

## DISCREET AND BLATANT CHARMS

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In attempting to emulate the relative conciseness of the thoughtful and scholarly comments on my paper, I will make use, repeatedly, of the charming observations about charm but, tactfully, will avoid a discussion of which theories or proposals in this field are the most bourgeois!

I strongly suspect that each of the commentators shares my conviction that the ideas of Moscovici and his colleagues have been a major encouragement to social psychologists to ask some of the important questions that our discipline should be asking, about widespread views of the world, their origins, development and consequences. To varying degrees, however, we may all harbour some doubts about how effectively, as yet, the study of social representations has provided answers to the questions it has raised. Criticisms regarding theoretical imprecision and methodological shortcomings appear not to have dampened the enthusiasm for notions of social representations. Across Europe, they exude not a discreet charm but a powerful, blatant one. As I suggested in my paper, they are confidently presupposed more often than they are convincingly demonstrated; that not all the views of a group or population can be shown to be organized as social representations is a possibility that many enthusiasts seem reluctant to confront. Although by no means immune to their charm, Fraser and Gaskell (1990) were just sufficiently able to resist them to edit a book which attempted to indicate that major substantive issues concerning widespread belief systems could be studied not only within a social representational framework but also in terms of attitudes, public opinion, ideologies and other notions. My paper is an attempt to spell out that suggestion in more detail as far as an attitude framework is concerned.

Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi compare my paper to the splendid film by Bunuel in which a magnificent meal is repeatedly promised but never actually takes place. It is certainly the case that, despite the types of studies I briefly invoked towards the end of my paper, the value of analyses of structured sets of widely shared attitudes is more a promise than an achievement. Like all analogies, however, their delightful one has its limitations. Perhaps it was promised seventy-five years ago by W. I. Thomas, but as Jaspars and Fraser (1984) and Farr, in his comments, note, thereafter the promise was rarely repeated. In contrast, repeated promises of substantial sustenance with frequently disappointing outcomes may be more true of empirical investigations of social representations. Again the analogy to Bunuel's film is less than perfect; some food has emerged but often it has turned out to be sandwiches rather than five-course dinners.

The contrast between the future promise of an attitudinal framework and how, in practice, attitudes have been studied in recent decades has some bearing on Farr's objections to my paper. He argues that social representation and attitude theories are epistemologically incompatible, but not, apparently, on the grounds that I briefly raised and decided to ignore, namely that a form of social constructionism might prove irreconcilable with enlightened positivism. Farr seems to accept that social representations and social attitudes, in something like Thomas's sense of attitudes, are compatible but that the individualized study of attitudes is not. I would more-or-less accept that. But my paper is about systems of widespread or

shared attitudes i.e. a focus similar to Thomas's. Admittedly I did not consistently use the phrase 'social attitudes' but only because I assumed that it was clear that it was the study of social attitudes that was my concern. My paper does make the assumption that the study of attitudes can change its focus away from dominant recent practices and recover a more social approach. In Farr's own terms, I am assuming the possibility of 'a sort of retro-revolution' in the study of attitudes and this retro-revolution, I am happy to admit, is one that has itself been influenced by the study of social representations, as Moscovici (1988) pointed out in a brief comment on an earlier version of my paper.

Towards the end of his remarks, Farr adds a second incompatibility, between gestaltist and behaviourist conceptions of attitude, which I take to be similar to what others have described as 'template' versus 'lever' conceptions. It is true that some decades ago that was seen as an active issue but in recent decades most attitude theorists and researchers, whether espousing tri-partite or expected value or other conceptions of attitudes, have assumed that the two views that Farr invokes both offer only partial analyses of attitudes and have to be synthesized and even extended to incorporate other elements too, especially affect and evaluation. Thus, I find Farr's main argument unconvincing, although his historical points are enlightening and I am attracted by his innovative proposal regarding the potential fruitfulness, in this area, of using Thurstone rather than Likert-type measures of attitudes.

With regard to measurement in this area more generally, I should make clear that the very valuable book of Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993) was not available in English at the time I wrote this paper. Had it been, it would have influenced my arguments, not just with regard to measurement but also concerning concepts. The aims of their book are admirable and their proposals regarding different stages of research are potentially very helpful. I agree with a number of their main emphases, such as recognition that factor analysis is a technique for exploring inter-individual differences rather than agreement, which should be tackled by techniques such as cluster analyses. I do have some reservations about their book and their comments on my paper. They appear to have greater faith in the ubiquity of large-scale social reservations than I do, as revealed by their conviction that what I suggest might be trivial dyadic representations will turn out to be relatable to much more widespread ones and their apparent pre-supposition that individual differences will be understandable in terms of social representations. Nevertheless, many of their proposals are attractive. Indeed they could be said to share some of the discreet charm that they attribute to mine! For example, in considering their own ambitious proposals about how best to systematically relate consensuality, group effects and individual positions, it seems not altogether unreasonable to resurrect the Bunuel analogy and note that most of the sustenance that may result has still to appear.

My reactions to Gaskell's interesting qualifications of my suggestions are rather similar, in part because, using different terms and different examples, such as the sophisticated work of Giorgi and Marsh, he considers some of the same issues raised by Doise and his colleagues, including the relations amongst agreement, variation and the identification of sub-groupings. I certainly share most of his reservations about the limitations and lack of subtlety of large-scale surveys. I also recognize the need to draw a distinction between categories of people constructed largely for statistical convenience and groups constructed by their own activities and identities. His suggestion of distinguishing between affinity groups and other groups based solely on self-categorization seems well worth pursuing. Uncertainty about whether the distinction will prove fruitful does, of course, lend that idea too a discreet charm.

The possibilities suggested by Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi, by Gaskell, by Farr on Thurstone scales, as well as by myself, are all promises that in the future systematic,

complex quantitative studies of what may prove to be structured sets of widely shared attitudes or social representations will prove to be enriching and fulfilling. Clearly there is an abundance of discreetly charming ideas. It is important, however, that the charm of such proposals is sufficiently great for them to be acted on, for the outcomes of the resulting research are likely to be one crucial determinant of to what degree and for how long we will remain enthralled by the blatant charm of social representations.

### **References**

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