

**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS,
JUDGMENTS, AND MEMORY:
A COMMENT ON THE PAPER
BY R. MICHIT'**

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This comment is focused on the methodological and theoretical questions which have been suggested by the original paper.

The topic analysed in the paper is a classic in the literature of social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, 1991; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Hastie, 1981; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). By contrast, although it is true that one of the most important functions assigned to social representations is their influence on memory and judgement (Jodelet, 1985; Moscovici, 1961/76), there are few studies dedicated to confirm this influence (Echebarría & Paez, 1989). The hypotheses proposed by the author could be resumed as follows:

(a) Social Representation are determinant in memory process: Subjects remember better those informations which are congruent with the central node (noyau central) of the representation (hypothesis tested in the experiment III).

(b) Social representations influence the judgement processes: Subjects stronger agree with the decisions which are congruent with the central node (Experiment I).

(c) Finally, social representations "go beyond" the actual data provided. Subjects fulfil the gaps of information through the central elements of the representation (Experiment II).

These hypotheses are tested in three researches focused on the social representations of the enterprise hold by bank-managers and social workers. In previous researches the author has found two different representations: (a) the representation shared by bank-managers had as central element the concept of "rentability", and the concept of "helping-others" as a peripheral component; (b) the structure of the representation shared by social workers had just the opposite structure. In the current paper the author tries to demonstrate the differential influence of these two representations on judgement and memory. Two assumptions (an implicit and explicit the other one) could be found in the text.

(a) The implicit assumption is that of the social practice (here the professional practice) as an anchorage point for the individual memory. This assumption is linked to a long sociological tradition in the study of the social memory which emphasises the central role played by organised social practices (rites and commemorations) in the individual memory. This position can be found in Durkheim (1893, 1912). According to him, commemorations are social devices which fulfil the function of collectively re-experiencing the past. Halbwachs (1968) also said that society provides reference points for individual memories. In the same line, Connerton (1992, pg. 45) states that "rites permeates also non-ritual behaviour and mentality. . . rites have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of those who perform them". Middleton and Edwards (1990) stated that commemorations establish the social context of individual memories. All of them associated the organised social practices to social memory in general and to individual memory in particular. By contrast, from the cognitive mainstream, memory appears as something which is "only into the individuals' brains" and, so, it can be explained by using only intrapsychic mechanisms. Thus, the study of memory is placed within the so labelled "Cognitive Science" (Gardner, 1987) which takes the computer as the best metaphor of the human mind, assuming that social and historical factors are useless in the study of cognition in general, and memory in particular.

How could we understand, from this "social and structural vacuum" (Morgan & Schwalbe, 1990), the predictable influences of social factors on individual memories, such as those demonstrated by Echebarría and Paez (1989)? or, how could we understand that not all the memories are placed into the individual brain? (subjects are able of remembering more information than those stored in their personal brains). Wegner's (1987) model on transactive memory is an example of the social network seen as a social memory system.

In the paper, the structure of social representations and, ultimately the individual memories, is determined by the professional practices of subjects.

Moreover, the same experimental procedure used in the paper and the same data could be used to test the hypothesis of a direct determination of professional practices on individual inferences and memories without the need of including cognitive-mediational variables (the structure of the representations).

(b) Explicitly, the paper exemplifies a structural approach to the study of memory (the central factors which must be elucidated in order to predict remembering is the structure of representation, namely the element which constitutes the "noyau central" of the representations. There are many examples of the predominant place that the structural models of the memory occupy nowadays in the American social psychology mainstream (for example the Associative Network Model of Bower (Gilligan & Bower, 1984; Bower & Cohen, 1982) Schematic model of memory of Hastie (1981, 1988), and Wyer & Srull's model of memory (1988)). These models focus only on the internal-cognitive structure of memory. From these models it is very difficult to understand the specificity of social psychological approach to the memory in contrast with the purely cognitive psychological approach. This same risk exists in some structural approaches to social representations (Abric, 1987) which don't explicate the relationships between social factors and the structure of social representations (the study carried out by Echebarría, Fdez Guede & Gonzalez, 1994, is an example of the explicit theorisation and direct testing of the relations between social dynamics and the structure of social

representations). The structural approach without explicit assumptions about the relations between social factors and representational structures could lead to a purely cognitive approach to social representations (when it was the criticism to the cognitive American mainstream that encouraged Moscovici to develop his theory).

Apart from these theoretical considerations, there are some methodological and statistical flaws in the studies which produce some difficulties to understand which is being really found. An important feature of social representations is that of their specificity and their contextualism. A Social representation is always a representation of a specific object which is activated in a specific time, in a specific context, by a specific target and within a specific group. This statement has strong methodological implications. For example, is it pertinent or logic to study the effects of the social representations of AIDS on the perception of, judgements about, feelings and attitudes towards physically handicapped children?. The same could be said about the second experiment. This experiment tries to test the influence of the social representations of the enterprise on the inferences about the motives by which the target of an ambiguous vignette goes to a hospital. First, taking into account the specificity of social representations, it is difficult to understand the logic relation between the representations of the enterprise and the context of application of these representations (at least the logic relation between the representation of the Bank and the context of going to a hospital). It seems to me that it is theoretically strange to analyse the influence of the social representations of a professional activity on a completely different sphere of activity (p. e. on the interpersonal relationships). In this case, it seems difficult to understand why the author analyses the influence of the representations of bank and social assistance on a context such as that proposed in the vignette. Only if the professional sphere of the observers (for instance, because they are nurses, physicians. . . .) is related to this context this study should have a logic (this could be, perhaps, the case of some social workers, but it seems unlikely). Moreover, the lack of a clear description of the content analysis procedure as well as the process of data reduction and categorisation and the lack of an explicit definition of what the "Aid" category means creates a strong confusion about what is being studied and how.

Regarding to the first study we expect to find a 2x2x2 full factor design according to the theoretical introduction. The author underlines the importance of the observers (experimental subjects) membership (bank workers versus social workers), the target professional membership (the same professions), and the observers personal implication in the context (is the context or not related to their profession?). However, we find an incomplete factor design that impedes us to analyse the joint influence of the representation, the implication and the context. Furthermore, the third experiment analyses the influence of social representations on memory. The data seem to indicate that we are faced to a 2x2 factor design (professional membership (bank versus social assistance) and familiarity with the context). Thus, and taking into account that the dependent variables are continuous, it is surprising not to find multivariate analysis (p. e. ANOVA or MANOVA). This is necessary to study the interaction effects which in fact clearly appear in the graphics of the pages 11 and 13. The author concluded that there are few significant effects but it seems to me that this is due to the inadequate statistics that have been used (Chi-Squares).

Moreover, it is very important to study the "errors, distortions and reinterpretations" in order to understand how the social representations work and influence memory. This distinction is not been made. The different types of biases have been grouped in the general category of "deformations". Thus data have not been exhaustively analysed.

There are some paradoxical results: The familiarity with the context leads to a higher forgetfulness and a lower level of "distortions". These results are interesting and some tentative explanation could be offered.

Concluding, from the theoretical point of view, it seems to me that author should stress the links depicted in Figure 1.

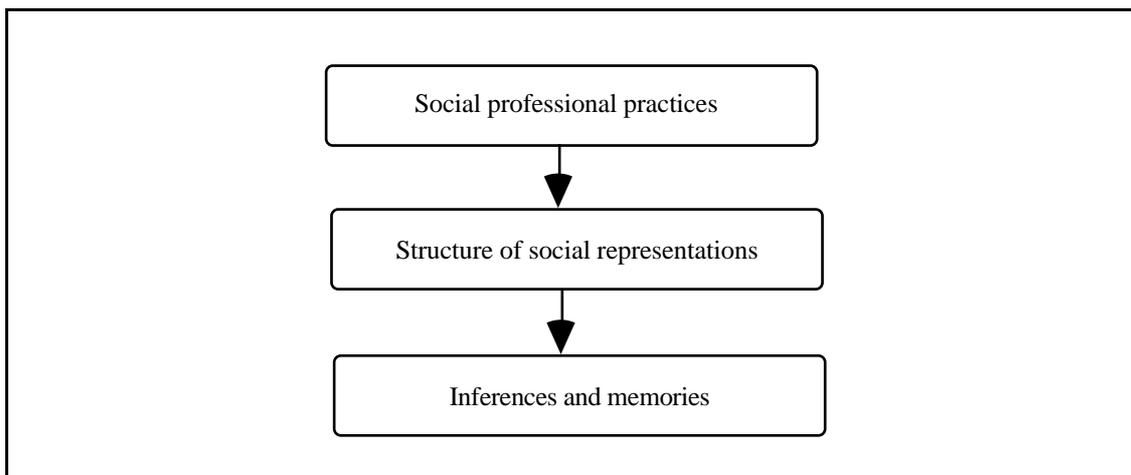


Figure 1

These links are implicit in the text and, it seems to me, are the most interesting contribution to the study of memory from a social psychological perspective such as that represented by the Theory of Social representation.

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