

# CONSENSUS, SALIENCE AND NECESSITY IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS - TECHNICAL NOTE\*

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*Abstract.* The results of 7 studies show that among several (quantitatively) very salient traits of an object of social representation, some are (qualitatively) necessary, the others, not. This is made apparent by using a particular kind of questioning, the logic of which is described. The necessary traits are considered as constituting the central core of the social representation.

Social representations, *with* or *without* consensus? This problem is too often formulated in *quantitative* terms. Of course, this is important, but insufficient. Unlike the theory of typicality, which contents itself with measuring a salient trait in social objects' study (which have a different nature than the objects the typicality studies. Cf. Semin, 1989), our results strongly suggest the existence of a character of *necessity*, which is suitable for some salient traits, but *not for all of them*. This qualitative problem is necessarily studied through numerical results but, when an extreme position gathers 96% of the subjects, a qualitative interpretation can be defended.

We present here a type of empirical data which does not seem to have been much sought after other than in our laboratory. The fact that this type of data answers the questions we<sup>1</sup> have set ourselves within the context of a *structural approach* to social representations is not the point: it seems to us that this type of data can be perfectly reproduced (if used with care)<sup>2</sup> and should therefore be taken into consideration by any theory of social representations.

## The Problem

Consensus is not Unanimity —although sometimes we are not far from it. For example, from data published by Salmaso and Pombeni (1986), we can easily calculate that *at least* 26 out of 30 Italian manual workers who had to characterize the notion of *work* (on a 5 - point scale) gave the maximum score to the item *enables one to earn a living*. That is not a stereotype, it is a truism! What is less trivial is the fact that research on the representation of *work* is increasingly making apparent, besides this kind of item (designated as: economic or instrumental), other items (often designated as: individualistic — but we would rather say: pleasure-oriented), such as *the job must be enjoyable...*

When researchers condescend to publish simple statistics of *salience* (frequencies of association, or of choice, characterization means..., which all too often remain deep inside

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<sup>1</sup> We - that is : Abric, 1976, 1987, 1993a, 1993b ; Flament, 1987a, 1989, 1993 ; Moliner, 1988, 1989, 1993, and some others.

<sup>2</sup> Certainly in our culture. It is possible that in other kinds of rhetoric, the test of calling into question would not be very pertinent. But it would be surprising if there were not, in certain cultures, non-negotiable elements (see Flament, 1987b).

the computer), we can even see that the pleasure items prevail (slightly) over the economic items. Thus, the French middle managers studied by Poutoux (1991) put in first place *the job must be enjoyable* (on a 3-point scale, 69% gave the maximum score ; mean=2.64), before *earning a living* (57% and 2.38) ; similarly, Mannetti and Tanucci (1993, p. 301) observed the following percentages of use among Italian children: *a kind of work one is keen on* (62%) and *to earn money for basic needs* (55%). But one feels intuitively that behind these examples of salience, which are *quantitatively* very similar, there is an essential *qualitative* difference: *remuneration* is a *necessary* attribute of *work*, whereas *enjoyment* is extremely desirable, but often utopian (perhaps in a few decades *work which is not enjoyable* will be considered as a pro slavery anachronism —but we are not there yet !)<sup>3</sup>.

Our general problem is therefore to see if certain attributes, among several which are quantitatively *salient*<sup>4</sup>, are *necessary*, while the others are *not*.

### The Test of “Calling into Question”: a New Paradigm

Suppose there is an object *A*, having *X* and *Y* as salient attributes ; an object *O* is proposed, which could be *A*, but is not necessarily so (this is verified with a preliminary study). Then *X* and *Y* are called into question separately ; the subjects are asked something like: Imagine an *O* which is *non X* (or: *non Y*) ; is it possible for it to be an *A* ? For example (and to play along with the Prototypicalists), we could study what can be said to be a *bird* (=A) ; suppose we find the characteristics: *can fly* (=X) and *has feathers* (=Y).

– Imagine an *animal* (=O) which *cannot fly* (=non X) ; is it a *bird* ? Perhaps it is, because there are birds which one cannot really say are able to fly.

– Imagine an *animal* which *does not have feathers* (=non Y). This cannot be a *bird* (100% agreement if the subjects are zoologists !).

Thus, the *principle* is simple, but the *operationalization* is sometimes delicate. We believe that quite a few (unpleasant) surprises are still to come.

In general, we use the following system of replies:

- 1) It is a very typical *A*.
- 2) It is an untypical *A*.
- 3) It is *not* an *A*, but it resembles one.
- 4) It is *not* an *A*, and it does not resemble one.

It can be seen that, semantically, one can group together 1) + 2) versus 3) + 4).

This system of replies seems to function quite well. But it is not imperative and, as we shall see, other systems can be tried without changing the principle.

A maladroit “calling into question” (“A house which is light and in the shade”)

Table 1

Replies	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
Subjects	6	7	7	4	24

It seems that the most delicate problem is to find an *O*, such that the idea of an *O non X* would be plausible for the subjects. An example of what *not* to do: Bourgeat (1993),

<sup>3</sup> It seems to us that the transformations we can observe in the representations of *work*, *unemployment*, *solidarity*..., reflect the slow but profound upheaval in the forms of sociability in our society. For those who are familiar with the Fables of La Fontaine, let us say that we are in the process of changing from a culture of “*la Fourmi*” (the Ant), to one which perhaps resembles a culture of “*la Cigale*” (the Cicada).

<sup>4</sup> The idea that one item is probably necessary, and another not, could become from measures of salience, but it is the same with any method, from depth interview to sophisticated data analyses.

studying the representation of *well-being at home*, found one of the characteristics to be *having light*, which he called into question (maladroitly) by speaking of “a house in which the rooms were *light*, but always *in the shade* of tall trees”. Subjects kindly agree to reply to stupid questions, but we can expect their replies to appear random and so we cannot come to any conclusions.

We feel the best thing would be to briefly describe some examples — which are not all exemplary, but which are perhaps instructive. (Note: the statistics are elementary: Chi-square, and what is more, one can usually predict the outcome).

### The Ideal Group

Moliner (1988, 1989) carried out the *initial* experimentation concerning the paradigm of calling into question. It was Moliner’s subjects who spoke spontaneously of an *ideal group*, although the representation under study had been named elsewhere (Flament, 1984) as an *egalitarian and fraternal group*<sup>5</sup>. This representation has the distinctive characteristic of not corresponding to any real object (no psychologist has ever observed a perfectly egalitarian and perfectly friendly group). And it is the case that one only has to speak of a *very friendly group* (=O) in order for the subjects to think (with 95% confidence) that it is a question of an *ideal group* (=A), and *therefore* that there is *no leader* (=X) and that there is *convergence of opinions* (=Y). Having verified this, one group of subjects is informed that *there is a leader* (=non X), and the other group that there is *divergence of opinions* (=non Y). Table 2 shows that *convergence of opinions* is not *necessary* in an *ideal group*, whereas *absence of hierarchy* is necessary (as earlier studies had suggested, but had not demonstrated).

The ideal group

Table 2

Called into question:	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
<i>no leader</i>	6	0	15	7	28
<i>same opinions</i>	15	7	8	0	30

It can of course be seen that 6 subjects agreed to consider a friendly group organized into a hierarchy as an ideal group, but we shall see later (concerning work) that an improvement in the system of replies could no doubt reduce this phenomenon (but there will always be some difficult subjects !).

### Comfort

Bourgeat (1993) studied *well-being at home* (=A<sub>1</sub>), and in particular *winter heating comfort* (=A<sub>2</sub>), which he assumes is included in the first theme. For A<sub>1</sub>, one of the most salient items is *having enough money* ; For A<sub>2</sub> , we have: *individual heating* and *economical heating* (the latter item being particularly interesting within a perspective of energy conservation).

Table 3 shows that *economical heating* is not necessary ; and the *balance* is clear: you need *enough money*.

This type of result has a certain importance for applied psychology: the salience of *economical heating* suggests individuals who want to save energy: whereas its negotiable aspect tends to suggest individuals ready to pay for their heating. This shows that an energy

<sup>5</sup> A representation which seems to be co-extensive to our contemporary Western Culture.

Table 3  
Comfort

Called into question:	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
<b>A1:</b> <i>enough money</i>	2	3	5	14	24
<b>A2:</b> <i>individual heating</i>	1	7	12	4	24
<i>economical heating</i>	14	3	6	1	24

conservation awareness campaign would be mistaken over the target if it confined itself to the results of classic questionnaires. Note: Another salient item for  $A_2$  (*good insulation*) was called into question and gave differing results according to sex (table 4), without anything else in the study allowing one to understand why: it could have been due to chance (low probability) or rather it could have been the indication of an approach to identifying subgroups.

*Good insulation* called into question

Table 4

	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
Men	2	3	5	2	12
Women	0	0	5	7	12

### Companies

Moliner (1993) notes that for students, a *company* is a *place of creation and research*, and quite far behind, an organization which *makes a profit*; something which might surprise an economist. But the test of calling into question inverts the relationship between these two items.

Table 5  
Companies

Called into question	it is a company		N
	probably Yes	probably No	
<i>profit</i>	4	19	23
<i>creation</i>	12	11	23

### The Artisan

Previous studies (Abric and Mardellat, 1983) isolated five important traits to define an *artisan* ( $A$ ): a *manual worker* ( $=X_1$ ), a worker who is *independent* ( $=X_2$ ), *creative* ( $=X_3$ ), *conscientious* ( $=X_4$ ) and someone who *likes his work* ( $=X_5$ ). Tafani and Tambon (1993) attempted some risky experimentation. In the control situation they presented  $O_o$ =Mr Dupond is a worker  $X_1 \dots \dots X_5$ ; the first row of Table 6 shows that  $O_o$  is very clearly identified as  $A$  (the 5 traits together are sufficient to define an *artisan*; but perhaps 4 traits would have been enough?). Each item called into question affirmed that Mr. Dupond had 4 of the traits under study, and did not have the fifth. For example,  $O_2$  was  $X_1, X_3, X_4, X_5$  and *non*  $X_2$ .

In these conditions, the objects  $O_i$  were perhaps too similar to A to obtain convincing results. And it can be seen (table 6) that only *manual worker* appears *necessary*. But some  $O_i$  less close to A might have given more interesting results.

The Artisan

Table 6

	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
Control (Oo)	17	3	0	0	20
Called into question:					
<i>likes his work</i>	9	4	7	0	20
<i>conscientious</i>	2	10	7	1	20
<i>creative</i>	2	9	8	1	20
<i>independent</i>	5	3	10	2	20
<i>manual worker</i>	1	0	15	4	20

### Unemployment

It is not a difficult problem (methodologically speaking): we can state  $O=A$ , as the subjects (at least French ones) consider that an *unemployed person* (“un chômeur”) who *does not have any financial problems* must be someone signed on at the Unemployment Office, but who works on the side as well as receiving his unemployment and social security benefits. Thus they have the concept of “faux-chômeur” (a person fraudulently claiming unemployment benefit).

Moussounda (1993) studied 4 populations with a factorial design: (Unemployed/Working) x (Young/Old), with young (less than 26 years old) and old (more than 40 years old).

To simplify, we will consider here the 2 extreme populations: Young Unemployed (YU) and Old Working (OW).

The most characteristic item in the 4 populations is *financial problems* (on a 5-point scale, the maximum score is always around 65%). The Working subjects also attribute a lot of importance to the item *material hardship*, which they believe is the lot of the unemployed (which does not seem to be the opinion of the Young unemployed). Table 7 shows that *financial problems* is characteristic of *unemployment* for everyone, whereas *material hardship* is only considered characteristic by the Working subjects.

But it would be too simple to say that the core of the YU’s representation is *included* within the core of the OW’s representation. In fact, Table 8 shows, by means of correlations<sup>6</sup> calculated from the characterization questionnaire, that the item *financial problems* does not have the same signification for the 2 populations: the YU live a difficult financial balance

Table 7  
Unemployment

Called into question:	Population	1)	2)	3)	4)	N
<i>financial problems</i>	YU	2	1	0	12	15
	OW	1	0	4	10	15
<i>material hardship</i>	YU	4	1	5	5	15
	OW	2	5	7	1	15

<sup>6</sup> It is not sure that correlation is the best index of covariation in a study of social representations. In fact, it is usual for a consensual item not to have a normal distribution. It follows that the correlation between extreme items can only vary within an eccentric range (e.g.: [-.95; +.30] or, on the contrary: [-.30; +.95]) which goes against our habits of interpretation. The only fixed point, zero is always independence

Table 9  
Work (I)

Called into question:	Yes	No	N
<i>remuneration</i>	10	30	40
<i>the job must be enjoyable</i>	29	11	40

between social security benefits and daily expenses, but it is not too dramatic ; whereas the OW think that unemployed people live in dramatic material destitution where “*financial problems*” is just an understatement. (The same schema is found for: *worries about the future*, linked, for the UY, to the *absence of qualifications*, whereas it is linked to several items of psychological drama for the OW).

Correlation of Unemployment items

Table 8

<i>Financial problems</i> with:	YU	OW
<i>Social Security cover</i>	.37	-.10
<i>material hardship</i>	-.14	.46

In fact, the whole study suggests that the OW have an *archaic* representation of unemployment: the one which accompanied the *arrival* of *structural* unemployment in our full employment (industrial) society about 15 years ago. So the Young subjects in the study were less than 11 years old, and when they arrived on the labour market (or, the unemployment market ?), they discovered a sad but undramatic reality (which must not deter our Governments and philosophers from trying to find a new socio-economic balance).

## Work

Douez and Talec (1993) studied the representation of *work* of salaried executives and self-employed professional people (we will ignore this distinction here, as there are no differences between these 2 populations for what concerns us at the moment). The authors found the now habitual salient items: *earning a living* and *the job must be enjoyable*. They chose O = “Mr. Durand regularly carries out a certain activity, and for this activity he goes to the same place ; he is satisfied with the results he gets ; on these occasions he has to meet people. It is necessary to specify that (calling into question)”.

We should point out that when *earning a living* was called into question by saying: “this activity does not allow him to earn a living”, this was immediately interpreted as meaning that it was *badly-paid* work. *Earning a living* was therefore called into question by saying: “this activity is *unpaid*”.

The results (table 9) are in the predicted direction, despite a harsh system of replies (only YES/NO). Certain subjects agreed to comment on their replies (but some did not have the time !) ; among those who considered that “YES, an *unpaid* activity is *work*”, one finds: “it is voluntary work”, “it is a training course” ; also, a lawyer spoke about “cocktails which he must go to in order to meet colleagues” ; finally a “fourmi” told us that “work gives you a position in society, money is not enough”. In short, these subjects did not speak about normal professional *work*.

To verify that we can improve this result by modifying the system of replies, Poutoux (work in progress), presented an activity *O*, as vague as the previous one, and asked if this activity could be: professional work, or sport, etc. (see table 10). For each situation the subjects had to say: YES (very probably, or probably), NO (probably or very probably).

In the control situation (where the activity was just as vague), the YES was always around 63% (62,5% for: professional work), except for: *sit-in strike* (which was only given YES by about 18% of the subjects and does not appear in table 10). *O* was then presented by specifying that this activity is *unpaid*, or else, is *not at all enjoyable*. Table 10 shows that with this diversified system of replies all ambiguity disappears: *professional work* must be remunerated, but can well be done without enjoyment — whereas, of course, the non-compulsory activities (the last 4 in table 10) should not be paid, and must be enjoyable. The activities linked to a profession (including: training) are more ambiguous.

### Money

We saw that *work* (normal professional work) requires *remuneration*, and that *well-being*

Table 10  
Work (II)

An activity can be:	<i>unpaid</i>		<i>without enjoyment</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
professional work	2	46	32	16
more or less related to a profession	9	37	34	13
training	18	30	10	38
for a charity	41	7	4	44
a sport	42	6	0	48
voluntary work	45	3	2	46
a leisure activity	44	6	1	47

requires *enough money*. Verges (1992), studying the representation of *money*, found *work* and *comfort well-being* as the most salient items. The reciprocity is only superficial: one can live without working (social security benefits, pension, allowances...), and “money can’t buy happiness”.

When we go from the Necessary Condition to the Sufficient Condition, the paradigm of calling into question no longer works (in fact, it is our theory backing it up which is a little perplexed).

### Brief presentation of a structural approach to social representations

We consider that the non-negotiable elements of an autonomous representation constitute its central core (Abric, 1976). This *central core* is not a simple organizing principle, but a *structure* (in the strong sense of the term) giving meaning to the whole representation, that is, to the numerous *peripheral* elements, which for their part are negotiable. It is the peripheral elements which can withstand the variations between individuals, between subgroups, and over time — at least in the case where these variations are not in violent contradiction with the

principles of the central core. But external circumstances can create such contradictions, and then the central core changes, either by breaking up (and with it, the whole representation) or by a progressive restructuring of the representation which occurs without a sharp break between the past and the present (Guimelli, 1989, Flament, 1993).

The existence of necessary elements in a representation does not necessitate the adoption of our theory. But we like this theory, because it is scientifically productive — for example by forcing us to distinguish the salience (quantitative) and the necessity (qualitative), and to imagine the test of calling into question.

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