QUESTIONING CONSENSUS IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY□

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Abstract: This paper challenges the notion that consensus defined as 'agreement in opinion' is at the heart of the theory of social representations. We suggest that the problem of consensus is a highly complex aspect of social life requiring appraisal. Consensus refers neither to mere agreement nor to the mere sharedness of attitudes, opinions and values by a social group. While these are the most common interpretations circulating in the literature, they fail to apprehend the different levels of analysis required to understand the social construction of symbolic realities. In this paper we criticise the most common notions of consensus and propose an alternative view. There is space in the theory of social representations to develop a more refined approach to the issue. We make use of this space in order to construct our argument that consensus in social representations exists at several levels. We propose the idea of a representational field simultaneously characterised by consensus, inconsistency and ambivalence. The issue of power within this heterogenous representational field is discussed.

(Mis)conceptions of Consensus

The `consensual' nature of social representations is often equated with their widely shared nature. Common to certain proponents of the theory and to some of its critics alike is a conception of consensus which renders it synonymous with agreement. Both

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Jaspers and Fraser argue that the most distinctive feature of social representations is that they are *shared* by many individuals and as such constitute a social reality. Indeed, Fraser (1994) seems to propose that social representations are a sub-set of the more general field of attitudes. From this perspective, sets of widely shared attitudes are termed social representations whilst more idiosyncratic beliefs are simply envisaged as individual attitudes.

Perhaps it is this assumption that leads Fraser (1994) to propose that survey methodology should be a primary methodological tool used for the investigation of social representations. However, while surveys are often useful in providing a snapshot of the attitudes and opinions of large, representative samples, *used alone* they cannot capture the diverse processes involved in the construction of social representations. They tend to focus on consensual or widespread opinions, ignoring non-consensual opinions, absent opinions and other levels of consensus, all of which are integral parts in the forging of social representations. Survey methodology reifies the concept of consensus, thereby failing to acknowledge the co-existence of oppositional themes and the consequences of this for the functioning of social representations in social life. For example, if a survey finds that 70% of teenagers are opposed to drugs surely it would still be necessary to explore the attitudes of the 30% who do not oppose drugs. Minority representations are neither independent nor unimportant. They constantly interact with the majority representations through conversations, the media, schools and peer groups.

From a different perspective, discourse analysts (Potter and Litton, 1985; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; McKinlay & Potter, 1987) have criticised what they see as consensus in a social representation. They have implied that social representations theory posits that agreement will be found at the level of specific conversations. They have used examples of such conversations to demonstrate that "consensus" does not exist at this level.

The argument of discourse analysts concerning the concept of consensus in social representational theory seems to be misguided. To imagine that consensus exists at the level of specific communications would render the theory of social representations entirely static, with the possibility of conversation and thought being completely impossible. Indeed, substantive research, including the work of Jodelet (1991), Duveen & Lloyd (1990), De Rosa (1987) and Giami (1987) has shown how oppositional themes can be found in a whole range of social representations. This echoes Billig's (1987, 1993) notion that social thinking has an argumentative rather than a consensual structure. Unfortunately, Billig fails to draw social representations theory into his own rhetorical position.

Ironically, the views of attitude theorists and discourse analysts rest on a common assumption concerning social representations theory. They assume that consensus requires a static and banal *agreement* between participants at all levels of their interaction. Mention of consensus in Moscovici's and his colleagues' work is taken to imply that any act of social communication must spring from, and result in, superficial agreement or "consensus". However, Moscovici (1988) does not identify consensus with sharedness, agreement, uniformity or homogeneity. He asserts:

> "It seems an aberration... to consider representations as homogeneous and shared as such by a whole society. What we wished to emphasise by giving up the word "collective" was this

> plurality of representations and their diversity *within* a group." (Moscovici, 1988; p. 219. Emphasis added).

Indeed, one of the reasons why Moscovici abandoned the Durkheimian concept of "collective representations" was precisely because it was too static and was appropriate only to a previous era and type of society. It could not account for the centrality of representational diversity, tension and even conflict in modern life.

Having highlighted some misconceptions of consensus, we move on to discuss the issues which are central to a more appropriate notion of consensus in social representations theory. First we will consider how social processes rely on shared background assumptions. Secondly we will discuss how this relates to the structure of the social representation.

Process of Social Representation Formation: Beyond Agreement

If straightforward and total agreement is not what is meant by consensus in the theory of social representations then what *is* the meaning of this concept? Let us begin by reminding ourselves that social representations are *social* and cultural entities, rather than the mere symbolic productions of isolated individuals. In Moscovici's terms, they are an "environment". This is what Fraser's (1994) argument, discussed earlier, fails to grasp: Social representations exist both in culture and in people's minds. They could not exist without being collectively realised. They are rooted in social life. They express and structure both the identity and social conditions of the actors who reproduce and change them.

Social representations are generated in the communicative practices of everyday life. These are embedded in a stock of historically constrained social knowledge. There is a *tension* between a commonly shared historical background and the diverse everyday interaction of individuals who can construct and construe, invent and transform. Yet social actors do not encounter a blank background waiting to be written. Any given society has the force to gather and to transmit not only descriptions but also prescriptions attached to a historical time.

So, social representations do not presuppose a purely consensual universe, and yet, they presuppose a degree of consensuality. The theory of social representations attempts to conceptualise both the power of social reality and the agency of social subjects. There is always a level of consensual reality in a society, which allows for cognition and recognition, for a language to be spoken and for debate and argumentation to take place. Such a level of consensus does not relate to general agreement or to the sharedness of the same opinion in everyday talk. It relates to the fact that even in disagreement social subjects still know *what* they are talking about, what they are referring to. This tacit knowledge provides a common basis upon which people discuss, compete or argue. This common ground does not result from the sharing of the same views. Rather, its existence is permitted by the "taken-for-grantedness" of social life. This taken-for-grantedness is built up mainly through language, images and ritualistic practices.

It follows, then, that it is necessary to make a distinction between (1) the level of the underlying ground-rules of *social* representation formation, which make understanding possible, are located in institutional settings, draw upon the weight of history and

possess a consensual dimension, and (2) the level of immediate social interaction which involves disagreement and argumentation. Of course these two levels are integral to one another in social practice. This distinction between levels cannot be understood if social representations are seen as exclusively "mental entities" replicated in the heads of all individuals in a group.

This is clearly illustrated in Jodelet's (1991) study of madness. She found that it was at the level of consensual ritualistic practices, such as the separate washing of lodgers' clothes and eating utensils, that the most exclusionary representations were given form. At the same time, there was constant discussion and disagreement amongst the villagers concerning their lodgers in respect of who was dangerous and who was harmless. At the level of manifest discourse they would argue and disagree. Yet, they would enact the same rituals to express the unspeakable. To keep themselves apart and protect their identity, the villagers were representing the mad not only through discourse but also through ritualistic practices that were beyond dissent within the community.

Consensus and Representational Structure

We have argued that there is a level of `consensus' in the background assumptions that makes interaction possible. Does it then follow that these background assumptions must themselves constitute a coherent and unified system? The answer to this question relates directly to the structure of the social representation. Since history and everyday social interaction are fraught with tensions, social representations generated in this context cannot be monolithic. Communication, representation and action are fragmented and contradictory. Thus social representations include in their very structure the resources for dilemmatic thinking. Moscovici states that the structure of a social representation allows for the simultaneous presence of divergent concepts, inconsistent ideas and paradoxical meanings.

"Representations assume a configuration where concepts and images can coexist without any attempt at uniformity, where uncertainty as well as misunderstandings are tolerated, so that discussion can go on and thoughts circulate." (Moscovici, 1988: p.233)

Contradictory views co-exist in people's minds as well as in their social and representational contexts. One only has to think about Hitler's Germany where Jews were accused at once of being fierce capitalists and uncompromising communists, hugely successful and totally degenerate.

Against notions of monolithic and homogenous representations, we propose the idea of a representational field, susceptible to contradiction, fragmentation, negotiation and debate. In such a representational field, there is incoherence, tension and ambivalence. Yet, permeating all these disparate elements there is a consensual reality, which forms the common ground of historically shared meanings within which people discuss and negotiate.

Consensus, Social Representations and the Issue of Power

We have argued that `consensus' is always temporary and precarious since social interaction and communication constantly threaten its stability. However, whilst the

multiplicity of social representations, or of contradictory elements within a given representation of any one object needs to be emphasised, relativism must be avoided. A relativist position denies the fact that social representations held by certain groups in a society have greater authority than those of other groups. There is *power* to be found in the symbolic field, in which very unequally equipped agents must compete to exert their influence. Nowhere is this clearer than with respect to the location of social representations in institutional settings which stabilise, control, and even segregate social groups and individuals. The mass media, for example, is one of the institutions which establishes the representational field in which people take up their (often contradictory) positions.

The theory of social representations' understanding of the interaction between the media and lay thinkers has the potential to provide a sense both of the power of the media, and of the creativity of its audience. Unfortunately these two components are seldom integrated by the principal proponents of the theory. In fact, social representations theory has rightly been accused of ignoring issues of power. For this reason we stress that the debate and negotiation which occur in the representational field do not necessarily undermine existing power relations. Consensus is already the outcome of power struggles occurring in the social fabric. Specific social groups have more access than others to the means for establishing dominant meanings. However, history is an open-ended process. Negotiation, debate and the forging of new practices may allow relations of power to change over time.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have challenged the idea that the notion of consensus, defined in terms of agreement, is central to the theory of social representations. Consensual realities do exist in society and it would be an error not to acknowledge them. However, it would be yet another error to conceive of these consensual realities as the agreement of autonomous individuals. We have proposed that the notion of consensus exists in an area of the representational field which is in permanent interaction with more mobile and unstable elements. We have suggested that this field is itself heterogenous, contested and diverse. This results from everyday life being marked by competing versions of reality and by power relations. Social representations arise from these contradictions and it is their very meaning that the theory attempts to understand.

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