

**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AS
THE MOTHER OF ALL
BEHAVIORAL PRE-
DISPOSITIONS?
THE RELATIONS BETWEEN
SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS,
ATTITUDES, AND VALUES**

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The social representation paradigm has been very successfully pursued in a multitude of theoretical and empirical research areas. It has been particularly important as an alternative to well-established traditions, such as the attitude and value paradigms, where social representation theory (SRT) is powerfully challenging many assumptions and conclusions of more traditional ways to frame theoretical and research problems. There are nevertheless critics within and outside of the social representation network. The more constructive ones are far less motivated to undermine SRT. Instead, they tend to explore or qualify the domain, or to find links and extensions to other traditions. For instance, the social representation schools of Aix-en-Provence and Geneva are exploring avenues, which are not necessarily in complete harmony with Serge Moscovici's formulations.

This paper explores some of the potential relations between social representations, attitudes, and values. More specifically, I will elaborate two positions: First, I will question the stance which suggests that the three paradigms are incommensurable. Second, I will question the notion that there exists a simple hierarchy, which makes one construct emerge as a function of another, i.e. that social representations are to be found at some basic level, while values and attitudes emerge "on top."

From the outset, it could be argued that neither of the three constructs has an essential "meaning core" but exists only as a heuristic device. Thus, it could be argued that the

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content of the construct depends entirely on its operationalisation. In this sense and encouraged by the optimistic promise of positivistic determinism at the time, Bridgman (1927) declared that operational definitions of scientific terms would inevitably lead to agreement of the terms and conditions between those who use them. However, since there exists marked disagreement between the various attitude, value, and social representation camps, research results are often contingent on variations in operational definitions of the construct. Or, alternatively, variations in operational definitions lead to different research results. Generally, this is not necessarily a bad state of affairs. Why should an ostensibly dissatisfactory definition hamper the enterprising researcher? However, constructs should not be re-defined in order to fit particular research results or to decrease the distance between one construct and another. These strategies generally lead to conceptual confusions and unreliability. Both, the attitude and the value concept, have become so “stretchable” that we often do not know what we are talking about when we speak of attitudes and values. For instance, Fishbein and Ajzen (1972) counted 500 different definitions of the attitude construct, while Van Deth & Scarbrough (1995) report nearly 200 different definitions of the value construct.

Far from arguing that this text represents the final word on the operational definitions of the three paradigms, I rather intend to point out some of their possible core notions. By doing this, I do not intend to give a definitive account of what they are about. I hope that this rather superficial sketch of the three paradigms will, first, clarify potential differences between the cores of each of the constructs and, second, ignite a more constructive discussion between the well-defended social representation, attitude, and value camps. I strongly believe that such a discussion is necessary in order to prevent re-inventions of well-documented phenomena, and to clarify the individual positions and meanings of each paradigm. This could be achieved - *in part* - by juxtaposing the concepts to each other.

Core Notions of Social Representations: A frequently cited definition of the concept of social representation (SR) is Serge Moscovici's in 1973 (xiii) where he states that a SR is:

a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.

The notion of a “sense-giving” system is probably the most important aspect for the purposes of this paper. Social representations turn the unfamiliar into something familiar through anchoring and objectifying. Such sense-making, as stated above, emerges from interacting “values, ideas, and practices.” But first and foremost, SRs are that which, first, *emerge as the product* of values, ideas, and practices while individuals are trying to make sense of their physical and social environment, and, second, SRs can be understood as *systems which produces* such values, ideas, and practices. Just as it is impossible to determine which came first - the chicken or the egg - so is it impossible to determine if SR are at the base of values, ideas, or practices, or whether the latter three give rise to SRs.

Core Notions of Attitudes: Elsewhere, I have discussed in more detail the possible links between attitudes and values (Bergman, 1998a; 1998b). In brief, McGuire states that “in most empirical studies specific attitudes are defined at least implicitly as responses that locate ‘objects of thought’ on ‘dimensions of judgement’” (1985: 239; cf. Wyer, 1974; Woelfel & Fink, 1980). “Objects of thought” can be abstract or concrete while dimensions of judgement are not limited to the “good”/“bad” dimension. Attitudes are always attitudes about something. This implies three necessary and interconnected elements: first, there is the object of thought, which is both constructed and evaluated. No evaluation can take place without an object, and no object that is in our consciousness remains unevaluated. Second, there are acts of construction and evaluation. Such acts are powerfully prescribed and proscribed by our histories, our perception of the immediate moment, and our idiosyncracies. Third, there is the agent, who is doing the constructing and evaluating. At times, we are nothing but automatons who feel and (inter-) act according to cultural, social, or institutional normative rules. At other times, we have to make sense of ambiguous situations or demands because we either do not agree with the salient rules or because we do not know what the rules are that cover an ambiguous situation. We can therefore suggest that, at its most general, an attitude is the cognitive construction and affective evaluation of an attitude object by an agent.² An attitude does *not* turn something unfamiliar into something familiar but represents a subjective position toward an abstract or concrete object of thought. An attitude, furthermore, is instantly formed and may, but does not have to, be shared by group members. While literally everything that can be mentally grasped may be an object of thought and, thus, involve an attitude, not everything can be a social representation. I can have an attitude toward a person that I met in the metro this morning, yet this person cannot be studied as a social representation because she has not entered the public sphere, i.e. is not part of the consensual universe. However, my attitude may certainly have been strongly influenced by the social representations that I hold due to my position in time, space, and society. Under most non-trivial situations, it is unlikely that my attitude toward this person can be inferred from a study on some social representation.

Although some criticise the attitude concept for overemphasising the individual and intra-individual processes while neglecting either social structure or social interactions, it needs to be said that, first, many, including Gordon Allport, have explicitly pointed out the social dimension of attitudes (proposing the term “collective-” and “social attitudes” as a subject for attitude research, cf. Fraser, 1994; Jaspars & Fraser, 1984). In addition, if we think of attitudes as having cognitive and affective components, it should be quite challenging to find even cognitive psychologists who would argue that cognitive components of objects of thought are independent of an individual’s physical and social environment. Instead, different sub-disciplines may have different interests and foci in the study of attitudes, but attitudes are rarely believed to be context-independent.

Incorporating the insights of group-focused social science, we must concede that all three attitude elements - the attitude object, the act of placing an object of thought on a

² I do not deny the possibility that behaviour may be part of an attitude, either in the form of actions or intentions to act. But this idea is controversial and doing this argument justice would lead this text astray from its original purpose.

dimension of judgment, and the agent - are subject to powerful, social forces which impinge on the individual's mental and physical acts.

Core Notions of Values: Schwartz and Bilsky (1987; Schwartz, 1997) proposed the following as the main features of values: they are relatively stable beliefs that are infused with affect; they refer to major life goals and general modes of conduct that promote these goals; values transcend specific actions and situations (but this does not mean that they are context-independent), and values guide perception, evaluation, and behavior.

Values can be *modes*, such as "individualism," *means*, such as "hard work," or *ends*, such as "personal wealth" (Kluckhohn, 1951). Another fundamental distinction is made between *ideal* and *real* values. For instance, "hard work for its own sake" might be a shared, yet ideal value, while "work for sufficient monetary compensation" might be a more salient and influential value in day-to-day work activity.

Seemingly inconsistent values, such as individual autonomy and collectivism may be held concurrently, yet the situational context is likely to influence the salience of one over the other in a given situation.

Values are so central to group membership, that many researchers study values in order to understand groups (e.g. Schwartz, 1992; 1997; Hofstede, 1980). Values are believed to be stable enough in order to encapsulate past and future aspirations and motives, selectively channel attitudes, perceptions and experience, and suggest appropriate behavior. We can turn this statement around and suggest that past and future aspiration and motives, attitudes, etc., may be components of a particular and relatively stable value system.

All three paradigms, social representations, attitudes, and values, can be considered as "acquired behavioural dispositions" (Campbell, 1963). "Behavioural dispositions" refer to tendencies toward particular acts, such as evaluating, or acting toward, a particular object or a particular process. Behavioural dispositions are forces that channel human perception, categorisation, organisation, or choice, to name but a few consequences. And behavioural dispositions are "acquired" in the sense that almost all behavioural dispositions are socialised (cf. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964). Consequently, SRs, attitudes, and values are powerfully shaped by our past histories, our group memberships, reference groups, and by our context-dependent experience of the given moment.

What differentiates SRs from both attitudes and values is that a study of these explores how people construct and objectify certain mental constructs, such as madness, psychoanalysis, democracy, or individualism. In this sense, SRT looks at people's subjectively created reality from an objectively unknowable reality. There are no "hidden" or "latent" SRs that need to be uncovered. Instead the study of a particular SR often tends to examine ways in which lay persons understand some abstract entity.

I will try to clarify the difference between social representations, attitudes, and values with an example. We can study individualism as an attitude object, as a value, and as a social representation. When we study individualism as an attitude object, we are likely to be interested in the position that people take with reference to the attitude object "individualism." A question that may tap into attitudes toward individualism may be "Do you believe people should be able to make important decisions without consulting

others?” Here, the position toward individualism is inferred from the answer of the respondent. Whether or not this question taps into individualism remains to be shown by the researcher’s argumentation.

As a value, we are likely to be interested in precursors or consequences of individualistic currents in a culture, a nation, etc. Values patterns can be detected by examining various attitude statements. Affirming a preference for working alone rather than in a team, decision making without consulting others, a perception of individuals being independent of their social environment, etc. may be indicators for an individualistic value set. Individualism may appear as patters in particular attitude statements but it is up to the researchers to convince their audience that these items indeed tap into individualistic value-sets.

As a social representation, we may study individualism in terms of how people may make sense of the abstract term. We may present them with the term, and ask them to discuss its importance at work, at home, or in society in general. We may, for instance, compare constitutions or texts on family law between so-called individualistic countries and so-called collectivistic countries. Individualism as a social representation is likely to give us insight into how people annotatively and connotatively converge in their ways of thinking while representing something - thus creating meaning from the abstract concept “individualism.”

Do attitudes, which are supposedly unstable, emerge from either values or from SRs, the latter two ostensibly the more stable constructs? Although parsimonious and theoretically elegant at first glance, it needs to be asked, how something supposedly stable can give rise to unstable attitudes, if the product - attitudes - is merely an extension of the “larger” construct. Another problem difficult to explain with this simple model is attitude change. Instead, I believe that, despite pervasive socialisation and interactions between beings which ultimately determine meaning and sense, group membership in modern societies is highly varied both in terms of what it takes to be in a group and which group one belongs to or should belong to. With varying and unstable group memberships come varying value-sets, and possibly a shrinking or even a fluctuating central core of SR. Furthermore, individuals are not merely automatons of some cultural meaning structure but also, to a limited extent, active information processors. Rather than proposing that social structures or SRs determine each and every move and thought, or that individuals’ thoughts and acts are free from social structures, I propose, first, to study the *conditions* under which values or SRs guide and norm our thoughts and behaviors, and the conditions under which we are able to transcend such normative guidelines. Second, our attitudes may come from an amalgam of different values, situational constraints, or from psychological processes that cannot be easily traced back to some value. In other words, while attitudes very often the product of a value structure, at other times - sepecially when there are conflicting normative demands through either conflicting values or a divergence in SRs - the individual is put into a position where s/he must make sense of the current situational demands. I would argue that at this point individuals have far more agency that is allowed to them by the current Zeitgeist of social science. Such forms of limited agency may occur through multiple group memberships which carry different normative guidelines (e.g. gender, age, and ethnicity) or when no normative guidelines are salient. Limited agency may also occur if the “ideal norms” (e.g. “though shalt not covet thy

neighbors wife”) come into conflict with “real norms” (e.g. coveting neighbors wives/husbands). Thus, a particular SR or a particular set of values may not always account for the individual’s thoughts or actions.

Many social scientists have recognized this exact problem before. Attitude specialists, recognizing that their paradigm has neglected social contributions to attitude formation, proposed the distinction “individual attitudes” vs. “collective-” or “social attitudes.” Value specialists, recognizing that their paradigm was not able to account for within-group differences, suggested the distinction “social values” vs. “individual values,” or “peripheral values” vs “central values.” Finally, recognizing the same shortcoming, SR theorists sometimes propose “individual representations” vs. “social representations.” Such a “stretch” of the paradigms represents an attempt to make each of them all-inclusive in the sense that the favored paradigm should account for all phenomena. This “Swiss Army Knife” strategy, i.e. creating an all-encompassing paradigm, leads, in my opinion, to a watered-down concept that follows the fate of the Swiss Army Knife: it may be very practical as a quick fix but it’s pretty useless for more demanding tasks. In other words, it does neither suffice to speak of social/central versus private/peripheral representations, nor is it constructive to speak exclusively of social/central values versus private/peripheral values, nor about social/central attitudes versus private/individual attitudes.

Instead of making one paradigm the mother of all others, the three constructs may serve a more useful function by recognizing their particular domain of interest.

In sum, attitudes are positions toward something abstract or concrete. They may be stable but they very well can be highly context-dependent. Values are about modes, means, or ends with reference to some goals of a collective. SRs are systems that transform the unknowable into something knowable that give rise to values and attitudes, but are concurrently formed by these. In a sense, SRs are on a very different level than attitudes or values since SRs look at the construction of something in order to make sense of it.

I am not arguing there that any of these propositions here stated should be taken into account when we are studying either attitudes, values, or SRs. Under no circumstances is a final definition or a grand, unifying theory suggested. Instead, this paper intends to ignite a constructive discussion between the paradigm camps. There is nothing wrong with working within one particular paradigm, although familiarity with the domains of, and the differences between, the paradigms can only enrich theoretical arguments or empirical work of a research project. But to defend ones pet paradigm by stating that one can easily be replaced by another, or to state that the favored paradigm is the mother of all behavioral predispositions, or to propose a causal order in which one paradigm is made to be the by-product of another, seems premature and unconstructive.

In conclusion, although there is a substantial area of overlap between social representations, attitudes, and values, i.e. attitude statements may show patterns that hint at values and endorsements of different value or attitude statements can be used to examine SRs, the study of each of these, first, can be fruitful without having to account explicitly for the other paradigms and, second, the choice of paradigm should be guided primarily by the purposes and the research focus of the researcher and not by the belief that one paradigm is inherently superior to another.

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