory, the social representations conception of identity hinges on a recognition of the tension between how we view ourselves and how others view us (Howarth, 2002). Public engagement with risk studies demonstrate that identity categories are elaborated and re-assembled on an ongoing basis, as they are marshalled to make sense of the threats with which people are confronted. This brings the complex and dynamic relationship between self and other to the fore.

A key contention of the themata concept is that themata operate generally unnoticed, at the non-conscious level. Elaborating the implicit nature of themata therefore also advances theory by tapping a psycho-dynamic element of social representations, which develops earlier work on the role played by the unconscious in public responses to threat (Joffe, 1996). More specifically, Joffe (1996) explored the emotive nature of social representations, arguing that from a psycho-dynamic perspective anxiety experienced by the self is allayed by representing risks in a comforting way (i.e. as affecting other people). The exploration offered by this paper adds to this implicit level, focussing on the dialogical content that drives surface level thinking. This dialogical level is formed by the interplay of opposing categories, but is linked to the more emotive level in that categories are never neutral: they are always imbued with emotion. The strong emotional impulse to protect the self and denigrate the other drives the way themata manifest in thought and behaviour, with very tangible consequences for intergroup relations and behavioural responses to risk.

The implicit nature of themata contributes to their durability, and that of the behavioural

patterns and social structures that they support. However, when themata are brought to conscious attention, change may become possible. For instance, public health authorities are starting to recognise the potentially stigmatising effects of the tendency to name new diseases with reference to their context of emergence, e.g. – French Pox, German Measles, Asiatic Cholera, Gay Related Immune Deficiency and most recently New Delhi metallo-β-lactamase (NDM-1) (Saliba et al, 2015). Thus, in the case of Swine Flu, suggestions that it would be labelled according to its Mexican origin were resisted and ultimately rejected. It was reflexivity concerning the othering and stigmatisation that had burdened groups labelled as the origin of infectious diseases that prompted this more neutral naming. It is possible that inculcating reflexivity about themata and their implications may help subvert some of their damaging social effects (Joffe, 2011). This offers opportunities for those involved in risk communication efforts: themata research could be leveraged to design communication initiatives that minimise psychological withdrawal from the threat and subvert the possibility that the risk will sow social discord.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper has aimed to expand the theoretical basis of social representations theory by specifically addressing an understudied area of the theory, that of themata or the underlying dyadic oppositions prevalent in many social representations. In particular, the paper has focussed on the role they play in how publics engage with contemporary risks. Evidence has been provided for a core dyadic opposition, namely self/other, which underpins social representations of climate change, earthquake risk and EID. Future research will be required to investigate how prevalent this dyad is in public engagement with other risk issues.

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