

Comment

# **CZECH SOCIAL SCIENTISTS' REPRESENTATIONS OF 'THE PHENOMENON "SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS"'**□

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*Abstract:* The purpose of this paper is to invite discussion of some fundamental steps in designing a research project on social representations of values, human rights, and ethics. The scientist's own representation (i.e. own definition) of the phenomenon social representation is in the focus. A first record of data is analysed and categorised in four types of representations. This yields some questions that are posed as a conclusion.

We are a group of sixteen social scientists, both accredited professionals and graduate students, working on the project *Social representation of human rights and the concretisation of personal value systems* within a programme of the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, commenced in summer 1995. One of the most important questions recurring in our discussions is just the very definition of the social representation. In this communication, we try to order our first findings and to invite criticism and eventual help of other interested social scientists.

We derive the strategy for the realisation of our task from the theory of social representations, which we understand according to the early work of Moscovici (1963, 1973) as it is further developed in this same author's formulations (Moscovici 1984). At the very onset, we have to admit that these were our only available theory sources (in the form of gifted xerox copies), when we designed our project. Already after beginning the work on our project, we came to know and consequently have accepted the systematic elaboration of the theory presented by Wagner (1994, 1995). Our research procedures are based on the methodology of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990) which means that our approach to each particular phenomenon starts with the open coding of available data and goes on, step by step, from qualitative processing toward a meaningful

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quantification (Mayring 1993). Thus in this sense, the present communication of our findings about the social scientists' representations of the phenomenon »social representations« grounds on a first empirical record.

Respecting the methodological principles as formulated by Moscovici, the very first of which is „*to obtain material from samples of conversations normally exchanged in a society*“ (Moscovici 1984, 52), our operational definition of the social scientists' representations of the phenomenon »social representations« is simply given through the following six steps:

1. Meet a social scientist. — (Record data of her / his field etc.).
2. Ask her / him the question „Have you ever heard about the theory of social representations?“ — (Record the answer).
3. Ask her / him then the second question „What is the social representation?“ — (Record the answer).
4. Proceed eventually to a narrative interview. — (Record accordingly using the open coding method).
5. Inform the social scientist, if you like her / him, about our planned project of research on the *Social representation of human rights and the concretisation of personal value systems*. Thereafter find out what methods of research she / he would use, if collaborating in our project. — (Record accordingly using the axial coding method).
6. Continue discussing with your partner the other dimensions of our project (as briefly presented in the *Brief statement* — see below), however try to stay close to the actual task of our project. — (Record accordingly).

Before offering an interpretation of our first findings in order to invite criticism and eventual help from you, dear colleagues, more information pertaining to the above six steps should be given. These six steps and the *Brief statement* about the project were formulated by the author of the present communication originally to be used during the recruitment of the collaborators for the research project. There have been differences in defining the social representations even amongst the first four members of our team who prepared the project for the submission to the Grant Agency. These differences in our personal representations of the phenomenon social representation provided in fact the first impulse to deal more precisely with the topic of this paper and to stress its importance. There have been also several versions of longer descriptions of the project, before the following *Brief statement* was formulated in Czech and in English:

Social representation of human rights and the concretisation of personal value systems

Project of the GAÈR No. 406/95/1329

Research on social representations (Moscovici 1984) of human rights and their concretisation in the goal-oriented social action, which is understood as governed by the personal values, is the actual task of the project. The outcomes of the research project should provide guidelines for practical programme (Fryba 1995) of prevention and cure of ethical anomie that causes undesirable psychological and social phenomena.

Theoretical basis for the project is provided by the ethical psychology of Abhidhamma which is being conveyed in the lectures on Psychology of Life Coping at the Masaryk University (Fryba 1975, 1989). The research procedures follow the methods of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Mayring 1993) with a special regard to the experiential anchoring in bodily reality (Fryba 1989, Gendlin 1991).

Goal of the project is (1) to identify social psychological determinants, enabling protection of society against action of persons who violate or misinterpret rights, (2) to find a basis for elaboration of procedures to control and cultivate personal value systems that structure the person's

psychotope, (3) to apply these procedures of cultivation in the fields of education, counselling, and psychotherapy.

Realisation is performed in steps by (1) investigation of social representation on rights related to the various types of value systems scrutinised in representative samples of the successful and unsuccessful students, psychiatry patients, delinquents, leading personalities, educators, counsellors, psychotherapists, etc., (2) analysis of personal strategies of action in the various realms of life coping as evaluated by both the scrutinised persons and the observing scientists, (3) comparison of the Czech and the international (Doise & al. 1994) representations of human rights, (4) generating the didactic techniques for the optimisation and cultivation of personal strategies, to be trained in the programme for educators, counsellors, and psychotherapists, with a special regard to the awareness of social representation of human rights and harmonisation of personal value systems.

(The references, as quoted in this *Brief Statement*, see at the end of the paper.)

### **'THE SUBJECTS ACCORDING TO THEIR REPRESENTATIONS**

The persons, we have approached in order to ask them whether they have heard about the theory of social representations, can be divided into two groups according to the criterion of the stringency of the method used. During the recruitment of collaborators, we approached some dozen scientists and maybe two dozens of students who were about to choose topics for their doctoral or M.A. theses. Out of these people, there have been selected those who either „knew something“ about the social representations or were „eager to learn and work“ in this field. Thus the team of sixteen collaborators, as already mentioned, was established and constitutes one group of our subjects. This group is characterised by sharing certain social representations. Admittedly, we did not bother much about analysing the material on social representations of those others whom we refused during that stage of work, which means that only some impressions and memories stay with us but no usable data are at hand. The second group of subjects includes those social scientists whom we are meeting since having established our project team. At present, the data from over sixty subjects are available.

For an easier reference further on, let us call the first group, i.e. the team of the selected collaborators, our „own“; whereas considering the second group, i.e. the other social scientist, as the group of our subjects in proper sense. This distinction is well in correspondence with the criterion of holomorphy introduced by Wagner (1994, 1995). Yet the differences in representation of social representations in our „own“ group grew with time and, probably due to the lack of knowledge of the theory but neither due to its „developing“ nor its „circulation“ (cf. Wagner 1994, 129f), we missed the expected „surprisingly great consense“ (Wagner 1994, 166) in our social representations. The differences concerned not only the definition of social representations, but also of the psychological approach to personal value systems (Fryba 1975, Rokeach 1970), the research on human rights (Doise & al. 1994), ethics and ethical anomie (Fryba 1989, 1995) as well, which goes however beyond our present interest.

The group of our subjects is still growing both in number and in its diversification. It includes psychologists, psychiatrists, educationists, lawyers, sociologists, and social workers, whom we continue to ask the question „What is social representation?“ It would be premature to analyse the social representations of our subjects according to the professional groups they belong to, or even try some quantification of our data. This is not at all our interest here. If we distinguish our subjects, then at most according to the

criterion of those „who know something“ about the theory of social representations, and those „who know nothing“. This is done as evaluation of the answer to the question asked in the second of the six steps of our method described in the introduction.

The aim of the present study is to analyse the material of our subjects' social representations, not to categorise the population of our subjects.

Types of the representation of social representations

Our main interest here is directed to finding out and analysing the various types of the social scientists' representations of the phenomenon social representations. The empirical material for this analysis is provided by the answers to the question asked in the third of the six steps of our method: „What is the social representation?“

Viewing the phenomenon social representations as „system of values, ideas, and practices“ that help people to cope with the world and to communicate (Moscovici 1973), we look for possible different views. We have found such different views in our empirical material, and decided to distinguish in them four types of the representation of social representations which we call:

1. populist,
2. mentalist,
3. reactionist,
4. fundamentalist.

These four types seem to have some connection with the person's amount of knowledge of the theory of social representations and his / her preference for certain particular methods of research, as is suggested by the contents of the statements won in the last three steps of our method. In some cases, the six steps are not realised in one single meeting. Before explaining how we arrived to the four hypothetical types, more information about our procedure has to be furnished. During the discussion with the subject (fifth step), we use to explain the genesis of the theory of social representations. We use as examples the work on social representations of psychoanalysis reported by Moscovici (1963), on social representations of illness (Herzlich 1973), and on social representations of human rights (Doise & al. 1994).

Now, the inductively discovered characteristics of the four types of the representation of social representations can be, here with no evaluative comments, briefly sketched in the following manner:

1. The populist representation is found in subjects who do know almost nothing about the theory of social representations. They either admit this or pretend that they know and carry on confabulating. Their typical answers would be: „Yes, social representation is important, especially in our times of social unrest.“, or: „One is treated by others according to that how well one represents oneself in their social perception“, or: „Everybody should represent socially some valuable issues and this is an important field of research.“ Some would stick to their populist type of representation even after having been confronted with our *Brief statement* on the research project. Typical is here lack of principal understanding of the theory connected with a sort of trying to either make good impression or dramatise the issue. That is why we have chosen to put this type of social scientists' representation under the label populist.

2. Persons holding the mentalist type of representation would contaminate the social representation with the mental representation as understood in cognitive psychology. Some of them may have heard about the theory of social representations, however they

would interpret it either within their personal system of everyday knowledge or try to reduce it to some other conceptions of social sciences they are familiar with. Typical is here a sort of reductionist approach in which is being left out the social dimension that is crucial for the theory of social representations. We have chosen to call this type mentalist not only because of the reduction to the cognitive aspects of the phenomenon but also for the tendency to locate it in the individual's mind only and to ignore the social processes that are involved.

3. Social scientists who are fond of quantitative methodology and usually also subscribe to the behaviorist or cognitivist conceptions of social science, would display the reactionist type of representation. They would do this even when they are rather well informed about the theory of social representations. These subjects seem to hold mentalist representation of the phenomenon social representation, to locate it in the individual's mind, then to proceed detecting it in various groups, and to quantify differences of its occurrence. On the other hand they would neglect the possibility of different structures of the representations in various individuals or groups. Most blatantly, they would give their subjects a questionnaire containing some list of the nosological items or a list of human rights, ask them to react to this list in some way, e.g. to evaluate the importance of the list's items. Then the scientist would statistically process the data and claim that he is doing research on social representations of the illness or the human rights. The point is that he does not care whether the nosological items or the particular rights included in the Charter of Human Rights are at all known to his subjects before the research is commenced. We have chosen to call this type of the social scientist's representation reactionist, because he merely measures the reactions to the list of his preconceived items instead of exploring the phenomenon of the social representations of illness, human rights, values, etc.

4. The fundamentalist type of representation of social representation is found in the scientist who studies diligently the theory and knows it well, but lacks the tolerance necessary for a reasonable communication with others who may hold different representations. Such a less tolerant attitude leads to reviewing one's own conceptions in detail as the right ones and to criticising other approaches globally by sweeping statements. Fundamentalists would tolerate neither revisions of their version of the theory nor allow research questions other than deduced from it. This should do to make clear why we choose to use the label fundamentalist.

## **REFLECTING DISCUSSION**

Can some of our here communicated views and procedures be tolerated by the community of scientists dealing with the social representations?

May we ask some questions that can be uncomfortable?

Do we perhaps see some problems in issues that are for the researchers working on social representations beyond any question?

The chief problem, we are here trying to cope with, is methodological. We ask the research question, identify the phenomena to be explored, survey the related literature just only as opinions of other scientists, choose the theory we find useful for our purpose, and then look for those methods which can help us to answer our research question. We derive our research question from a problem we personally and socially experience as

relevant. We neither deduce our research question from a theory nor formulate it according to a prevailing methodology. We do not want to do science for the sake of science only, yet we consider ourselves scientists who respect achievements of our colleagues both in theory building and in developing methods of empirical approach. Nevertheless our final aim, as proclaimed above in the *Brief statement* on the project, is to lay fundamentals „for practical programme (Fryba 1995) of prevention and cure of ethical anomie that causes undesirable psychological and social phenomena.“ This means that we see the science as an instrument in the service of more humane social practices.

Such an attitude is compatible with the methods of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990) and with the approaches subsumed within the qualitative methodology (Mayring 1993) that does not eschew reasonable uses of quantitative data processing. Thus our programme is to, from the very beginning, allow our subjects to express their own representations of the studied phenomena, and to explore them by the qualitative methods first to see their microdynamics, then to try to survey them within the context of the social macrodynamics, before measuring, quantifying, and interpreting them within a formalised frame of theoretical reference. This leads, of course, to a refusal of the mentalist and reactionist types — as we identified them above — of representing the studied phenomena.

Our methodical procedure — as we exemplified it very rudimentarily through the six steps above — demands repeated interactions between the researcher and the subjects, revisions of the research question during the process of research, and due to it the researcher's respect for the subjects' autochthonous definitions (Fryba 1995, Mayring 1993). Such a horrible thing for a fundamentalist of any provenience — not only for those identified above — does not seem to threaten the exponents of the theory of social representations in which it is provided for by the self-categorising (Wagner 1994, 206) and also by the idiomorphy of the representations (Wagner 1994, 280). A departure from the single shot approach of the so called „collecting“ the data at one time point only — which is the very opposite to our methodical procedure — is being even called for by many exponents of the theory of social representation as reviewed by Wagner (1994, 141f).

Besides the problems of the scientists' social representations of the scientific methodology, to which we arrived from our basic question of the social representation of the phenomenon called social representations, there are further problems we have been confronted with since our research project has begun. Although these further problems could be well approached by means of the theory of social representations, they would require also reflecting upon the politics within the scientific community as scrutinised e.g. by Kuhn (1970). Important ones amongst them were the problems of the conservative defense against introducing a little known theory on the one hand, and eventually also hurting the scientists' narcissism by exposing the fact that the theory is not known to them on the other hand.

To close this communication about the Czech social scientists' social representations, I cannot hold back at least to mention how we had to deal with an embarrassment amongst our colleagues. I wish to refrain here from any justifications derived from the recent political history of the country, which were sometimes offered by the colleagues with whom I discussed the findings reported in this paper. They became appeased only after we have managed to ask also more than ten foreigners from the West, all of them

psychologists by the way, whether they know what is the phenomenon social representation. We found in their answers all the four types of representations analysed in this paper. May this be an invitation for colleagues in various countries to explore, at least in such a modest way as in this paper, what are the social scientists' social representations of the phenomenon social representations?

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