

FOLK SCIENCE AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: SOME COMMENTS*

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Social psychology is a science of culture, and particularly of our culture : it is, or should be, "the anthropology of the modern world." Thus Moscovici emphasizes the perspective of a social psychology of knowledge which in particular refers to the genesis of folk knowledge in the field of medicine, psychology and sociology. These types of knowledge coexist with scientific knowledge: all cultures possess a folk science or philosophy, a common sense knowledge made of descriptions, explanations and normative elements which derive from tradition and which coexist with scientific information or with popularized elements of science in the construction of every day knowledge.

As we know, it is in this transformation of scientific theories into common sense that Moscovici locates the epistemological genesis of Social Representations intended as "common sense theories about key aspects of the world". He formulated the notion to elucidate the particular problem of how scientific ideas become represented in "popular consciousness". The relationship between scientific ideas, common sense and social representations is widely discussed by Billig (1991), Furnham (1990), Semin and Gergen (1990) *inter alia*.

In this paper, however, I will not deal with this relevant but specific aspect of the topic "folk science and social representations", and, instead, I would like to focus on a more general problem concerning the concept of social representation, mainly considered in the perspective of folk science.

Seen in the perspective which, broadly speaking, may be defined anthropological, the concept of S.R. does not differ from folk or cultural model, a widely used concept in cognitive anthropology and it is useful, in my view, to reflect on the contact points, the similarities and the differences between the two concepts.

In recent years a lively debate about folk or cultural models has developed among cognitive anthropologists interested in understanding how cultural knowledge is organized and Keesing (1987) raises the question: what are such models? And what are not cultural models? "The original characterization of these models as "folk" did not reflect their adherence among the untutored masses, but their common sense nature. Such models comprise the realms of (culturally constructed) common sense. They serve pragmatic purposes; they explain the tangible, the experiential (hence in an egocentric perspective), the probable; they assume a superficial geology of causation; they hold sway in a realm in which exceptions prove rules and contradictions live happily together...

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These cultural constructions of the every day world do not consist of disconnected bits of cultural wisdom, expressed in precepts, parables, proverbs, or pragmatic, probabilistic operating strategies, but of the world-proposing (however simplified and internally or externally contradictory) models embodied or expressed in these bits. Such models, then, are not presented to us in what everyday people say and do in their everyday lives... they are represented in fragmentary surface facets. We must infer the more coherent, if not articulated, models that lie beneath."

Cognitive anthropologists came to stand for a new view of culture as shared knowledge, "not a people's customs and artifacts and oral traditions, but what they must know in order to act as they do, make the things they make, and interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do."

A cultural model is defined by D'Andrade (1987) as a cognitive schema that is intersubjectively shared by a social group. This model can be called a "folk" model both because it is a statement of the common sense understandings that people use in ordinary life and because it contrasts with various "specialized and scientific" models.

The similarities between the two concepts are evident and may be summarized as follows: folk models and social representations both refer to shared knowledge, produced through language in every day exchanges, used by lay persons to order their own world and to orient themselves to it. This common sense knowledge is re-constructed in the mixing of "scientific" and every day information.

In reference to parental belief systems, (and I am using here the term only for defining a rich field of research carried out by psychologists and anthropologists too) that is parents' ideas about children's development and education, Goodnow and Collins (1990) maintain that there are: "two overlapping literatures: one on cultural models, the other on social representations. These two literatures have considerable overlap but tend to exist side-by-side with little cross-reference." That is, they deal with exactly the same thing, but they ignore each other.

In this anthropological perspective, the "social", in the concept of S.R., refers to a knowledge objectified and shared by a social group, produced through language in every day life, but we lose the psychosocial specificity of the concept.

Billig (1991) rightly complains that theorists of social representations should also study what are not social representation. "The paradox is that social representation theorists must search for those aspects of socially shared beliefs which would not classify as social representations, just as much as they study social representations...."

The risk that this author is warning us against "is a tendency for researchers to define their field of study at the outset as being, for example, "An investigation of the social representation of X". They then include uncritically beliefs and dialogues about X as being aspects of the social representation..."p.70.

Billig's criticism is very harsh, but we agree that it is necessary to distinguish between different concepts and different forms of shared knowledge.

The concept of representation is not equivalent to that of cultural model or belief systems because the term "representation" does not merely imply the description of the content of information, but elicits the process of selective organization of information within a system of

relations which links the subject to a given object, and defines them on the basis of that link which becomes the filter through which all information is interpreted and elaborated.

In this selective organization of knowledge three socio-psychological processes are involved: familiarization of the unfamiliar, the need of regulating conflicts between social roles and identities at work, and the elaboration of information concerning a valued object.

With regard to parents, for example, they have specific reasons for constructing and sharing representations of intelligence and development because they have to cope with (and have the responsibility of) the problem of inter individual differences between their children: these differences are by no means a matter of abstract explanation since parents are charged with responsibility and have to make everyday decisions. Furthermore they may feel both that they are lacking "scientific" knowledge and they are not doing "all that is needed" to improve intelligence and to foster the development of their own children. This specifically concerns mothers who have a job outside the family (teachers, office workers) and who therefore may feel guilty for being less involved (at least as regards the amount of time spent) with their children.

In this perspective social representations become socio-cognitive processes based on the assumption that the individual is a socially inserted actor. Monteil (1991) defines a social insertion by the fact that the activities of the individual (his automatisms, his conscious acts, his behaviours) are more or less determined by behaviour systems which involve other individuals.

The specificity of a pscho-social view depends on these social insertions which can be more or less strong, but as such they mobilize, activate and produce the basic knowledge of the representations which guide and orient social conducts in every day life.

We agree with Doise(1990) that the study of social representations should highlight the regulations which the social meta-system exerts over cognitive system in order to explain under what conditions precise social insertions activate specific ways of cognitive functioning and how the relationship with valued social object constitutes a basic part of the activated knowledge.

It is only within this frame of reference that the folk aspects of knowledge "unscientific" and therefore contradictory, sometimes illogical and not verifiable can be understood in their regulating and legitimizing functions of social positions.

As a consequence of this premises, we think that studying a social representation does not means describing what a social group believes about a relevant social object, but finding out how the available information, whether scientific or folk, is organized in relation a) to valued objects, b) which calls upon the need to defend and justify one's personal identity, especially when c) one must explain something "mysterious" and inexplicable.

To continue the example of research on parents' ideas, we find that many studies are carried out descriptively, common both to the perspective of cultural models and social representations, in which the main focus is on how widespread a certain theory or a given belief on development are in different groups of mothers belonging to different cultures or to what extent groups of parents share theories or descriptions of the child on the basis of sociological variables such as educational qualification, profession, residence in urban or rural areas.(Goodnow, Collins, 1990)

In this perspective, for example, the parent's educational and professional level are considered the strongest predictors of parent's theories on development and education. In this sense, having a low educational and professional level and living in rural areas favours the collecting of experiences that emphasize the value of hereditary factors on development and education, where the parents' priorities are looking after their children's health, feeding them and so on: this type of parents share an innatist theory and nativism beliefs. On the contrary, having a medium-high educational and professional level, living in an urban area, foster the sharing of an environmentalist theory of development (Triana, Rodrigo, in press)

Numerous studies carried out in the field of social representations on the child are conducted in such descriptive way: for example, our early studies on the images of the child shared by various groups of women (Emiliani, Molinari 1989) and the study quoted by Doise, Clemence, Lorenzi-Cioldi, (1992) and carried out by Verquerre on the image of the child are compared according to different socio cultural variables.

On the contrary, in the perspective of social representation considered as socio-cognitive processes, such sociological indicators do not influence directly the choice of the developmental theory. In their research on social representations of intelligence, for example, Mugny and Carugati (1985) have shown the existence of a specific representation linked to the experience of being parent.

This parental identity produces a representation which is built up around the problem of differences between individuals, and which tend towards an ideology of giftedness. Parents who are also teachers(that is, individuals with a high educational qualification and who undoubtedly possess scientific information on child development) privilege an innatist theory in order to explain the development of intelligence. However, when mothers-teachers face at the same time the dual images of their own children and their own pupils we find that self attribution of success is kept stable when referring to the relationship with the pupil and to the characteristic which they consider most important, namely intelligence, while they accept to be responsible for the child's negative outcomes in the case of characteristics concerning social rules. This means that parents refer to different types of explanations according to both the nature and the relationship with the object which determine the organizing principles of the social representations.

In conclusion, in our opinion, the cultural knowledge shared by parents on the theories of children's development, becomes social representations when a socio-cognitive regulation is implied, activated by a complex social dynamic. We realize that in such a way we reduce and limit the concept of social representation, but this perspective allows us to make some distinctions with other anthropological concepts and to highlight the psychosocial specificity of this concept.

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