

# ATTITUDES, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND WIDESPREAD BELIEFS

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## Introduction

In a chapter in Farr and Moscovici's (1984) book, *Social Representations*, the late Jos Jaspars and I made a first attempt to discuss some of the relations between attitudes and social representations (Jaspars and Fraser, 1984). In this paper I wish to carry that consideration further, and I shall do that in four parts. I shall provide a little historical background to the two concepts. Then I shall point to some of the apparent differences and real similarities between conceptions of social representations and of attitudes. Thirdly, I shall consider some of the consequences of and difficulties in treating social representations as structured sets of social attitudes. Finally, despite the difficulties, I shall offer some grounds for optimism that such an analysis will prove fruitful in the study of widespread beliefs. But before any of those, let me briefly raise two issues that have received limited attention in expositions and critiques of Social Representation Theory (eg. Moscovici, 1984; 1988; Jahoda, 1988; Raty and Snellman, 1992).

First, what does one take the scope of Social Representations Theory (SRT) to be? Is it, in essence, an innovative framework which encourages social psychologists to recognize that understanding 'when' and 'why' large members of people hold the same or similar views of the world is at least as important and interesting as studying differences amongst individuals in their views? That was the assumption made by Fraser and Gaskell (1990) in our book *The Social Psychological Study of Widespread Beliefs*, in which, we argued that the central substantive issue illuminated by SRT was that of shared views of the world for which we used the theoretically 'neutral' term 'widespread beliefs.' We also argued that SRT was not the only framework within which widespread beliefs could be studied; they could be examined as attitudes, as public opinion, as ideologies and conceivably within other frameworks too. I will continue making those assumptions and will conclude that studying widespread beliefs within an attitude framework will prove at least as effective as studying them as social representations. It has to be conceded, however, that an alternative view of the scope of SRT is possible. Perhaps, as some proponents would have it, SRT is not just one out of an array of frameworks for studying widespread beliefs; instead it is a revolutionary re-orientation of social psychology whose radical elements include a social constructionist meta-theory that is in principled opposition to positivistic social psychology. Thus, this view would have us accept that SRT and attitudes are not complementary approaches to understanding widespread beliefs; they are epistemologically incompatible approaches. Having raised that possibility, I will return to it briefly in the conclusions to this paper. Until then I shall assume the more modest conception of SRT.

A second, related issue is, how partial or all-encompassing is the scope of social representations? One feature of SRT which has loomed large has been the notion that they are consensual for the groups which hold them. According to Moscovici (1988), social representations may take several different forms, 'hegemonic', 'emancipated' and 'polemic'.

Presumably, though, all of a group's thinking is not consensual. Some notions may be idiosyncratic individual representations as Moscovici (1984) acknowledged. But on other issues, it is reasonable to assume, the group's thinking is likely to be neither consensual nor a conglomeration of idiosyncratic ideas held by separate individuals. Instead it is likely to be an array of ideas with limited signs of agreement amongst unstable groupings, such that for example, all of the 30% who believe that benefits paid to unemployed people are too low are not necessarily contained within the 40% who hold the government responsible for creating unemployment or the 50% who believe that the unemployed are in no way responsible for their own unemployment. In such a population there would not be two convenient, readily discernible social representations of unemployment, a left-wing one and a right-wing one. Instead there would be what Fraser (1986), in an earlier version of this paper, called a 'jumble of attitudes.' Within such a 'jumble', it might be possible to discern limited patterning, rather feeble structuring, even statistically significant differences between parts of the views of two sub-groups known to be different e.g. 20% of one sub-group as opposed to 35% of another agreeing that modern technology is a major cause of unemployment. But consensuality across a range of ideas would not be present either for the group as a whole or for readily discernible sub-groups. In other words, if, as I believe should be the case, consensuality is seen as central to the concept of a social representation, then it is an empirical question to what degree a population or group's thinking is organised as social representations and to what degree it is not cf. Converse (1964) versus Judd and Milburn (1980).

An alternative view, however, is that, like the air we breathe, social representations are everywhere. Why, this view would hold, need every, or virtually every, member of a substantial social grouping have to agree before we can talk of a 'social representation'? Why can't all our thinking - apart perhaps from the occasional case of delusionary paranoia - be seen as social representations? If a small group of friends develops an unorthodox view of the local football team, why shouldn't that be a social representation? My wife and I have a clear, shared and, we think, distinctive view of what constitutes 'a good holiday'. Why shouldn't that be thought of as a 'two-person social representation'? Because, I would argue, if social representations are claimed to organise all our thinking, the concept will become vacuous, and, given what we know of the practices of mainstream experimental social psychologists, it will be rapidly trivialized. Widespread, socially significant systems of belief will be ignored in favour of laboratory studies of 'dyadic social representations'<sup>1</sup>. In what follows, then, the first and narrower conception of the scope of social representations will be pursued just as the first and narrower conception of SRT was preferred.

### Historical background

As Jos Jaspars and I pointed out, the study of attitudes has changed markedly over the 70 or so years since 'attitude' became a key concept in *social* psychology. W.I. Thomas really introduced 'attitude' to social psychology, especially in *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-20). For Thomas, an attitude was an individual's internalization of a value, which was anything that was socially valued. Within a group many attitudes would be widely shared. In *The Polish Peasant*, attitudes, like values, were primarily of interest insofar as they

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative way of handling this problem might be to reluctantly concede that virtually all our thinking consists of social representations, but in order to distinguish the important from the trivial, to insist that priority be given to the study of widespread, consensual views, for which, ironically, we might wish to resurrect the term "collective representations".

distinguished between different groups of individuals, as exemplified by the contrast and conflict between the attitudes shared by immigrants to America from traditional, rural Poland and the widespread attitudes of modern, urban Americans.

From the 1930s onwards, however, attitudes increasingly came to be seen not as views of the world which distinguish between different social groups but as views which differentiate amongst individuals within a group. Attitude has come to be treated primarily as a measure of inter-individual differences. This is ironically seen in the construction of the most common of elaborate attitude scale, the Likert scale. *The* key step in developing a Likert scale is a careful item analysis, and a major part of that involves throwing out items which fail to discriminate amongst individuals. Thus, if a given group or population share a series of consensual views, there is no way in which a social psychologist using a Likert scale of attitudes can become aware of that fact. Attitude-behaviour research (e.g. Ajzen, 1988) and the study of persuasive communications (eg. Petty and Cacciopo, 1986), the primary foci of current work on attitudes, provide good illustrations of the study of individual differences within a population. I do not wish to argue that there is nothing of interest in such questions - far from it - but I do feel that major issues for social psychology, such as the study of socially significant belief systems, have been lost sight of.

Hence, the idea of studying social representations is an attractive and timely one. For 'social representations' are held to be shared, structured understandings of delimited domains of social life, such as health and illness, or the human body, or the city we live in. According to Moscovici (1963) a social representation is 'the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating'. Of course, the notion is not wholly new. Moscovici (1961) had adapted it from Durkheim's conception of 'collective representations' (1895). But Moscovici was interested in more delimited and less static sets of shared ideas than the vast belief systems, science, religion, myth, that he claimed interested Durkheim (Moscovici, 1984).

Social representations then are held to be major components of social reality and of the social structure of a society. Their formation, however, is dependent not only on widespread interactions amongst group members and between members and institutions, such as the media; it is also dependent on the operation of basic psychological mechanisms, particularly anchoring and objectifying, which serve to make the novel or unfamiliar familiar and apparently understandable to us. The study of social representations, then, holds out promises to examine, on the one hand, large-scale social processes, on the other, fundamental psychological mechanisms, as well as the relations between those two. In other words, it offers a properly social psychological field of study. But where, if at all, might the examination of attitudes fit in such an enterprise? Let me turn now to some differences and similarities between conceptions of social representations and of attitudes.

### **Differences and similarities between social representations and attitudes**

'Attitude' and 'social representation' *can* be made to appear rather different concepts, and their respective research traditions can be made to seem near incompatible. A social representation is a structured system of beliefs. An attitude is seen as more limited, more discrete, more narrowly focused. The detailed contents of social representations are seen as important. In recent decades, however, attitudes have been studied in terms of process rather than content. Attitudes are, of course, studied in experimental settings and assessed and analyzed by sophisticated quantitative techniques. Social representations on the other hand are

usually studied by means of more naturalistic, descriptive methods and the findings sometimes presented in qualitative unquantified form. Above all, social representations are used to study widely shared within-group similarities in views of the world whereas attitudes measure within-group differences.

But as Jos Jaspars and I pointed out, that was not always the case, and the contrasts I have just cited might be better thought of as differences in recent practices, rather than as necessary incompatibilities. In addition, some other arguments by proponents of social representations (e.g. Moscovici, 1963: 1964), originally designed to distance that approach from the study of attitudes, might now be regarded with some scepticism.

Moscovici (1963) emphasized that social representations were not just cognitive constructs, unlike opinions, images and other attitudinal concepts. Social representations had dynamic properties too. But few if any systematic analyses has conceived attitudes as being purely cognitive. The common tripartite, or three-component, analysis of attitudes (eg., Rosenberg, 1960) recognizes that, for analytical purposes at least, attitudes possess affective or evaluative and conative or intentional elements as well as cognitive ones. Interestingly another of Moscovici's (1973) definitions of social representation has a decidedly tripartite ring to it: 'A social representation is a system of values, ideas and practices'. An alternative popular framework for studying attitudes is the expectancy-value, or belief-evaluation, analysis espoused by Fishbein (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and others. Here it is assumed that an attitude involves a set of beliefs and a related set of affect-laden evaluations, with the latter being particularly important in turning attitude in to action.

Moscovici (1984) has also stressed that social representations are not static, but are always changing. But the stability of attitudes has usually been seen as only relative stability, and attitude change has been *a* major, if not *the* major, concern of attitude theorists and researchers.

On some issues, attitudes can be widespread or shared, as is clear from many surveys of public opinion, even though, in practice, they have usually been shown to vary, in part as I have argued, because no other type of finding has been permitted. But social representations are not necessarily hegemonic. In a particular domain, there can be alternative social representations. Parisians apparently have a different shared view of Paris from that of tourists (Milgram, 1984); women, it is claimed, have a different representation of the human body from men (Jodelet, 1984).

One respect in which writings on social representations have been more insightful than those on attitudes is that the former recognise that widespread beliefs become externalised and institutionalized; they do not exist just within individual heads. They are most commonly studied by interviewing individuals and searching for the consensual, but they can also be investigated through artifacts, photographs, newspapers, books, the mass media and through institutionalized social, legal and religious practices and codifications. Attitude researchers rarely make use of such resources. But if they see their task as describing and explaining widespread beliefs there is no necessary reason why they should not do so.

At the end of the day, there has been one crucial difference between how social representations and attitudes have usually been conceived and studied. A social representation is a structured system of beliefs; an attitude is a relatively self-contained view of a fragment of reality, and issues of systematic structure have played little part in our descriptions of attitudes. Crassly, two people are held to have the same attitude if they end up with the same score on an attitude scale. They may agree and disagree with quite different items, but that is usually ignored. Sometimes, of course, relations between different attitudes have been studied (e.g. Adorno et al., 1950; Jowell and Witherspoon, 1985). But then we are inclined

to talk of relations amongst different attitudes, rather than of attitude systems. In general, we have not explored which specific attitudes are consistently associated with which other specific attitudes within a group or population; we have not consistently attempted to study the structuring of widespread attitudes.

I suggest that we *should* study structured sets of attitudes that are widely shared, and in doing that, I would claim, we will be studying social representations. More precisely, we will be studying how individuals understand already widely disseminated and accepted social representations. We shall still have to tackle the even more difficult study of the social processes involved in their creation and dissemination. Notice, my suggestion does not assume that all attitudes are widely shared; many attitudes may well be idiosyncratic or of limited currency. We might call the widespread attitudes 'social attitudes' in opposition to 'individual attitudes', just as Moscovici and others recognize that in addition to 'social representations' there are also 'individual representations'. Notice also, we need not assume that all widely shared attitudes on an issue are in fact consistently structured or interrelated one with another; sometimes all we will find will be a jumble of attitudes.

But, if we give priority to the discovery and examination of structured sets of shared attitudes, or social representations, we will be increasing the chances of understanding the social and psychological mechanisms involved in creating, sustaining and transmitting socially significant belief systems. What then are some of the implications of defining social representations as structured systems of social attitudes?

### **Some consequences of reconciling Social Representations and Attitudes**

For the study of attitudes, many of the consequences are fairly obvious and very attractive. Recognizing the relations between social attitudes and social representations would permit attitude researchers to re-discover major social questions which in recent decades they have largely ignored. It would also encourage the re-examination of the concept of attitude.

In addition, important issues about the structuring of attitudes will be opened up to systematic examination. It is striking, for example, that the frequently invoked three component structure of attitudes has rarely been subjected to careful empirical examination (Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969). In some major papers, McGuire (1985, 1986) has proclaimed that the study of attitude structures will be the major focus for social psychology in the 1990s. I hope he is right, with the one proviso that whereas all the structures that McGuire identifies for empirical examination reside within the heads of individuals, I hope that structures that hold across a group or population will attract as much attention as those that are confined to individual minds.

Studying structured sets of social attitudes could, then, revitalize what has been the flagging field of attitude research, at time, although the field has never flagged as badly as critics have asserted (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987). But why should the bold new enterprise of social representation research wish to tie itself to such familiar and perhaps tired notions? What will be learned about social representations by conceiving of them as sets of attitudes? First, some implicit features of social representation theory might be made more explicit. Do all social representations show the same balance amongst the cognitive, affective and intentional? Do all individuals have the same degree of commitment to each of these facets of a given social representation? The internal structures of social representations, as well as of attitudes, merit closer examination.

In particular, an examination of cognitions and corresponding evaluations - a notion familiar in thinking about attitudes - would help clarify a key issue which has been glossed over in writings about social representations - namely, is it what we know about an issue or what we accept and believe that is more likely to be shared and consensual? Most writings appear to have implied the latter. Moscovici (1984) for example, has stressed that social representations are not merely value free cognitions; instead they are always prescriptive with implications for action. Using attitude terminology, that implies that social representations are simultaneously consensual sets of cognitions and consensual sets of evaluations. But of course we share many cognitions that we don't believe in - we frequently know the opposition's arguments about the Gulf war or about privatising health services, as well as we know our own side's arguments. One possibility, then is that shared cognitive representations may contain within them different, competing social representations held by sub-groups with different value positions. Sometimes, however, it seems likely to me that individuals' acceptance of evaluations may well not pattern into 2 or 3 neatly distinguishable sub-groups. On some issues, such as explanations of unemployment in British samples, there can be signs of agreement about what issues are relevant but, judging from research conducted by colleagues and myself, explanations do not seem to be neatly organized into left-wing and right-wing representations. Many people appear happy to accept varying mixtures of the two.

I am not arguing that social representations should be reconceptualized merely as shared cognitive representations. I assume - and will try to demonstrate later - that there are indeed full blown social representations where a population attains near consensus about what is right or wrong, not merely about what is potentially relevant. And I assume that such representations where both evaluations and cognitions are shared are likely to be socially and politically especially influential. But work on social representations needs to clarify relations between knowledge and acceptance of views - or mention vs. use (Potter & Wetherell 1987) - and I suggest that some familiar concepts from the attitude literature might help in that clarification.

However, an even more crucial and immediate benefit could be derived from approaching social representations as sets of attitudes. In my view, the study of social representations needs some empirical help if social representations are not to prove thought-provoking wills-of-the-wisp that can never be quite caught and presented for inspection. At this point I would be happy to be corrected, for I feel obliged to claim that, as yet, no one has convincingly demonstrated the existence of really consensual social representations! How can that possibly be? We have all been assured of the existence of social representations of psychoanalysis, health and illness, the human body, the city of Paris, madness and many other things. But do any of the empirical demonstrations force us to believe that there really was 'a social representation' rather than 'a jumble of attitudes', given that within a jumble of attitudes there can be limited patterning, feeble structuring, even statistically significant differences between parts of the views of two different sub-groups?

If I am not mistaken, many studies of social representations have reported little more than that type of data. For example, Milgram (1984) reported that many Parisians inserted many of the same landmarks in their personal maps of Paris; 26 locations accounted for about half of the 4,132 elements invoked by the entire sample. But there is no indication of how likely it was that an individual who inserted one of the 26 would insert another of the 26. And what about the 4,106 elements which made up the remaining 50%? An awful lot of Paris seems to lie outside its social representation.

Jodelet (1984) in her report on views of the body, presents data in table form about changes over time in female and male conceptions of the body, which suggest to me a jumble of attitudes rather than four, two, or even one social representation. I could make the same point by invoking a variety of studies within the social representation tradition, including the otherwise still very impressive seminal study by Moscovici (1961). In fact, perhaps the most convincing accounts of apparently coherent and consensual social representations are those like Claudine Herzlich's (1973) treatment of health and illness in which she relied on qualitative methods such that the exact extent of sharing and structuring was left quite unspecified in quantitative terms!

Jodelet's (1989) book *Folies et representations sociales* is a particularly fascinating and impressive work within the qualitative tradition. It portrays a rich and subtle picture of social representations of mental illness in a small French community in which, for almost a century, mental patients have lived with local families. Official reports, participant observation, questionnaires and other techniques were used in addition to interviews with a representative sample of foster-parents of patients in 65 of the 493 placements. From my own experience of rich qualitative data, one is frequently justified in being cautious of claims of consensuality. In practice, confronted with an initial mass of fascinating fragments, it is very tempting for qualitative analysts to allay their anxieties that order might never emerge by alighting joyfully on recurring themes and presenting views as consensual that are in fact explicitly offered by only a minority of respondents. When Jodelet makes a claim supported by two very apposite quotations are we to assume that similar evidence emerged from the other 63 interviews? What grounds do we have for believing that the social representations described are really consensual rather than being the single most common view shared by an unspecified number - and conceivably even a minority - of the respondents? One ground for doing so is Jodelet's explicit assurances regarding the striking homogeneity of views offered. Given the consistent care and coherence of her work, my own inclination is to accept her assurances, at least as far as claims about the more manifest representations of the mentally ill which were made evident in respondents' speech. The latent representations involving suppressed notions of contagion, sexuality and strangers are more problematic. They are postulated on the basis of subtle, detective-like inferences and linkages offered by the writer and, at times, suggested by mere fragments of evidence from respondents. Compared with the representations based on the brain and the nervous system, innocence and wickedness, the balance between recurring claims by respondents and sophisticated interpretation by Jodelet has swung markedly towards the latter regarding sexuality and otherness. One is bound to wonder in what sense these suppressed, barely acknowledged representations can be held to be consensual. And if they and the manifest social representations are consensual, within what population or group are they held in common? The implication is that they are the consensual views of madness at least in the community at large and conceivably well beyond. But perhaps they are not. Insofar as the interviews were important in determining claims about the nature of the social representations, it is conceivable that what we have are not views hegemonic at least in the community as a whole, but social representations which emanate from a sub-group and which, in Moscovici's (1988) terms, would be emancipatory or even conceivably polemical. Foster-parents were not representative of the community; they tended to be of lower social and economic status and suffered stigma for having patients in their households. Non-foster parents and the local council, it appears, opposed at least some of the policies and practices relating to the patients. Only foster-parents were systematically interviewed and it is conceivable that consensual representations were social representations held by a unique group of foster-parents of mentally ill men. I deliberately raise these doubts not in any way to

belittle Jodelet's considerable achievements in this very fine study, but instead to make the point that if after a close examination of what may well be the single most impressive empirical work within the social representations tradition, there remain reasonable grounds for claiming that accepting the consensuality of the manifest social representations depends on the author's assurances, that the status of the latent social representations is problematic and that the boundaries of the group which holds the social representations remain unclear, then it is indeed defensible to claim that, as Potter and Litton (1985) also argued, social representations have been presupposed by their proponents, not demonstrated by them.

The simplest demonstration that, at least sometimes, we have to invoke social representations rather than attitudinal mishmashes would be to demonstrate that a structured set of consensual - or near consensual - views exists amongst a specified group or population. By 'structured' all I mean is that elements are consistently associated with one another; I do not mean that they have to be logically consistent.

Notice that demonstrating that, at least at times, a population or category or group operates with a single near-consensual representation would appear to be the most tractable of several types of empirical demonstrations that it is reasonable to demand of proponents of social representations. More difficult demonstrations include:

1. convincingly showing that two different categories or sub-groups within an overall population e.g. men and women or democrats and republicans, hold two different social representations of the same social objects. The difficulties here include being able to specify the categories independently of the representations they might hold - thus avoiding circularity and deciding on how different consensual representations have to be to be different social representations. Here one might stress the desirability of attempting to fuse Moscovici's work on social representations with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory.

2. the even trickier problem of studying novel or emerging social representations. If only a small minority of people initially espouse a particular view of, for example, a newly formulated medical condition such as Pre-Menstrual Tension or AIDS, how does one justify the claim that a new potentially consensual social representation is emerging rather than saying that views on this novel issue are disorganized?

So, if initially, we stick to the apparently simplest case, that of demonstrating that at least sometimes a population does share a consensual social representation, then even there, we have to face at least two rather general problems. First, can we demonstrate that in at least some areas or domains of experience *individuals* operate with organized systems of belief? Many social scientists question that assumption (see McGuire, 1985). The second problem we face is that of demonstrating that enough individuals are sustaining essentially the same coherent outlook to justify our invoking 'a social representation' or 'a widespread belief system'. A sobering warning that we cannot presuppose agreement is contained in the failure of many of the most sophisticated of British sociologists in the late 1960s and early 1970s to demonstrate the existence of hypothesized 'class images' (Bulmer, 1975). Despite these difficulties, however, there are grounds for optimism regarding the study of social representations as structured sets of social attitudes.

### **Some grounds for optimism**

For some groups on some issues there is ready evidence of widespread agreement on a number of related attitude-like items. Let me give just two examples taken almost at random from surveys of attitudes or public opinion. In surveys of the American public carried out from 1982 to 1984 (c.f. Den Ouden, 1985) numerous items about nuclear war and relations



with the U.S.S.R. elicited agreement from more than 75% of respondents. These items included beliefs that:

'nuclear war is suicidal';

'both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. have an overkill capability';

'a nuclear arms race cannot be won, since the Soviet Union would match U.S. increases', and a variety of others, including the erroneous understanding that 'it is current U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons only if the U.S. itself is attacked first with nuclear weapons'.

Thus, at that time, there was at least that suggestive evidence for a very widespread social representation organized around nuclear war and U.S. - U.S.S.R. relations.

Let me cite one other serendipitous example. In September 1985, Research Bureau Ltd. (1986) conducted for the British Government's Department of Health and Social Security a survey on perceived likely effects of heroin use with a random sample of over 700 13-to-20 year olds in England and Wales. Ten different statements about heroin and its use were accepted by at least 75% of the young people interviewed, including: 'there are no good things about using heroin', 'however you take it, it will certainly harm you'; 'if you use heroin... your muscles get weaker'; 'if you use heroin... life becomes very boring'; 'if you use heroin... the opposite sex is not interested in you'. In addition, about as many items again were accepted by between 50 and 74% of the respondents. At first sight, the items may seem to consist mainly of cognitive beliefs, but it is hard to deny that a number of them are strongly affect-laden and many of them carry clear implications for action. Furthermore there was evidence of increased consensus against heroin use over a six month period in 1985 when there was a major government funded media campaign targeted on teenagers. Those data do suggest to me a consensual belief system, albeit of limited scope, rather than a jumble of attitudes.

Analyses of survey and attitudinal data of course, could often be both more detailed and more sophisticated, particularly in exploring issues of structure in individuals and in a population or group. But many relevant multi-variate techniques already exist for handling the data that would emerge from well designed studies of structured sets of social attitudes. And public opinion research (cf Marsh and Fraser, 1989) routinely samples specified populations far more representatively than any study of social representations has done. Attitude and public opinion research can achieve much more than piecemeal demonstrations of the existence of a single consensual set of attitudes for a single group. It can plot with some rigour the areas of consensus and variability in the views of a variety of groups. An example of such a study is the book by the late Hilde Himmelweit and her collaborators, *How voters decide* (1981). Himmelweit had available measures of attitudes towards a variety of social and political issues from the same individuals at a number of different points in time. She also had reported voting behaviour so that groups of Conservative, Labour, Liberal and Abstaining voters could be identified, and they could be further refined in terms of how consistently individuals had been one or another. The data were subjected to factor analyses, discriminant analyses, smallest space analyses. What emerged? At first sight, a considerable amount of limited patterning and modest group differences of the sort that I have described as a jumble of attitudes. But, in addition, there were, particularly from the smallest space analyses, signs of what might be thought of as social representations or consensual belief systems. The clearest of those held for consistent Labour voters who showed considerable agreement around a structured set of attitudes relating to economic and class interests. The next strongest candidate for a consensual belief system was agreement amongst consistent Conservative voters around a different set of attitudes, namely law-and-order issues.

Particularly if we work in as broad-ranging domains as Himmelweit tackled, this picture of islands of consensual belief systems amidst a sea of floating attitudes may be a good guide to what will emerge from further rigorous studies of attitudes. Studies which can reliably distinguish areas of consensus from dissensus and can accurately identify the boundaries of the groups involved are necessary before we can start to satisfy Semin's (1985) desire to move beyond descriptions of the contents of social representations and study processes which will explain how social representations emerge, spread and change. Explanatory theories of non-existent social representations and misidentified groups are unlikely to be of great value. Wide-ranging descriptive studies using the techniques and data of attitude and public opinion research are likely to be effective ways of tackling Sperber's (1990) ambitious call for an epidemiology of widespread beliefs or 'strains of representations'; 'what causes such strains to appear, to expand, to split, to merge with one another, to change over time, to die?' (p.30).

The recent work of Heath and his colleagues, especially Heath and McMahon (1991), has started to indicate one way in which that challenge might be tackled. They have used the annual, high quality British Attitudes Surveys 'to explore the extent of agreement and disagreement in Britain on various core elements of our beliefs and values' (Heath and McMahon, 1991, p2). Admittedly using limited numbers of attitude items, they have detected relative consensus on certain issues relating to the economy, redistribution and welfare, including education, the provision of health care and pensions for the elderly but dissensus on others including unemployment benefits and spending on culture and the arts. With regards to issues of freedom of speech and action there are considerable signs of agreement regarding both what should be tolerated and what should not. On matters of morality, dissensus is in general more apparent than consensus, but 85% of respondents agree that extra-marital relations are 'always' or 'mostly' wrong and 70% offer similar views on homosexual relations. Their analyses not only point to likely areas of hegemonic belief systems, but also start the search for what, in Moscovici's (1988) terms, would be consensual emancipatory or polemical representations. In the area of redistribution and welfare dissensus is systematically associated primarily with social class whereas systematic variations in moral views relate more strongly to education and age. Interestingly, however, neither class, education nor age divisions in themselves are sufficiently marked to suggest clearcut but competing consensuses in sub-categories. The likeliest locations of those lies in opposing views of gender roles held by different sub-groups of women, especially women of different ages (rather than women of different generations).

Just as it is reasonable to hope that qualitative studies of consensuality will, over time, increase in rigour, so we must wish that quantitative analyses will increase in richness, as Heath and McMahan themselves acknowledge. Bearing that proviso in mind, one further possibility can be mentioned. Using attitude surveys, there is no reason why the mapping of consensus and dissensus need stop at the boundaries of one nation. Various data sources now exist which already permit at least crude cross-national comparisons. Smith (1989), provides data which suggest, for example, that in 1987 there was near hegemonic acceptance of governmental responsibility for a wide variety of welfare activities in Hungary and Italy; in West Germany, Britain and the Netherlands, although there was more support than opposition, there was evidence of greater dissensus; in the USA opposition outweighed support and Australian views are compatible with the decreasing importance of European influences and increasing American ones. Such findings immediately raise interesting possibilities for social and political explanations.

## Conclusions

I have attempted to demonstrate how the study of structured sets of shared attitudes can provide a framework for the analysis of widespread beliefs. I have also suggested that swifter progress may be made in studying widespread beliefs by using the quantitative methods of attitude research than the qualitative methods often preferred in the study of social representations.

Am I proposing, then, that we abandon the ideas and methods of social representation theory and research? No, I have no wish to do that. My own view is that attitudes and social representations provide alternative but compatible frameworks for reaching the same goals. To me, they seem to be largely interchangeable and a fusion of the two would be desirable. I would not object to calling a belief system 'a social representation' and describing the elements within it as 'attitudes'. I believe that qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary not contradictory. Most commonly, qualitative analyses like Jodelet's should precede quantitative ones, but sometimes a quick quantitative mapping, like Heath's, could indicate where the investment of qualitative efforts would be most fruitful. I do not believe that an approach derived from the positivistic tradition of attitude research need be incompatible with the supposed social constructionism of SRT. As Moscovici (1988) has observed, the use of attitude concepts and methods I am proposing has itself been markedly influenced by the study of social representations. Furthermore, it is compatible with at least some of the aims of social constructionism. On the other hand, according to social constructionists such as Harre (1984) and Gergen (1985), SRT itself is a less than perfect form of social constructionism; it can be faulted for its individualistic elements, its cognitivist leanings, and its strong contrast between 'the reified universe' of science and 'the consensual universe' of commonsense. Enlightened neo-positivism and non-dogmatic social constructivism may not lie too far apart.

If, however, there are major epistemological differences that I have failed to grasp, such that studying widespread beliefs as attitudes and as social representations is contradictory and, in principle, incompatible, then so be it. Let the two approaches proceed as best they can and in another thirty years time we can try to decide which has been the more enlightening.

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