THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: WHENCE AND WHITHER?

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Marie Jahoda (1972) has a simple test of the value of any theory. Does it enrich or impoverish the scope of psychology? If the theory enlarges the scope of the discipline by incorporating interesting and complex new phenomena within the purview of psychology then she welcomes it. Freud's theory of the unconscious clearly meets with her approval in this respect. If, however, the theory restricts the scope of psychology either by focusing on a narrow range of phenomena or by being highly prescriptive in regard to the use of a particular method of research then it meets with her disapproval. Behaviourism and gestalt psychology incur her censure in this respect. She was always critical of the over-reliance of social psychologists on experimenting.

Does the theory of social representations pass this particular test? Clearly it does, but only in part. In my view it has enriched social psychology by enlarging its scope. It has made social psychology an explicitly social discipline and restored its links with other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. This, as I hope to show, is no mean achievement. It has produced book-length studies like *La Psychoanalyse: Son image et son public* (Moscovici, 1961/76), *Un Monde Autre: L'enfance: De ses représentations à son mythe* (Chombart de Lauwe, 1971/1978), *L'âge des Foules: Un traité historique de psychologie des masses* (1981) and *Folies et Représentations Sociales* (Jodelet, 1989) which are without parallel in any of the other social sciences. Social psychologists in departments of psychology in Europe and America rarely write such books. This is because, as Marie Jahoda observed, they study a very restricted range of phenomena. Their typical unit of output is an article in a refereed journal. The rewards of the academic system, especially here in Britain and also (I suspect) in America, encourage this form of productivity. To embark upon writing a book can be a form of academic suicide in some contexts. To write a book that wins the critical acclaim of other social scientists, however, is an event that is extremely rare in the history of social psychology. Yet Moscovici has recently achieved this signal distinction with the publication of *La Machine à Faire des Dieux* (Moscovici, 1988) for which he was awarded the prestigious Amalfi prize. Clearly this French tradition of social psychology, which Moscovici inaugurated over three decades ago, has enormously enriched not only social psychology but also other social sciences. In this respect it passes the Marie Jahoda test with flying colours.

The Marie Jahoda test, however, relates to psychology and not to social psychology. Much remains to be done, in my view, to persuade psychologists, as distinct from social psychologists, to accept the theory of social representations. This, I think, is the real challenge. The most difficult part has already been achieved i.e. the development of a form of social psychology that is explicitly social. Now the challenge is to get this accepted by non-social psychologists. The strategic next step, in my opinion, is to persuade social psychologists in America to accept the theory. This is because they are a sophisticated and powerful community of scholars and researchers in social psychology who remain deeply sceptical

about the value of the theory of social representations. If we cannot persuade them of the utility of the theory then we might as well abandon the task of persuading psychologists in general to accept it. Moscovici and I, both separately and jointly, have expended a good deal of effort in recent years to achieve this objective with, as yet, little or no evidence of success to reward our efforts. I have recently been studying the history of social psychology in America and I now think I better understand why the task is proving to be more difficult than either of us envisaged at the outset.

Moscovici has been more successful than I have been in this regard. His work on minority influence, for example, is generally accepted within American social psychology. In part this is because it challenges the conventionally received wisdom in that country concerning conformity and the maintenance of the status quo. In part also, I suspect, it is because the research is in a format that social psychologists in America are used to accepting i.e. it is based on a series of experimental studies carried out in laboratory. Whilst it is gratifying to see this evidence being accepted by other experimentalists, there is a real danger that the topic of minority influence will become separated from the rest of the theory. The experimental programme merely demonstrates the feasibility of such forms of influence.

To understand why minority influence is important it is necessary to understand the wider theory of social representations. Whilst the experimental programme is important its object of study is trivial from a historical perspective – namely, a series of blue/green slides and whether the subjects who participate in the experiment hear others describe each slide as either blue or green. When it comes to scientific theories, however, rather than perceptual judgements about discrete stimuli, the matter is not historically trivial. Freud, Marx, Darwin and Einstein, for example, when they were developing their various theories were in a minority of one, yet, over time, they succeeded in changing the collective representations of their peers concerning the nature of the world in which they were living. This form of minority influence, which is an integral part of the study of social representations, needs to be studied over a longer time scale and by other means than the laboratory experiment. It is not possible to study such changes in the collective representations of an age purely within the confines of a laboratory. Such a study belongs to the Geisteswissenschaften and not in the Naturwissenschaften. In a number of respects Moscovici's study of Le Bon (Moscovici, 1981a) is just such a study. He shows how someone (namely, Le Bon), who is marginal to a number of sciences, creates a new science i.e. the psychology of the masses. Moscovici then goes to show how dictators, of both the political right (like Hitler and Mussolini) and the political left (Lenin and Stalin), this century have put Le Bon's theory into practice. Dictators need a representation of the masses they lead and Le Bon provided them with an appropriate form of social psychology. Moscovici's study is inevitably a historical study and not an experimental one. Both kinds of study, however, are needed in relation to the theory. Unfortunately those who read and are influenced by Moscovici's laboratory studies of minority influence (such as experimental social psychologists in America) rarely bother to consult or even read a book like *L'Âge des Foules: Un traité historique de psychologie des masses* and those who read or are influenced by the book rarely consult or even read the experimental literature. Tant pis. Both communities of readers miss a lot.

In the article with which I started Marie Jahoda (1972) compares and contrasts psychoanalysis and social psychology. Both held early promise of enlarging the scope of psychology by introducing subject matter of a complex and interesting nature. In the case of psychoanalysis there was Freud's theory of the unconscious. In the case of social psychology there was the possibility of studying such socially significant issues as fascism and anti-semitism.

The highwater mark, for Jahoda, in collaboration between psychoanalysts and social scientists was the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Much of the work subsequent to this did not live up to the early promise of either psychoanalysis or social psychology. She expressed disappointment in the performance of both at the time of her review over two decades ago. This was because, at least in the UK, psychologists remained hostile to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, too, had developed largely independently of academic psychology. Behaviourism and gestalt psychology had restricted the scope of psychology and of social psychology respectively. In addition social psychologists depended too heavily, in her estimation, on a single method of research – namely the laboratory experiment – in order to explain social phenomena.

I mention Marie Jahoda's account of the impoverishment of social psychology in the early 1970s because I believe her criticisms would not apply to the theory of social representations. The theory at that time was little known outside of its native France and so it did not feature in her review. It is a theory in which multiple methods are used to study the same phenomenon and so no one method is privileged above all others (as the experimental method was in American social psychology). There is no royal road to the study of a social representation. At the time I did not share Jahoda's pessimistic appraisal of the state of social psychology. Indeed I subsequently wrote a rejoinder in defence of the state of experimental social psychology (Farr, 1975). I think, however, she did correctly identify two forces that led to the impoverishment of psychology – namely behaviourism and gestalt psychology. I wish now to demonstrate why I think she was essentially correct in her analysis before I go on to argue that the theory of social representations is the perfect antidote to the state of impoverishment of social psychology as she described it at the start of the 1970s.

Behaviourism is the chief reason for what Graumann (1986) has called "the individualisation of the social". This is a process whereby theories and concepts which initially are explicitly social can turn out, over time and on closer inspection, not to be social at all. From the outset French research on social representations has constituted an important critique of the individual nature of much so-called social psychology in America and the UK. What I am seeking to explain here are the historical reasons for the individualisation of the social in the development of social psychology in America. Graumann identifies F. H. Allport as the chief architect of "the individualisation of the social". In his highly influential textbook *Social Psychology* (Allport, 1924) Allport sought to establish social psychology as both an experimental and a behavioural science. If psychology is the science of behaviour then the only ultimate reality is the behaving organism, i.e. the individual. There is no psychology of the group that is not also at one and the same time a psychology of the individuals who comprise it.

Many European thinkers, including Wundt, Durkheim, Freud, Saussure, Le Bon and McDougal, distinguished between phenomena at the level of the individual and phenomena at the level of the collective. The distinction between the two levels was necessary because laws that held at one level did not necessarily hold true at the other level. Wundt distinguished between physiological psychology and social psychology; Durkheim between individual representations and collective representations; Freud between clinical studies of the individual and a psychoanalytic critique of culture; Saussure between "parole" and "langue"; Le Bon between the behaviour of the individual and the behaviour of the masses; McDougall between the biological organism and the "group mind" (or national identity and character). Allport differed from all of these thinkers in believing that, as one moved from the level of the

individual to the level of the collective it was not necessary to change one's model i.e. it is possible to explain events at a collective level in terms of one's model of the individual. This is a strong form of reductionism that often goes with a positivist philosophy of science.

F. H. Allport was a powerful critic of anyone (whether social scientist or journalist) who appeared to assign agency to any entity other than an individual. The public do not think – only individuals express their opinions; the voters do not decide – only individuals cast their votes. He reserved his fiercest criticism, however, for McDougal for appearing to suggest that groups, as distinct from individuals, possess "minds". In the 1930s F. H. Allport was a stalwart supporter of public opinion polling. It was entirely consistent with his own brand of methodological individualism. Mrs. Thatcher could well have been paraphrasing F. H. Allport when she said "There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals and families".

The important point to note here is that individualism is already a detectable force in the historical development of social psychology in America in the period between the two world wars. The chief engine for the individualisation of the social during this period was, as Graumann (1986) correctly observed, behaviourism. It was not the only such engine at work during the same period. Allport's brother, G. W., also individualised the social, but from a more cognitivist perspective. Jaspars and Fraser (1984) note how G. W. Allport selectively edited out collective and social components in the various definitions of attitude that he considered, in his classical chapter on "attitudes" for the Murchison *Handbook* of 1935, before defining attitude as an individual predisposition to respond. Jaspars and Fraser point out that in the Chicago of the 1920s social attitudes and social representations were but different sides of the same coin. Attitudes were the subjective side of culture. Culture corresponded to "collective values" or "collective representations". G. W. Allport, in his editing, converted a collective representation into an individual representation and it has remained that ever since. Confronted with such historical evidence Moscovici (1981b) is quite happy to describe his theory of social representations as a form of "retro-revolution" i.e. as a return to a time in the history of social psychology in America when the main theoretical terms in social psychology were more explicitly social than they have been in recent decades.

The process of the individualisation of the social continued well into the post-World War II era. During this period it assumed two quite distinct forms. The first comprised an extension to the other social sciences of what, in the inter-war years, had occurred within social psychology. The social sciences became known collectively as the behavioural sciences. Essentially this was a ruse to obtain adequate funds for research. Politicians who vote public funds for research are likely to confuse social sciences with socialism. This was especially so during the McCarthy era at the start of the Cold War. Opposition to the granting of such funds would be much less if they were known collectively as the behavioural sciences. This was a successful strategy but there was a price to pay for it. The social sciences became less explicitly social as a consequence. In Europe this did not happen to anything like the same extent. The social sciences retained their theoretical purity but at the cost of being seriously under-funded. Behaviourism did not become as strongly entrenched in Europe as it was in America and it did not spread to the other social sciences to anything like the same extent. This is relevant to my argument in two respects. If it becomes necessary to re-socialise social psychology in America the answer is unlikely to come from the other social sciences in America since they have been infected by the same virus of positivism (or behaviourism, to cite the form that positivism assumed in the human and social sciences) as social psychology. The best antidote is likely to be a European form of social psychology such as Moscovici's

theory of social representations. Just as Californian vines helped to re-vitalise French viticulture after the scourge of phylloxera so the theory of social representations might help to re-socialise American social psychology (Farr, 1989).

Marie Jahoda shrewdly linked gestalt psychology with behaviourism when she spoke about the impoverishment of psychology. This is the second form that the individualisation of the social assumed in the post-World War II era. This came about as a consequence of the migration of the gestalt psychologists from Austria and Germany to America when Hitler rose to power in 1933. A couple who had emigrated just before that date i.e. Koffka and Heider were prevented from returning to Europe by the series of events that unfolded there leading to the annexation of Austria in 1938 and the outbreak of war in 1939. The full effect of the gestalt psychologists on the development of social psychology in America was not really evident until after the end of World War II. If the roots of modern social psychology are part of the Western (mainly European) intellectual tradition then, as G. W. Allport (1954) noted, its flowering "is a characteristically American phenomenon". The gestalt psychologists made a significant contribution to the flowering of social psychology in America. This is not the place to spell this out in detail.

What is relevant to our theme, however, is that they constitute a second wave of the individualisation of the social beyond that described by Graumann (1986). Coming on top of the first wave this had an even more dramatic effect. The mechanism whereby the social became individualised this time round was perception rather than behaviour. This comprised the "view of the world" approach to the study of attitudes compared to the "consistency of response" approach that was preferred by the behaviourists (Campbell, 1963). The gestalt psychologists had not encountered behaviourism until the arrived in America. When they did encounter it they were opposed to it. It was this opposition that led to the peculiar flowering of social psychology in America in the post World War II era. A number of the gestalt psychologists became social psychologists in America and then only in the context of American behaviourism. They had not been social psychologists back home in their native Austria or Germany.

The co-existence of two individual perspectives does not constitute a paradigm especially when they are incompatible with each other. This is the structural flaw that lies right at the heart of American social psychology. If you approach the individual from the outside this is the perspective of the observer of others. This is behaviourism. If you approach the individual from his or her own perspective this is the perception of the actor in the social scene. This is gestalt psychology. According to Jones and Nisbett (1972) these are two divergent perspectives. They are also given divergent forms of individualism which, taken together, do not constitute a social science. Campbell (1963) explains how the "view of the world" approach to the study of attitudes came to prevail over the "consistency of response" approach. Thanks to the influence of the gestalt psychologists social psychologists in America were cognitive theorists at a time when it was not fashionable to be one i.e. in the heyday of behaviourism. Social psychologists were interested in the study of representations – but these were individual representations and not social or collective ones. Social psychology in America is so thoroughly individualised that it is difficult for social psychologists there easily to take on board the notion of social and collective representations. This, as I see it, is the next challenge. If social psychologists in America accept the theory of social representations then one is more than half-way to persuading psychologists in general to accept the theory.

I think the augurs are good that this first step will be successful. A bridgehead has been established but the campaign has scarcely begun. The separation between academic disciplines in the social sciences at American universities was virtually complete by about 1925 (Manicas, 1987). This was before the various phases in the individualisation of the social described in the preceding paragraphs. Autonomous traditions of social psychology developed within these other social sciences e.g. the symbolic interactionist tradition of social psychology that developed at the University of Chicago starting with the death of Mead in 1931; or Goffman's dramaturgical model of social interaction which developed at the same university in the 1950s. These sociological forms of social psychology in America have become increasingly isolated from the psychological forms of social psychology that has been the main focus of attention in the present paper. This is because the first wave in the individualisation of the social did not begin to affect these sociological forms of social psychology until after World War II and there was no second wave in the process. The dominant tradition of social psychology at American universities is that of social psychology as a sub-discipline of psychology (Jones, 1985). There is virtually no dialogue in America between sociological forms of social psychology and the dominant psychological form of social psychology. This is sad, but it is a reality that needs to be faced. The only dialogue between a sociological form of social psychology and a psychological form of social psychology is a transatlantic dialogue between those who work in the field of social representations and those, in America, who work in the fields of attitudes, opinions, social influence and inter-group relations. The theory of social representations is a sociological form of social psychology. This is reflected in Moscovici's choice of an ancestor for this tradition of research i.e. Durkheim.

When Moscovici and I convened the first international colloquium on social representations in Paris in 1979 the theory was scarcely known outside of its native France. The situation, now is dramatically different as the papers in the present issue amply testify. There is, today, a healthy and robust tradition of research on social representations in many countries of the world. This research is a multi-lingual enterprise. The various titles of the publication in which this article appears reflect this multi-lingual reality. It is no longer merely a French tradition of research in social psychology. There is now a literature in German on the subject. The problems of persuading social psychologists in the German-speaking world to accept the theory of social representations is akin to the problems, described above, of persuading social psychologists in America to accept it. Whilst German culture is clearly different from American culture America played a key role in the post-War reconstruction of universities in Germany and this influenced the forms of psychology that flourished there in the post-War era.

Thanks mainly to this Newsletter-like journal there is, now, a network of researchers in social representations, world-wide, who are in touch with each other's research and with the latest developments in the field. The Ravello conference was a huge success and another is planned for Rio in 1994. More and more books are being published each year, in most of the languages of Europe, on the topic of social representations. This Newsletter-journal is on the threshold of becoming an international journal. The level and intensity of international activity in this area of research is all very gratifying. It is easy, in the midst of all this international hullabaloo to forget that many of one's colleagues – especially those who are not social psychologists – remain deeply sceptical about the value of the theory. It is always easier to present papers in a context where others agree with us than it is to engage in a dialogue with

those who do not. Many challenges remain and it is necessary to address ourselves to these challenges.

I have already indicated above what I believe to be the strategic next step i.e. convincing our social psychological colleagues in America that the theory is worthy of their serious consideration. I shall conclude by identifying what I believe to be the biggest internal challenge facing the community of those who study social representations, and finally, what I believe to be the most important external challenge facing that same community.

It should come as no surprise to the reader that I regard the theory of social representations and behaviourism as being in fundamental opposition to each other. Indeed, I have myself tried to understand behaviourism in terms of the theory of social representations (Farr, 1981, 1984). It would be easy, but foolish, in my opinion, to imagine that behaviourism is now a spent force. It has an after-life that is easy to underestimate. Behaviourism was the form that positivism assumed in the human and social sciences. Positivism is far from being dead. It lives on in the way in which historical accounts are written and in *Handbooks* of research methods. We are likely to encounter it in its first form when we suggest to our social psychological colleagues in America that the theory of social representations is really a sort of retro-revolution i.e. a return to an earlier stage in the development of social psychology in America when the major theoretical terms in the discipline were more explicitly social than they have been in recent decades. This is likely to be treated as a retrograde proposal. If one accepts a positivist philosophy of science then once a field of study becomes a science findings are cumulative and "progress" more or less inevitable. To suggest that earlier formulations of the same issue are superior to more recent formulations of the same issue is to swim against a very strong tide. It is after-life of positivism in *Handbooks* of research methods to which I now wish to turn since this poses an important internal challenge.

It is important that the methods of research in the study of social representations should be compatible with the theory (Farr, 1993). Since the theory is not prescriptive in regard to the use of any particular method there is a good deal of flexibility here which is an attractive feature of the theory (see above). There are methods around, however, which are incompatible with the theory. The use of factor analysis, for example, is unlikely to lead to the identification of representations. Some of the methodological prescriptions of today reflect the research orthodoxies of yesteryear. I have tried to show elsewhere that some of the methodological critiques of studies in social representations are misplaced (Farr, 1993). Some of it derives from a notion of social psychology as a branch of natural science. This is true of calls for the operational definitions of concepts and the rigid specification of variables. These requirements derive from the assumption that research is replicable. This is a reasonable assumption in the sphere of the natural sciences. It is not a valid assumption in the sphere of the human and social sciences. It is particularly not a valid assumption in relation to the theory of social representations. The form that the physical dimensions of time and space assume in the human and social sciences is history and culture. Representations vary from one culture to another and change over time within any one culture. Therefore it is not possible to replicate a study. The social representations of psychoanalysis in England in the 1950s would have been different from those which Moscovici studied in France at that time. If Moscovici were to repeat his study today in France they would be different again to what they were in the mid 50s. One would not expect social phenomena to be the same. The issue of the relation between theory and method in the study of social representations is a matter of

controversy within the community of researchers on social representations just as much as it is a matter of controversy between that community and those outside it.

I think Moscovici was right at the outset not to begin by defining his term. I think, however, some thirty years on that this is no longer a defensible position. I think it is now necessary to identify how social representations relate to other important theoretical concepts in the social sciences such as attitudes, public opinion, ideology etc. I think a start has already been made in regard to attitudes (Jaspars & Fraser, 1984). Now it is time to relate social representations to their theoretical concepts. This work is particularly important if the theory of social representations is to win acceptance in psychology itself. I think the theory does have the potential to enrich psychology by enlarging its scope and thus passing in full the test that Marie Jahoda set.

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