

COMMENTS ON M. J. SPINK'S PAPER 'QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS'

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I very much enjoyed reading the paper by Mary Jane Spink and, in fact, had enjoyed her presentation at Ravello in October 1992, at the First International Conference on Social Representations. When Mary Jane and I discussed her arguments in Ravello, I mentioned that although I had appreciated her paper, I did not agree with all her points. To which she generously replied that we should discuss the differences in our two approaches to Social Representations in the pages of *Papers on Social Representations*. And that is how I come to be commenting on her paper, and elaborating on my own position about Social Representations (SR).

Mary Jane outlines three issues which she suggests are paradoxes for the theory of SR. They are:

1. The concomitance of more permanent and very dynamic content;
2. The possibility of focusing either content or process aspects and the difficulties of keeping both in view;
3. The need to focus the group as the context of production of social representations and the possibility of utilisation of individual case studies in order to better understand process."

That SRs are full of paradoxes is very true. However, it seems to me it is these paradoxes which can allow for further development and articulation of the theory. What I mean by this is that if the theory of social representation is "located at the crossroads between psychology and other social sciences" (Raty and Snellman 1992: 3), and therefore has to develop specific "problematics of social representations theory" (Potter and Billig 1992: 18), then we need to work out how such a set of problematics could be developed. I will argue that it is from the paradoxes identified by Mary Jane Spink, for example, that we may be able to explicate the problematics for social representations theory.

Mary Jane's first paradox - the point that SRs have both permanent and dynamic content may be considered by looking at the arguments put forward by Potter and Billig (1992). They suggest that the anthropological and historical sciences have different problematics - briefly, their points relate to the ways in which particularity and universality form the cornerstones of the two approaches - and that the writings on SRs confuse the two, as does the concept of SR itself. I would like to suggest a different way to enter this discussion, however, which is to begin by pointing out that social psychology is located at the intersection of the historical and anthropological sciences. The implication of this is that it therefore becomes possible to conceptualise the problematics for social psychology as continuously shifting from the particular, and apparently more permanent content (analogous to the historical approach) to those aspects which emphasise the dynamic nature

of socio-human processes (analogous to the anthropological approach). So, my first response to Mary Jane's paper is to suggest that the paradoxes of permanent and dynamic that she identifies in SRs are a reflection of the paradoxes in social psychology. Therefore, I suggest there is room for empirical work based on SR theory which explicates both aspects. I do not mean to suggest by this that SRs should mean everything to everyone, but, rather, that a study which attempts to look at the 'permanent' aspects needs to have in its 'background', the argument that social representations are also dynamic.

And this leads into her second point. This relates to her first, and in this second point she suggests that the difficulties of keeping both content and process in view means that it is not possible to decide whether SRs are figure or ground in any research study. I agree that this can be the case, but I differ from Mary Jane when she argues that the 'process' factors can be recast as *praxis*, which she defines as "the role of social representations in creating and maintaining a specific social order" (Spink 1992: 3). She continues by offering the contention that if psychologists focus on the relationship between social representations and social practices, then "we can best understand the power of ideas in the social construction of reality" (*ibid.*). My difference with her argument lies on the grounds of two implications: firstly, that SRs are to be analysed in relation to a functionalist view of society, and, secondly, that SRs are not social practices in themselves. I will illustrate what I mean when I outline my proposals for developing SR theory, and I will try to ensure that the heuristic strengths of the theory are not overlooked.

Mary Jane's third paradox refers to the ways in which it should be possible to see the individual in the group as the group within the individual. How can social psychologists deal with this puzzle? Social Identity theory has tried to do so (e.g. Hogg and Abrams 1988), but it still has to struggle very hard on this point. The reason for this difficulty lies in the positivistic origins of psychology, and, therefore, of social psychology. These origins require that variables be 'clean', and not confounded - that is, that they are treated as unchanging and permanent. Such a requirement then means that variables which are inscribed and reproduced within and through social formations, such as 'race', gender, age, (I have deliberately omitted class - that would be the subject of another article at least, and probably a book!) are to be explicitly operationalised as ahistorical - that is as unchanging and permanent - so that we may conduct a 'scientific' and, therefore, valid study. Mary Jane is absolutely correct when she points to the 'individual in the group' and the 'group in the individual' as a paradox. But, I suggest that while this paradox is a difficulty for much of social psychology, it could be strength for those working with SR theory. Let me try to explain. Firstly, social psychology can not adequately work with the idea of the 'group in the individual' as a means for defining the individual in the group. This is because, in order to grapple with the idea of the 'group in the individual', it is necessary to ask individuals for their understandings of that particular group. These understandings will not be identical for all individuals, of course. So, to comprehend an independent variable such as the 'individual in the group' by redefining it into the 'group in the individual' is not possible for social psychology in general - for the independent variable would have to be a constantly shifting variable. However, the very paradox that Mary Jane identifies is, I think, a source of strength for SR theory - for the paradox could allow those who develop empirical work in SRs to deal with the relationship between prevailing social ideas and the ways in which individuals will re-interpret those ideas, and, also, how they will communicate those ideas. In sum, Mary Jane's third paradox becomes the basis of the

distinctions between much of social psychology and current formulations of social representations theory.

How can the above points be used to push further the discussion on SRs?

I want to use her paradoxes to develop the theory of SR as follows. I will outline and elaborate my standpoint on the concept, which I first discussed in Bhavnani (1991).

Discursive Configurations and Social Representations

Over ten years ago, Deschamps (1982) outlined a plea and suggested an urgency for social psychology to study relations of power. What he wrote was:

It is necessary to insert into social psychology a concern with problems of power, or, more precisely, with relationships of power. If this is not done, there is a risk of skirting around a number of phenomena the study of which is indispensable for our understanding of social behaviour.

I should like to place this statement next to a definition of social psychology which states:

Social psychology...is concerned with the integration between the individual and the social...and enables us to cast light on the processes which constitute the individual from the social standpoint, and the social from the individual standpoint (Doise, 1978).

From the above two arguments, I will suggest that the project of social representations is to cast light on the social, from the individual standpoint.

The 'social', however, is not a synonym for shared, consensual beliefs. Social refers to the economic, political and ideological systems which constitute a society, usually, a nation state. And while it is a truism to point out that the political, economic and ideological systems are systems of conflict, not consensus, it is this aspect, that of negotiating conflicting ideas, which needs to be attended to in the theory of *social* representations.

Social representations theory refers to the ways in which "people analyse, comment, concoct spontaneous, unofficial philosophies which have a decisive impact on their social relations" (Moscovici 1984: 16). Moscovici continues his point by suggesting that social representations are means of both constructing and communicating knowledges. The processes of constructing and communicating knowledges can be viewed as being ideological processes, that is, as processes which rely on cultural meanings to sustain, and challenge, relations of subordination and domination. So, the processes of constructing and communicating knowledges, inasmuch as they are ideological processes, rely upon the creation and reproduction of cultural meanings to sustain (and challenge) power inequalities. Therefore, the notion of social representations has embedded within it the idea of power inequalities, for the concept of the 'social' implies such inequalities.

So far I have suggested that the domain of the 'social' is about negotiating conflicts and also has embedded within it the reproduction of power inequalities. Take the concept of gender. This is a social system which is about power inequality. That is, masculinity and femininity are not equally but different systems based on the assumed biological sex of a person, but, rather, they *create* meanings which reproduce inequalities. Further, the system of beliefs about gender is not a singular system, but many systems. That is, the common sense about gender in any social context is not one common sense, but many common senses. For example, when someone says "men are aggressive, and women are peaceful", then we know that that is not the only possible view of aggression in relation to gender. We know that some may argue that aggression or peacefulness are not restricted to any one sex

or gender, and others may argue that definitions of aggressions emerge from the context in which the definition is expressed. In this example, I am following the ideas of Gramsci to point out that while one set of ideas and common senses may be hegemonic, that hegemony is established in a shifting manner, for it is always being contested. Therefore, as the hegemonic set of beliefs is being contested by other beliefs, so, these prevailing views are constantly redefined, as is the terrain on which they are discussed. From this point is developed that the contesting belief also shifts, for the hegemonic and non hegemonic 'common senses' develop in a contradictory relationship with each other.

From the above, I am suggesting that social representations are contradictory ideological elements which together make up 'common senses' of particular social groups. The term refers to both process and content, to foreground and background, and to the groups which create the social representations, and, in turn, are created by those very representations. These paradoxes, which have been so clearly laid out by Mary Jane Spink suggest a different path regarding SR theory, and empirical work, to the one Mary Jane points to. Given my argument about social representations, and the necessity to see their contradictions or paradoxes as part of both their form as well as their content, I suggest that it would be more appropriate to recast them as 'discursive configuration'. I make this suggestion in the spirit of trying to tackle the problems which the concept appears to create. I see the problems arising mostly from the *name* attached to the concept which Moscovici has developed by presenting provocative and exciting arguments about social representations, and indeed, about the future projects of social psychology. For example, Moscovici (1976) argued that the task of social psychology is to define the social representations of individuals. He suggests that social representations are analogous to Durkheim's notion of 'collective representations', the latter embracing a large number of intellectual forms, including myths, science and religion. It is the Durkheimian origins of social representations which I think can lead to the problems which Mary Jane identifies so clearly, and which are not, I think, intrinsic to the ideas which Moscovici has put forward.

To use the word 'discourse' can lead to many misunderstandings at a time when the word is used so very differently within literary criticism, conversation analysis, and sociology, let alone psychological uses of the word. Clearly, the word 'discourse' has many notions attached to it. I use discourse - and 'discursive' - in the sense that Michel Foucault uses it - namely to indicate the historical aspects, the shifting nature and the constitution of power inequalities which are embedded in the development of scientific ideas. Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, initially points to the need to analyse the continuities, the co-relations between statements. In arguing for the importance of transformations, rupture and contradiction, Foucault then continues by indicating the ways in which discursive formations may be identified. In brief, in my arguments, I follow Foucault, and suggest that in order for discursive formations to be identified, the elements which make up those formations have to be distinguished. I name those elements 'configurations' in order to retain the dynamic, and shifting nature of those representations or elements. Therefore, my argument about 'social representations' is that, basing my ideas on Moscovici's formulations, I merely rename them 'discursive configurations'. This is so that the phrase which describes concept can connote the points referred to above. Thus, I am arguing that 'discursive configurations' provides a way to examine the manner in which power inequalities, shifting meanings and common sense frames are condensed in social issues.

That is, discursive configurations are the elements which together make up discursive formations. And discursive formations are what I understand SR theory to be about.¹

I suggest that social psychology can be a study of the ways in which these three aspects - power inequalities, shifting meanings and common sense frames - combine together to create discursive configurations. And different combinations of discursive configurations create different discursive formations. Moscovici (1984) argued that the simultaneous occurrence of phenomena and process is a pivotal hallmark of 'social representations'. If we can accept that, then, social representations, or discursive configurations, will be made up of both figure and ground elements, and, indeed, will be about both the individual in the group as well as the group in the individual.

So, as I think about social psychology being located at the crossroads between itself and the other social sciences, and as I reflect on the development of a set of problematics for SR theory, I return to Mary Jane Spink's article. For, as the article helped to identify the paradoxes in SR theory, it also allowed me to present a view of social representations which does define the parameters and boundaries of the concept. Finally, let me say that I am in total agreement with Mary Jane Spink when she says that the world of paradoxes is delightful, for as we identify those paradoxes, and as we develop the empirical strategies to furthering refine this important set of ideas, it will, indeed be an even more delightful world.

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¹ I am at the moment conducting research for my next project - on the discursive configurations of feminism in the United States. The project will attempt to make more clear my theoretical arguments about the continuities and discontinuities between social representations and discursive configurations.