

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE DELIGHTFUL WORLD OF PARADOXES

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the difficulties which emerge from the kaleidoscopic nature of social representations and the consequent need for clear definitions of our research objectives. These difficulties are examined taking into account three central paradoxes which research on social representations is faced with: the concomitance of more permanent and very dynamic content; the possibility of facing either content or process aspects and the nature of the group which is taken as the necessary context of production of social representations. The questions posed by these paradoxes form the necessary background for the discussion of an analytical procedure, based on single case studies, developed for use when research interest is centered on the explication of the relationship between subjective theories, sustained social practices and affective investments.

Given the complex nature of the phenomena, research on social representations, whether quantitative or qualitative, is always faced with a number of paradoxes. Three such paradoxes will be considered in this paper as well as some of the analytical procedures devised so as to resolve them. The paradoxes which will be addressed are:

1. the concomitance of more permanent and very dynamic content;
2. the possibility of focussing 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 utilization of individual case studies in order to better understand process.

The first paradox, the concomitance of permanent and dynamic contents, underlines one of the most appealing features of work in this area which, like a kaleidoscope, lends itself to multiple combinations. Social representations, as mental productions, are both the expression of cultural permanence and the site of multiplicity and diversity.

When focus is placed on the more permanent contents we access cultural codes which frequently have ideological functions as they reflect "world views" which sustain specific social orders. Focus on permanence also brings to the fore consensus which can be revealed through modes of analysis which emphasize the underlying structure of the representations held within specific groups.

Focus on diversity brings to the fore the creative processes which generate new contents. This is, perhaps, the dimension which Moscovici had in mind when he reiterated that "social representations are always on the making in the context of interrelations and actions which are themselves always in the making" (1988).

The second paradox, - a straight consequence of the first one - is that social representations, as stated by Moscovici (1988), are at the interface of two realities: a psychic reality comprising imagination and feelings; and an external reality which takes place in a

collectivity and is subjected to group norms. In this latter sense, social representations are socially structured phenomena which reflect the social context in which they are formed and circulate. In the former sense they themselves have structuring effects and can be seen as the motors of social change.

The second paradox, therefore, rebounds on the relationship between content and process. Both aspects are intrinsic to social representations and what seems to be at stake is their status as either figure or ground in the research objectives and procedures. Thus, in order to avoid the risk of introducing a false dichotomy, it is important that content and process be adequately defined. Content, for example, can be focused on permanence, as in historically oriented research, or on diversity; and process can be restricted to the socio-cognitive aspects of information processing or to the functionality of social representations in the creation and maintenance of social practices.

Content, however, will always be an expression of the social context in which it is produced : context which is simultaneously historical and in the "here and now". It is in fact my contention that when studying the content of social representations we are always faced with history and a sound historical background with regards to the object of representation under study is a necessary guide to interpretation.

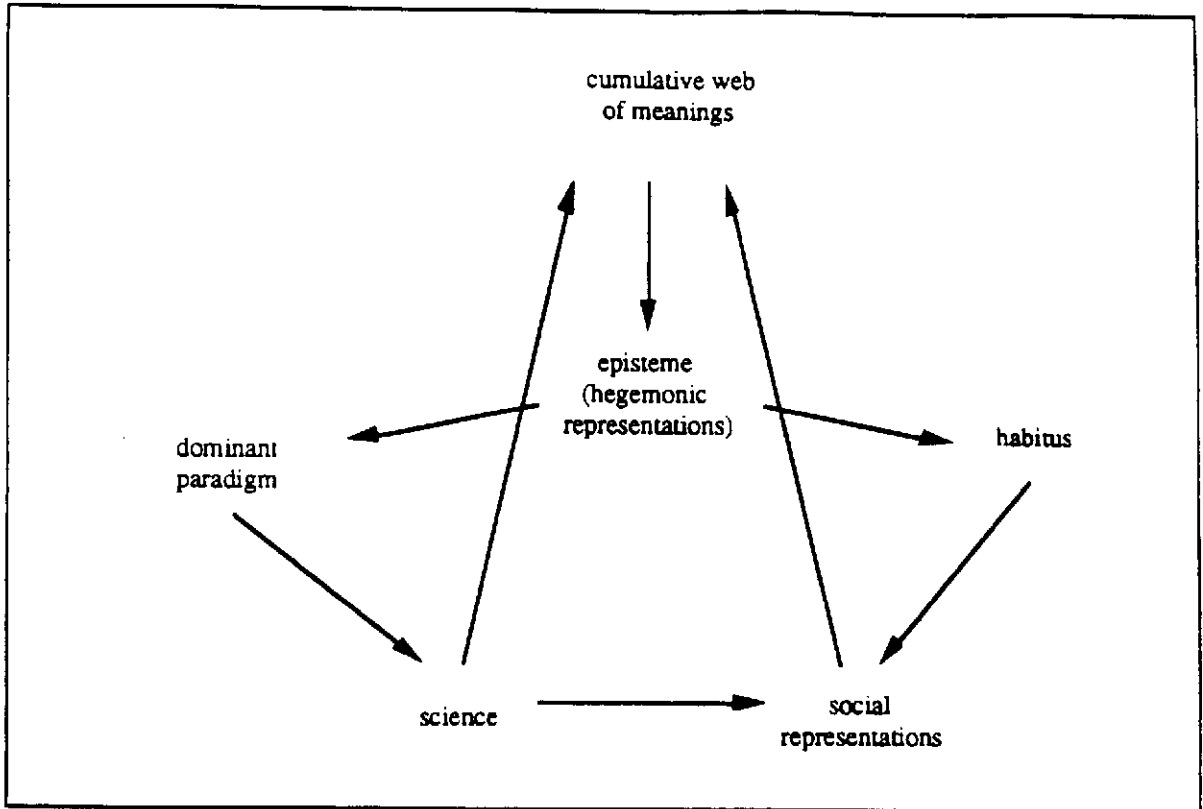
Historical content is present through the *imaginaire sociale*, the total set of cultural productions accumulated in time which circulate in society through a variety of forms: pictorial representations, literature, songs, proverbs, myth. This wealth of representations , as can be seen in Figure 1, is filtered through the group. It is filtered more specifically through the "habitus", borrowing a useful concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1983), who defines it as the acquired dispositions derived from belonging to a group.

However, social representations are not merely a re-combination of such archaic contents. They are also fed by the ever evolving products of science which are circulated through the media and through no end of popular versions of these products : science which is itself a reflection of the "world views" which permeate each historical period ; and therefore bounded by an *épistémè* as so often demonstrated by Foucault.

Figure 1 shows, therefore, the complexity with which researchers on social representations are faced and the consequent need for clarity about which dimensions will act as figure and which as ground. Different dimensions will demand different research methods and, consequently, the effort to incorporate multiple dimensions will demand the use of multiple methods.

Process can also be misleading. From a social psychological perspective process is often approached from an information processing angle, however much it may be presented as a socio-cognitive, as opposed to a purely cognitive, stance. However, process can also be approached from the point of view of praxis ; from the point of view of the role of social representations in creating and maintaining a specific social order. The contention, in this paper, is that by focusing the relationship between social representations and social practices we can best understand the power of ideas in the social construction of reality. Equally, we can best understand the role of affect in the elaboration of our common sense theories about the world.

Figure 1



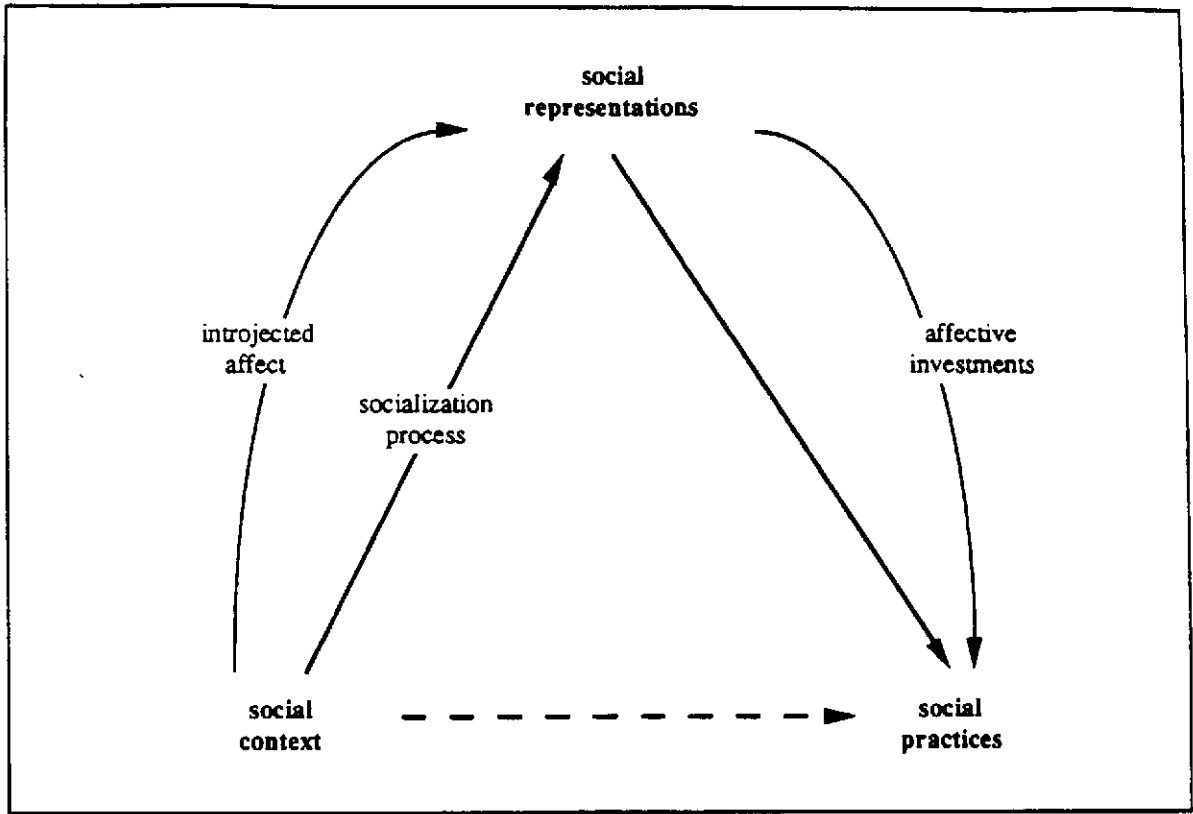
Social Representations and the Web of Meanings Spun by Mankind throughout History.

Thus, once again we are faced with figure and ground decisions and the ensuing need to define how we conceive the role of the social context. Figure 2 is a tentative effort to clarify some of these issues: social context, here, is both the vehicle of primary and secondary socialization processes, through which group norms are internalized, and the context of social practice where representations have orientation functions .

Figure 2 also allows for a better understanding of the role of affect in the elaboration of social representations. When the socialization dimension is considered ,affect is usually non-manifest. It is introjected and remains below the level of consciousness. This is the locus of psychoanalytic work. But when we focus social representations in their role in social communications and practices, affect is manifest: it is a libido investment which can be accessed through observation and /or discourse about social practices on and about the object of representation.

There are various researchers who work well this interplay of content and process, socialization context and social practices. Jodelet's research on social representations of madness (1989) is a good example in that it reveals the functionality of the representations in maintaining a group identity and as a defense mechanism against the anxiety which proximity to mental illness arouses.

Figure 2



The Role of Context and Affect on the Production of Social Representations.

Finally, the third paradox raises the problem of the one and the many; that is, the potential contradictions between focusing the group as the inevitable context of production of representations - which must therefore be studied through the sum of the individual representations of its members - and the possibility of studying individual cases so as to better understand the workings of collective rules and roles. We are reminded, here, of arguments presented by Harré (1984) about the nature of the social in the French School and the consequent conception of group. If social is seen as the influence of social situations on the mind of individual actors and the group is seen as an aggregate of individuals with similar attributes ( the distributive sense of group according to Harré), then the study of social representations must focus many in order to get to the group. However, when approached as a collective concept, a supra-individual phenomena, discourse of any individual must be seen as having origin in rules and roles of a collective nature which cannot be conceived as deriving from individual thought processes.

The contention here is that when diversity and process are privileged, and content is merely the means of accessing process, then the group can be subsumed in the individual . The individual, following a Vigotskian tradition, is always a social entity and, as such, a living symbol of the group he represents. Thus, the individual in the group, provided we understand the social context he inhabits (its habitus and the wider web of meanings within which the object of representation is located) can be approached as the group within the individual.

These considerations form the necessary background for the discussion of an analytical procedure, based on single case studies, developed for use when research interest is centered on making explicit the relationship between subjective theories, sustained social practices and affective investment. A strategy where, the contraposition of subjective theories and the actual social practices unveil the existing contradictions and ambiguity which are the necessary pathways for identifying affective investments.

Thus, it seems possible to work successfully with both dichotomies: permanence/diversity and social/individual by utilizing case studies and by focusing on process as defined by the relationship between social representations and their social use.

The more permanent elements of social representations must be relayed to a historical context so as to take into account the hegemonic representations which sustain our present "world views". Diversity and contradiction, however, can only be accessed through some type of content analysis of discourse. For this purpose, the research group on health issues at the Catholic University in São Paulo has been developing a type of analysis which tries to incorporate cognitive aspects and affective undercurrents by unveiling contradictions within the discourse and associating these to adaptive strategies adopted in social practices in the health area.

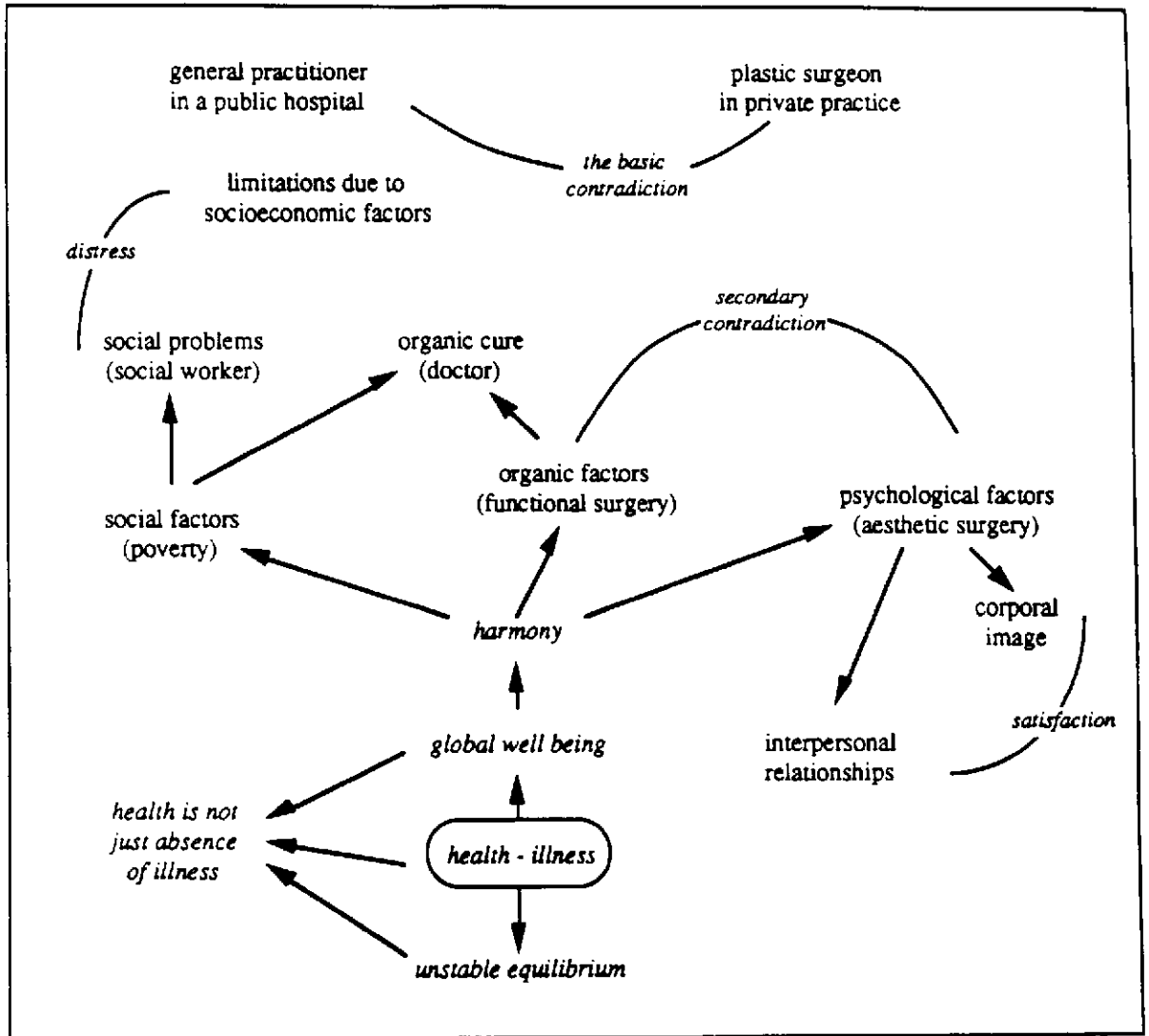
My own research, for example, attempts to understand the subjective theories held by a general practitioner about :essential hypertension, hypertensive patients and the doctor's role in the control of this health problem; and the implications of these theories for medical practice. This implies the combination of different research procedures aimed at understanding both the implicit theories held by the doctor ( which demands the use of interviews) and the implications of these theories for medical practice ( through the use of conversation analysis techniques ).

The first procedure, more relevant to the issues discussed in this paper, involves, like similar techniques, an initial period of immersion in the available data so as to identify nuclear concepts about the object of representation as well as satellite concepts which give it contextual meaning. For example, the representation of essential hypertension within the wider context of representations of health and illness ; the doctor's role in the cure, control and prevention of specific health problems; and the patient's passive or active role in this "cure" process.

Once these nuclear and satellite conceptions are identified, their various manifestations ( concepts, images, practices and affects ) are mapped within the flow of the discourse. At this point graphic representation of these elements is possible having in view the major aim of a synthesis which might be able to convey the intricate relationship between theories, action strategies and the affective elements which give them personal meaning. Figure 3 displays an example of such analysis.

The example is taken from a research project carried out by one of our students (Lessa 1992) which compared the social representations of health and illness of doctors and psychologists. In this particular example, which portrays the representations of a doctor, the central notion of health as bio-psycho-social well-being emerges in a variety of ways in the subject's discourse . These various ways, which subsume the satellite notion of "unstable equilibrium", are integrated in the notion of HARMONY.

Figure 3



The Social Representation of Health and its Implications for Medical Practice  
(social representations of health and illness by doctor M1 - Lessa 1992).

This global conception, however, finds greater applicability in his work as a plastic surgeon in private practice. Here, the understanding of psychological aspects of his patients is vital because plastic surgery, in his view, is neither purely aesthetic nor functional given that the way you feel and the way you look are intimately connected. One of the dimensions of health, however, is minimized: the social factors are subsumed by the psychological ones and refer mainly to the network of social relationships in which the patient is immersed.

In sharp contrast, the social factors of health and illness are a major aspect of his practice as a GP in the public health sector. Health, for the poor, is intrinsically bound up with socio-economic determinations. It does not mean that the psychological factors are absent; they simply cannot emerge given the institutional drawbacks of health care delivery. Furthermore, in this setting the non-organic dimensions are not seen as belonging to the medical sphere; they are delegated to other health professionals.

Thus, global health does not apply to those patients who lack financial resources. For them, an organically oriented medical practice is the only way out. Obviously, the implicit contradiction in his discourse emerges as distress with the associated attempt at alleviating guilt by overemphasizing the differences between the two realities of health care : the public and the private.

This type of analysis, therefore, allows for the emergence of the representations which incorporate the prevailing holistic health ideology. But, less concerned with the structure of the underlying theories, it also allows for the emergence of the coping strategies adopted in social practices in the face of the multiple limitations imposed by the health care system. The discourse is seen no longer as the product of intra-psychic dynamics but as an example of the rhetoric that emerges from collective rules and norms.

The conclusion, therefore, is that single case studies are possible roads to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cognitive, affect and praxis provided we adopt the collective frame of reference and therefore re-signify the relationship between the individual and the group so as to focus no longer on the individual in the group but on the group within the individual.

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