The Role of the Iconic-Imaginary Dimensions in the *Modelling Approach* to Social Representations.

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The article focuses on the relationship between different dimensions of social representations, such as verbal and iconic-symbolic dimensions, looking at the functions that images could play not only for shaping social representations, but also for investigating them. The way the images connect groups and shape representations in the collective imaginary is a key question, which needs to be addressed both on the theoretical and methodological level. Driven by this goal, we will briefly present our paradigm defined *"modelling approach",* based on the integration/differentiation of multi-theoretical constructs and multi-methodological research designs, as functions of specific hypotheses also concerning the interaction among the nature of the technique, the choice of the data analysis strategies, and the expected results. We will also refer to a series of *innovative graphical techniques,* inspired by a *theory of the method*, that integrates qualitative and quantitative, structured and projective, textual and figurative techniques and multi-step data analyses.

Keywords*: social representations, modelling approach, iconic-symbolic dimension.*

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STUDYING SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS BY MODELLING APPROACH

To renew the discussion about the iconic dimension of Social Representations is an opportunity to highlight the connections between the theoretical and methodological background (Moscovici, 1961/1976; 1984a, 1984b, 2000, 2013) inspiring some of the most recent released researches and more classical works put forward by de Rosa since the 80s, in a wider context of social psychology dominated by a monotheistic methodological option for verbal production (de Rosa, 1995c; 2006a; de Rosa and Farr, 2001). Also the works on Social Representations have been largely focusing on the linguistic rather than iconic-imaginary content for a long time, but the emerging of a multi-method approach (Milgran and Jodelet, 1976; Jodelet, 2003; de Rosa, 1987b, 1990; Doise, 1990) integrating verbal and graphic-pictorial elements, allowed the exploration of iconic dimensions, which often elude our rational control, the pressure of the norms and the rhetorical use of written and verbal communication.

The very comprehension of different techniques and the peculiarities each of them puts forward in studying social representations has guided, in several research programs led by de Rosa at the *European/International Joint PhD in Social Representations and Communication Research Centre and Multimedia Lab*, a constant implementation of a multi-method approach integrating graphical projective techniques and verbal or textual ones.

During several decades of research, starting from our first book on *Drawing and Language* (Castelli and de Rosa, 1979) and especially from our first publication on social representations of madness (de Rosa, 1987), we noticed how a multi-method approach can enrich our results:

i) due to multiple projections and structures of levels of analysis, depending on the specific hypotheses about the interactions between social representations and other psychological constructs (attitudes, image, social memory, multi-dimensional identity, emotions, stereotypes, social practises, communication…), traditionally investigated in separate research fields and distinct theoretical orientations, and

ii) due to diverse multiform channels of communication integrated through different techniques, methodological tools and strategies in data collection and analysis.

This research experience led us in elaborating a paradigm that we defined "*modelling approach",* becoming more aware of the behind epistemological choice consistently adopted as a

sort of '*fil rouge*' across different empirical research programs focussed on multiple thematic objects and contexts of the social arena (de Rosa, 2013b).

The need for defining our paradigm as "*modelling approach*", based on the integration/differentiation of multi-theoretical constructs and multi-methodological research designs (de Rosa, 2012c, 2013b), was driven by the awareness that too often the adoption of multi-methodological research designs is simply based on a sort of cumulative model consisting of summing different techniques (as if several methods were necessarily better than one). In the most of cases the adoption of more than one technique is even restricted to a single verbal or textual communication channel, for example in the classical combination of interview, free association and focus group or of questionnaires and content analyses of press. Furthermore too often multiple techniques are not adopted in one single integrated study, guided by theoretically driven justifications for the choice of the specific methodological tools and by hypotheses concerning the interaction between the methodological tools, their communicative channels (oral, verbal, textual, figurative, behavioural, etc.), the data analysis strategies and expected results – thus shaping their interpretation. In fact in most of the cases different techniques or methods are used in subsequent studies (frequently on different research participants) according to a linear cumulative logic of adding data to data (the classical sequential schema: Study I, Study II, Study III… , so familiar in the editorial writing format for publishing in many journals).

The adoption of multi-method approach is not a new research-practice. It has originated a critical debate about the combining of methods and the lack of methodology under the headline of the "triangulation" principle "within-method" or "between-methods", and the development of the "triangulation" no longer as an eclectic strategy of validation, but as an *alternative to validation* (Denzin, 1970/1978, 1989a; Fielding and Fielding, 1986; Flick, 1992). More recently - after having reviewed the history of "*mixed methods*" and having examined the leaders' definition replying to the question "What is mixed methods research?" - Johnson et al (2007, p. 130) has given a new definition in term of the "*third research paradigm*" as follows:

"Mixed methods research is an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research; it is the third methodological or research paradigm (along with qualitative and quantitative research)."

Our need to claim for a "*modelling approach*" to Social Representation moves forward the assumption of the logic of *mixed methods research* (including qualitative or quantitative research tools and their behind epistemological viewpoints) certainly useful in many research fields of the social sciences. The *modelling approach* is more than a research practice for the integration of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore it cannot be reduced to the application of *Multilevel Modelling* (MLM), used to analyse datasets where cases are not independent, or to *Structural Equation Modelling* (SEM), which facilitates the investigation of hypothesized relations involving both measured and latent variables, or to *Multilevel Mediation Analysis,* although it can include these data strategies in its methodological plan. According to our conception, the *modelling approach* is a paradigmatic option specific to the research field inspired by the Social Representation theory. It is aimed to grasp its core value as a *unifying meta-theory of the social sciences*, by operationalizing the investigation about any object of this supra-disciplinary field in multi-methodological research designs. These require to be fully justified and adequately complex depending on the multi-theoretical perspective adopted and the variety of constructs selected, as functions of specific hypotheses also concerning the interaction between the nature of diverse techniques (structured and projective, textual and figurative, verbal or behavioural, etc.), the choice of the data analysis strategies and the expected results.

Along with other classical paradigms (the *structural approach*; the *socio-dynamic approach*; the *anthropological and ethnographic* approaches; the *dialogical and narrative approaches*), the "*modelling approach*" is one of the paradigms specifically inspired by the social representation theory (de Rosa, 2013). It has been conceived in order to empirically detect the articulation of social representations with its different constitutive dimensions and other socio-psychological constructs (also anchored in diverse multi-theoretical perspectives, like for example: multi-dimensional identities, place-identity and identity theories, collective memory, social emotions, etc.), selected in function of the target research object investigated *within* and *by* the specific communicative contexts/channels. This implies designing adequate methods and techniques able to lead the empirical verification process based on theoretically driven hypotheses concerning the interaction between constructs under investigation, techniques, multi-step data analysis strategies and expected results in relation to the research topic and the nature of the communicative context.

In the modelling approach it is fundamental to do not restrict the focus of the investigation to its "objects". Therefore it is crucial to operationalize one of the key epistemological assumptions founding the Social Representation theory: i.e. to assume the interplay between the social actors (and their positioning), the social objects and multiple forms, channels, tools, contexts and scenarios of communication, essential to explore the social process of knowledge building, as a set of interrelated system of social representations dynamically co-constructed and circulating within society (de Rosa, 2012). This statement implies an effort of the principal investigator in order to concretely translate the complexity into well defined research designs. At this purpose, having developed this modelling approach in many complex research programs, involving multiple constructs, different techniques, numerous variables and levels of analysis, we have found helpful to elaborate for each study a *modelling research plan*, which may be produced in the double format of:

- an illustration visualizing the whole elements under investigations and their hypothetical relations and
- a table summarising the key points addressed by the study.

The table includes usually - along the horizontal axis - the various levels of analysis in a logic of a multi-step level of complexity of the interrelated research lines.

In agreement with an ordinary multi-step logic of statistical analysis, the table's sections reserved to the *research lines focussed on field study* usually includes three sub-sections:

1. *descriptive level of analysis*, reserved to those variables characterizing:

   a. the typology of the participants in the study (groups and sub-groups of the target population chosen for the study);

   b. their socio-demographic variables supposed interesting depending on the specific study;

   c. other descriptors selected by the researcher as hypothetically interesting to better describe the participants. All these variables need to be first investigated at purely descriptive level (as dependent variables) to characterise the research population in order to identify better defined sub-groups' profiles, compared to the typologies of participants initially chosen by the researcher for the data collection. In further analysis' steps these descriptors of the population can be

used (as illustrative or independent variables, depending on the chosen statistical procedures) to position the diversified groups and sub-groups in the representational semantic space detected regarding the object/s of the study.

2. *intermediate level of analysis*, reserved to those variables playing a *mediational role* in the research plan, because they are supposed by the investigator to be relevant both for diversifying the *subjects* (the research population on the basis of specific psychological dimensions) and at the same time for the target *object* of representation in a logic of set of multiple interrelated objects of representations, each of which could be itself a target object of the study. Also in this case – as for the previous set of descriptors – the logic of multi step analyses and the multiple functional role assigned to the variables in the data processing (dependent/independent; active/illustrative, textual active/ categorical) is a strategic key to grasp the complexity of the interplay between the three apexes of the semeiotic triangle *Subject/s-Object/s-Alter* constituting the epistemological core of the S.R. theory;

3. *cross-level of analyses* aimed at understanding the core object of representation by positioning on the semantic field the various groups and sub-groups, finely identified according to all the complex set of dimensions included in the whole research design. At this purpose it is also interesting to detect the meta-representations expressed by the different groups as regards each others.

The section of the table dedicated to the *research lines focussed on media* includes - along the horizontal axis – a combination of multiple sources based on traditional and new media, selected according to the specific research modelling plan in order to investigate the same objects and analytical dimensions of the field study line as outlined in the above sections of the table:

1. *traditional media (press, radio, TV, cinema, theatre, literature, advertising, etc.)*, that can be diversified according to different communicative channels: *textual* (like in the case of the print media: newspapers, documents, magazines, books, etc.), *figurative* (like adverts, posters, maps, photos, artworks, vignettes, etc.), *sonorous* (like song, different genres of music), *multi-channels* (like films, spectacles, TV programs, etc.);

2. *new media* and the multiple digital worlds (websites, social networks, blogs, chats, forum etc.).

Along the vertical axis, the table usually includes:

a) the main theoretical constructs, the paradigmatic elements of the Social Representation. theory under scrutiny, the specific analytical dimensions selected for the study, other theoretical perspectives considered intertwined;

b) objectives concerning each of the various constructs/paradigmatic elements/other theoretical perspectives/analytical dimensions chosen and their relationship with the core object of the study;

c) hypotheses concerning expected results regarding each of the various theoretical dimensions chosen and their relationship with the core object of the study, with the kind of the techniques used (based on oral, textual, figurative or behavioural channels, their degree of projectivity/structuration, etc.), with the data analysis strategy, with the population;

d) instruments and techniques, adopted or specifically designed for each of the main theoretical constructs and the specific analytical dimensions selected for the study

e) data analysis strategies

f) research population.

At the end this comprehensive modelling plan of the whole study, conceived while designing the research, may be integrated by the key results obtained at the three main levels of analyses (descriptive, intermediate and cross-level), confirming or redefining the expected results guided by the specific hypotheses formulated in advance.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND ICONIC-IMAGINARY DIMENSIONS: THEORETICAL CONNECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL SYNERGIES

After 50 years of research on social representations (de Rosa, 2013b), following de Rosa (1987a, 1990, 1995c, 1997) and de Rosa and Farr (2001) considerations on images in S.R.s research, we can recognise that there are still different ways in the literature to use them in order to empirically study the social representation iconic dimensions, that is image as:

• a "*source*" able to activate a social representation or to enforce its development;

- a "*product*" of an actual social representation, an iconic-symbolic synthesis, a direct expression of an objectivation process, the fictional core of the S.R.s;
- a "*medium*", a specific way of channelling from different means (visual arts, TV, cinema, photographs, internet) through which a new or previously existing S.R. is transmitted.

Broadly speaking we can refer to:

- studies analysing images belonging to reality and to social communication which are either a *product of objectivation* or *media in themselves in* social representation *transmission*;
- studies focusing on images as tools for data collection (images as medium).

This last stream of studies, also, is divided into those using images as stimuli in associative tasks and those in which the research participants are asked to produce images.

In order to explore the use of the image, as a *source,* a *medium* or a *product*, in the social representation. literature, we will present some of these studies in the following paragraphs.

Our classical studies on madness (Quadrio, Carli, and de Rosa, 1981; de Rosa, 1987a, 1995b, 1997a; 1997b, 2006b, 2009, 2010, 2012a forthcoming, 2012c, 2013c; de Rosa and Bocci, 2013a, 2014 b; de Rosa, Bocci and Pereira 2012)[1], based on a multi-methodological approach, where a triplet of requests ("*draw a human figure*", "d*raw a mad person*" and "*draw a human figure as a mad person would do*") entailed the production of a number of drawings whose analysis highlighted the anchorage of the S.R.s of madness to a surprising repertoire of archaic and pre-scientific images deeply rooted in collective imaginary and even in the classical mythology. Since the very first studies the verbal techniques tend to favour representations expressing a rational and socially acceptable vision of madness. On the contrary, images, either produced by children and by naive adults (but also by professionals), allow emotional aspects to emerge, connected to ancestral fears and multiple expressions of the social and collective memory on madness.

The issue of connection between the iconic dimension of S.R.s and image production had different meanings in subsequent studies (de Rosa, 2006b, 2012c, 2013c), following-up the

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[1] The technique of the *drawings "of" and "if you were"* has been applied by de Rosa also in other research for different target of minority group, like *gypsy* in the exploration of stigma and of the dehumanisation process (the gipsy as an animal, the same result we found for the madman) towards the gipsy minorities.

classical research on S.R.s of Paris by Milgram and Jodelet (1976) who asked the participants in their study to draw a mental *map of the city* (Lynch, 1960; Jodelet, 1982; Haas, 1999; Ramadier, 1997; De Alba, 2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2011; Lejano and Stokols, 2010). Milgram and Jodelet's results, and those that we have obtained 30 years later, show that even a tool inspired at first by a cognitive and physicalist approach, due to its projective and fictional nature, helps to detect elements closely connected to identity and memory of social groups living together in a historical capital city such as Paris, and the relationships with places according to different feelings of belonging. We have developed the city maps technique in the study of social represenntations and place-identity of residents and first-visitor tourists from different nationalities interviewed about their imagined and experienced visit in several European capitals (de Rosa, 1995a; 2013c; de Rosa, Antonelli and Calogero, 1995; de Rosa and d'Ambrosio, 2011; de Rosa and Dryjanska, 2014)). More recently de Rosa has developed new methodological tools (including the "*city visiting cards*" via municipal websites, virtual tours of significant places flying with Google Earth, and conversational exchanges about city-places experienced/imagined via social networks) for detecting the Social Representations of European Capitals and *place @-branding* (de Rosa and Bocci, 2013b, 2014 a, 2014c).

The series of research programs about the multidimensional identity and the Social Representations of Europe, the EU, European countries, his/her own nation and the self - carried out on participants coming from more than ten different European countries in the first wave research in the 90s and in the follow up in 2000 - were conducted also thanks to the development of new graphic tools:

• The *silent map of Europe* was used to explore the level of knowledge of participants about the countries and their perception about the size of the countries and eventual perceived conflicts *between or inside* them (participants were asked to draw countries' boundaries, their names and capital cities) (de Rosa, 1996);

• The E*uroSKYcompass* in which participants were asked to draw a line to separate North from South, and East from West in order to identify the barycentre of Europe exactly where the two lines crossed. Thanks to this technique – included in a set of multiple tools used - a cross-national comparison highlighted how a social categorisation process acts in shaping different Social Representations of Europe and member states (his/her own Nation, his/her own

favourite country and the self included) with reference either to cardinal points or their symbolic meanings (de Rosa, 2000, 2001a; de Rosa, d'Ambrosio, 2005; de Rosa, d'Ambrosio and Cohen, 2005; de Rosa, d'Ambrosio, Bordini, 2006; Rosa, Bordini, d'Ambrosio and Urgeghe, 2007)

Finally, some tasks concerning free verbal association about each cardinal point were administered, merging in the E*uroSKYcompass* tool the graphic and verbal dimensions. In this way the *EuroSKYCompass* represents one of the tools to operationalize the *multidimensional identity model* (de Rosa, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001a), providing us with more information about: a) the different geo-political and cultural (and not purely geo-graphical) meanings attached to each cardinal point (also in relation to answers given in the silent map); b) the projective process of identification with the EU and their own countries (also in relation to the proximity/distance with their favourite country) that people put in place.

Results provided by these two tools (the *silent map of Europe* and the *EuroSKYCompass)*, showing relevant synergies, point out how strong the connection between identities, social categorisation and S.R.s are. What emerges is a complex and circular relationship in which the characteristics of the system of social relationships and power, where the social actor remained, at that time, embedded in the representation of the self, his/her own country, cardinal points and the EU, determine the type of relationship that the different identity levels (personal, social, national, supranational) build up between themselves, the ways they integrate and the comprehensive meaning of identity itself (de Rosa, 2000, 2001a).

As an example for studies, which analyse the role of images taken from the reality (photographs) and transmitted by media, either as products of objectification, or as media in themselves (adverts), we could refer at least to two studies, using:

a) the Benetton ads, in the research carried out on Benetton advertising campaigns (de Rosa, 1998, 2001b; de Rosa and Losito, 1996; de Rosa and Kirchler, 2001, de Rosa and Smith, 1998; de Rosa and Bocci, 2009, 2012);

b) the most recurrent photographs of the traumatic mass-mediated collective event September 11th from exhibitions in famous museums all over the world (in Italy the exhibition took place in *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* in Roma). Participants were asked to

visit the exhibition and to participate, afterwards, to some focus groups in which the same pictures were used with the technique of *photo language* (de Rosa, 2004, 2005, 2007).

- The research on Benetton campaigns (implicitly joining shocking images to a marketing-oriented context, consequently provoking polemical representations) comes out of an interest in the *effects of images in the process of building up a* social representation *stimulated by persuasive communication*. The research plan has included:

    o *media studies*, conducting a *semiotic analysis* of Benetton advertising campaigns with reference to S.R.s theory and the theory about active minorities, following their development from the conventional communicative strategies (focused on the product) to non conventional and shocking messages (focussed on controversial social issues).

    o *field studies,* interviewing potential customers in the intent of integrate our results about the company's communicative strategies and the polemical social discourse activated "*by*" Benetton with the representations they had "*about*" Benetton itself (de Rosa, 1998, 2001b; de Rosa and Losito, 1996; de Rosa and Kirchler, 2001, de Rosa and Smith, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; de Rosa and Bocci, 2009, 2012). The results of verbal association tasks referring to advertising images examined together with those referring to the stimulus-word "Benetton" suggest a paradoxical effect: despite powerful resistance to accepting Benetton's communicative style, a large share of the target had a positive representation of the firm that, at that time, was increasing its business and its popularity through communicative strategies capable of arousing controversial attitudes (de Rosa, 1998, 2001b; de Rosa and Losito, 1996; de Rosa and Kirchler, 2001, de Rosa and Smith, 1998; de Rosa and Bocci, 2009, 2012).

- The research about September 11, using very striking images (such as, among many others, people jumping out of the towers), helped to understand the memory of media images which are thought of as an iconic and symbolic synthesis of the S.R.s of the event itself and to explore its emotional character swinging from remembering to forgetting). The exploration of the iconic contents of the event's social memory focused both on individuals and on the group as an analysis unit; thanks to a photo-language technique,

the negotiation dynamics have been examined in depth for emotionally relevant images and their emotional meaning. Following a multi-method approach (de Rosa, 1990) and the *modelling paradigm* (de Rosa, 2012c, 2013b), those results were integrated with others coming out of verbal projective tools[2] with a common key focusing on the role played by emotions in the S.R.s and in the memory recollection of the event 9/11 and by systems of ideological representations and attitudes of participants referring to such "*complex cultural objects",* as terrorism, USA, West, Islam, war and peace (de Rosa, 2004, 2005, 2007).

As far as *innovative graphical/figurative/pictorial techniques* designed or re-designed by de Rosa are concerned we can mention:

- the *semantic metaphorical differential,* used for example in the study of the Social Representations *"of"* and *"in"* organizational contexts, *focusing on the Italian Social Security National Institute (INPS)* as a case study in the S.R.s of a changing organization seen from *within* and *outside* (de Rosa, 2003b);

- the *metaphorical identification network* , used for example in the study on S.R.s and stock market in financial traders, investors and media (de Rosa 2008, 2012c; de Rosa, Bocci, Bulgarella and Sirolli, 2010; de Rosa, Bocci, Bulgarella, 2011, 2012; de Rosa, Bocci, and Sun, 2012; de Rosa, Bocci and Wang, 2012, 2014; de Rosa, Sun and Bocci, 2015 forthcoming), developed as a continuation and further cross-national extension (Italy, France, UK and China) of a pilot study carried out in Italy since 2004 (de Rosa and Gioiosa, 2008; de Rosa, Enrietto and Gioiosa, 2005a, 2005b);

- *the drawings of a family (FED: Family Eating Drawing), and a person, while eating* implemented in a research about the meaning of disfunctional eating behaviours (anorexia and bulimia) of teenagers (de Rosa, d'Amore, 2002);

- the *family members' emotional facial expressions* in particular moments of the daylife implying separation or sharing, *assemblage* and *free messages sent to family members by an imaginary postman* (a projective figure for the respondent), as innovative techiques added to the *Family Relations Test* to explore in all the members of entire family circles

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[2] *Associative networks* for some stimuli (September 11, terrorism, USA, West, Islam, war, peace) were provided to participants together with the *conceptual identification network* and the *conceptual identification network of the self.*

different dimensions of family relations/representations in a three-generational perspective (de Rosa, 1991, 2013e, forthcoming b.);

- the *body map,* designed for a study in which participants from several EU countries (Italy, Spain, Romania) later extended to Brasil and China, were asked to express their future intention or at least their desire to modify parts of their body through surgery, their S.R.s of beauty and of aesthetic surgery (de Rosa and Holman, 2011, 2014a, 2014b,, forthcoming a, forthcoming b; Vizeu Camargo, Vilas Bôas, de Rosa and Holman, 2014; Camargo, Vilas Bôas and de Rosa, forthcoming;).

- As far as *innovative projective techniques* are concerned, we point out that in other research program some of the initially verbal-based techniques (like the *associative network*, the *conceptual identification network and* the *"self" conceptual identification network,* which includes the "self" in the centre of the *conceptual identification network)* have been also transformed into figurative techniques including visual still image/s or even video and sound multi-media stimulus, rather than the stimulus-word/s:

A CONCLUDING REMARK

Following this overview of some of the studies in which we have referred in different way to the iconic-imaginary component of S.R.s (Arruda and De Alba, 2007), in the article by de Rosa, d'Ambrosio and Aiello (2014) included in this Special Issue, we will present some results from a pilot study about S.R.s of family showing an approach based on artworks as stimuli to the study of image in the literature inspired by this theory (see also de Rosa, Aiello and d'Ambrosio, 2014).

We are convinced together with Jodelet (2012:41) that "the importance assigned to the figurative, imaginative character of the common sense thinking has not received the echo which it deserves in the investigation on social representations". For this reason we hope that this Special Issue will stimulate the awareness of the importance of the images, as fundamental elements which link emotional, symbolic and imaginary dimensions of both S.R.s and collective memory.

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