Would the Real Social Representation Please Stand Up?
Three Levels of Analysis of Social Representations of European American and Mexican American Identity[1]

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Basing this research on questionnaire data collected from 203 European Americans and 93 Mexican Americans residing in the south-west of the US, I will develop three incommensurate conclusions about their social representation of self- and ethnic identity. Despite the use of identical observations and variables, I will accomplish this by using different statistical, theoretical, and conceptual approaches. The divergence of results, despite using identical data, must be understood in two ways: first, identities and representations are far more complex than any one theory or method of the competing strands in the social sciences allows for at present. Second, despite using statistical methods, I will arrive at divergent results because of the way data was analysed. More generally, with this paper I intend to illustrate the complexity and some of the pitfalls of comparative research.

Many studies have examined variations of the content of social representations, including madness/mental illness across social class, age, educational attainment, professional groups, or geographic region (Wagner, Duveen, Verma, & Themel, 1999; Zani, 1993; Jodelet, 1989; De Rosa, 1984), representations of Europe by children from different age, socio-economic

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groups, and personal experience (Rutland, 1998), gender identity across the sexes (Lloyd & Duveen, 1990; 1992; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1991), work across professional groups (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Joyce, 1988; De Paolo & Sarchielli, 1983), and self and group identity across ethnic groups (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Meyer, 1984). One of the theoretical assumptions of these studies is that social groups are marked by a shared set of social representations (SRs) and, following from this, variations of the content of selected SRs emerge across different social groups. Such variations across groups are likely to exist because SRs are a form of knowledge matrix that is learned and negotiated among members of social groups. As Jodelet (1988: 361) states:

> The concept of social representation indicates a specific form of knowledge, i.e. common-sense knowledge, the contents of which reveal the operation of processes that are generative and that (serve) distinct social purposes. More generally, it indicates a form of social thought. Social representations are practical and communicable ways of thinking that are oriented towards an understanding and mastery of the environment (translated by Farr, 1990)

Since individuals are more likely to interact with members of their own groups, they develop and transmit a particular set of SRs that may differ in substance from that of other groups. If "at the collective level, [social] representations correspond to culture" (Farr, 1990: 58), then we should find variations in the content of some SRs across cultures. Indeed, the social anthropologist, Dan Sperber, observes that "cultural phenomena are ecological patterns of psychological phenomena …. [SRs] are fairly pervasive in a culture and may differ across cultures" (in Farr, 1990: 58-59).

If members of a group share a particular set of social representation, then does it follow that group membership can be automatically attributed to someone who is sharing a specific set of SRs with a group? Or, can someone share SRs with a group without belonging to it? Alternatively, can someone belong to a group without sharing essential SRs with the group? Which SRs are group-specific and what should we include in the study of a specific SR?

If SRs should be what Harré (1984) called collective SRs (as opposed to distributive SR), or if they should include every image to an idea and every idea to an image - as Serge Moscovici (1984) emphasises, then it is quite difficult to imagine what should *not* be included as part of a SR with respect to any abstract or concrete object. Surely someone at some point in time associated madness with Europe, but does such an occasion make Europe part of the SR of madness? If we return to the idea proposed at the beginning - that groups are demarcated by shared SRs - we should obviously allow for a great variety of images and ideas, but we may have to pose restrictions to what is part and not part of a specific SR. While it would be silly to suggest statistical or other mechanistic principles that would assist us in delimiting the boundaries of SRs, we have to realise that whatever choice we as researchers make, whether it is intuitive, interpretative, or statistical, we have here a first problem in the empirical study of SRs: which of the infinite potential data should become part of our report on a SR under investigation? But let us assume that we have successfully collected empirical data that tap into the significant dimensions of a specific SR. The next task may now be to describe its key features. It is precisely at this point, where another, more subtle, selection bias enters our work.

In this article, I will demonstrate that it is possible to use the same data set and come to three completely different conclusions as far as the content of SRs is concerned. I am deliberately using quantitative techniques because many believe that interpretative biases are less common in quantitative methods, ostensibly because the researcher is executing impartial statistical tests. "Numbers don't lie," so I've been told.

To illustrate my arguments, I will use data that two research assistants and I collected from Mexican Americans (MAs) and European Americans (EAs) in the south-west of the US. More detailed methodological and substantial discussions can be found in Bergman (1998) but here, I intend to concentrate on the complexity of interpretation of empirical observations and of identity. The data pertain to identity characteristics that both groups attribute to themselves personally, to their ethnic group, and to the respective outgroup. In other words, we can regard the data as elements of social representations of self-, ingroup-, and outgroup identity of Mexican Americans and European Americans, and the task here is to describe the content of these three aspects of identity.

Method

Participants

Data was collected from 97 MAs (recent immigrants were excluded from this study, i.e. the group of interest was limited to those who have resided in the US at least since the immigration reform of 1982 and to descendants of immigrants) and 203 EAs (only US citizens of European descent who were born in the US). All individuals were residents of California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas, and all were US citizens or had permission to reside and work for an indefinite length of time in the US.

Occupations of the respondents included office clerks, waitresses and waiters, cleaners, homeless, car mechanics, oil riggers, fishermen, soldiers, police officers, taxi drivers, engineers, software programmers, social workers, secretaries, lawyers, dentists, professors, accountants, the unemployed, a film producer, a CEO, a photographer, an actor, cooks, gang members, house-wives, and 39 full-time students. Both genders are equally represented, and ages ranged from an arbitrarily set minimum of 17 to 83.

Material

A survey was administered to each of the participants, which was constructed from qualitative data based on ethnographic observations, exploratory interviews or, what Geertz calls, "deep" interviews, in which identity dimensions were carefully studied and discussed with informants from a variety of backgrounds. Twenty-seven identity "markers" were eventually selected to study the SRs of the "self," "Mexican Americans," and "European Americans." The choices were made based on the frequency of use by interviewees in the exploratory stage of the study, or on how essential informants judged a marker. For instance, the marker "family oriented" was used frequently by both groups and selected as important by the informants. It was therefore included in the list of identity markers.

Of course, it could be argued that the 27 identity markers that were eventually chosen hardly capture the entire space of the SRs, even if they emerged from careful fieldwork over a period of three years. Which set of empirical obervation can lay claim to this? In other words, the small set of markers is not what I would consider *the* SR of the self and both ethnic groups but merely represents indicators of underlying SRs. Nevertheless, because both MAs and EAs consistently use these characteristics when they speak of themselves and others, because these characteristics thus anchor and objectify identity, and because they guide prescriptive and proscriptive psychological processes and behaviours, we have to concede that within the limits of the methods employed here we are dealing with indicators of SRs of identity.

The 27 markers are included in inventories of the self, the ingroup, and the outgroup which were administered in the form of a questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate how typical they thought a particular identity marker, such as "family oriented," was for (a) themselves, (b) their ingroup, and (c) the outgroup. The questionnaire included (a) an inventory on self-identity, (b) an inventory on ingroup identity, (c) an inventory of outgroup identity, (d) a set of questions referring to the type and length of relations formed with ingroup and outgroup members, and (e) an evaluation of the desirability or positivity of each of the 27 identity markers. The questionnaire was back-translated from English into Spanish.

Design and Procedure

It is practically impossible to randomly select subjects from the US population, even with sufficient resources. Given the limits of this study, it was nevertheless attempted to approximate randomness by collecting questionnaire and interview data at different time periods, locales, and by varying surveyor characteristics. The surveys were collected by two research assistants and myself. One of the assistants was a male, bilingual Mexican American and part-time community college student, employed as a dishwasher in gambling casino, the other an unemployed, bilingual European American waitress. Surveys were distributed in parking lots of supermarkets and social security offices, street fairs, at the department of motor vehicles, laundromats, cafés, restaurants, bars, museums, trailer parks, service stations, community centres, football games, bus stations, airports, libraries, and door-to-door.

Thirteen European Americans refused to attribute characteristics to Mexican Americans. Two of these refused to explain their reasons and all others found the attribution of characteristics to the outgroup racist. They, however, agreed to be briefly interviewed. Four of these changed their minds after the interview and completed their questionnaire. Of those Mexican Americans who accepted the questionnaire, none refused to attribute characteristics to the outgroup.

Result and Discussion A

The first analysis explores the difference between identity markers of the three constructs self, EAs and MAs across both groups. The following table lists identity markers, ordered according to strength of attribution, that each group considered either very, moderately, not likely to be, or not at all descriptive of the self, MAs, and EAs.

What table 1 clearly shows is the similarity with which both MAs and EAs construct the objects of thought "self," "Mexican Americans," and "European Americans." According to the data, both groups attribute characteristics with nearly the same strength to the three constructs. Indeed, the most striking feature of this table is the similarity of construction of the three identity elements.

Because the evaluations are so similar across groups, I could now propose that both MAs and EAs share essentially the same SRs. A convergence in the content of SRs can be explained by the fact that both groups share a similar geographic and cultural space in the US, since the study was limited to the Southwest where most Mexican Americans reside. In fact, in many regions, Mexican Americans represent the numerical majority. Because most of the participants grew up in the US, I could also propose that they essentially share the same values (e.g. materialism, individualism) and are subjected to the same institutions (e.g. laws, schools).

Table 1

Elements of Representations of Self, European Americans, and Mexican Americans, ordered according to strength of attribution:

Self (by EAs)
Very: hardworking, respectful, honest, intelligent, clean, educated, ambitious, cooperative, warm, individualistic, easy going, logical;
Moderately: tolerant optimistic, proud, strong, emotional, competitive, spiritual, family oriented;
Not likely to be: selfish, poor, weak, slow, rude, lower class;
Not at all: prejudiced;

Self (by MAs)
Very: respectful, hardworking, clean, honest, family oriented, ambitious, cooperative, intelligent;
Moderately: easy going, emotional, educated, tolerant, warm, proud, strong, logical, spiritual, individualistic, optimistic, competitive;
Not likely to be: lazy, selfish, slow, rude;
Not at all: prejudiced;

European Americans (by EAs)
Very: materialistic, competitive, proud;
Moderately: ambitious, defensive, sexual, aggressive, selfish, prejudiced, individualistic, hardworking, strong, traditional, clean;
Not likely to be: ø
Not at all: ø

European Americans (by MAs)
Very: materialistic, competitive, ambitious
Moderately: prejudiced, proud, educated, defensive, intelligent, individualistic, sexual, selfish, clean, aggressive, strong;
Not likely to be: poor;
Not at all: ø

Mexican Americans (by EAs)
Very: family oriented, religious, traditional, spiritual, proud;
Moderately: hardworking, sexual, strong, warm, emotional;
Not likely to be: ø
Not at all: ø

Mexican Americans (by MAs)
Very: family oriented, religious, traditional, hardworking, proud, warm, spiritual, strong;
Moderately: emotional, respectful, sexual, cooperative, clean, defensive, honest, artistic, competitive, ambitious, intelligent, tolerant;
Not likely to be: lazy, slow;
Not at all: ø

Positivity ratings of attributes (by EA)
Very positive: respectful, honest, educated, tolerant, cooperative, warm, intelligent, hardworking, family oriented, spiritual, optimistic, easy going, logical clean;
Positive: artistic ambitious strong, individualistic;
Negative: aggressive;
Very negative: slow, lower class, sly, defensive, materialistic, weak, poor, selfish, lazy, rude, prejudiced;

Alternatively, it could be argued that, although the groups may use similar labels, the labels themselves may actually have different meanings and may signify different things across groups. In other words, the term "intelligent" may mean something different for MAs than for EAs. I have not studied the semantic field of each of the labels but I did ask the respondents to assign each adjective a desirability or positivity rating. As it turns out, both groups tend to have nearly the same evaluation with respect to the identity markers. Interviews and field data further corroborated that both groups understood terms, such as "educated" or "materialistic" in similar ways. How else would it be possible for both groups to converge to such an extent in their attribution of "materialism" and "individualism" to European Americans and "family oriented" and "religious" to Mexican Americans?

Can we state from this that both MAs and EAs construct and evaluate the objects self, MA, and EA similarly, i.e. that they anchor and objectify the three objects in more or less the same way? Do they thus share the same ontological, motivational, and behavioural space? By emphasising the convergence of elements that emerged from this point of view, I could now conclude that it is not correct to speak of different groups, at least with reference to their SRs, as both groups essentially attribute similar characteristics to the three constructs. Let us go to the next level of analysis to examine this issue further.

Result and Discussion B

Instead of merely comparing the individual identity markers across groups, I will now explore how the SRs of the self and the ingroup relate to each other. The following chart is again a listing of frequencies of identity markers, but this time they are ordered based on how each group evaluated each identity marker in terms of desirability or positivity. To make the chart legible, only makers pertaining to the self and the ingroup as evaluated by MAs are displayed (Figure 1).

As already observed in table 1, we can see from figure 1 as well that MAs tend to evaluate their ingroup as highly "religious," "traditional," and "family oriented" and very low on "lazy" and "slow." We can also observe that MAs associate "respectful," "hardworking," "clean," and "honest," with their self and dissociate their self from, for instance, "prejudiced," "lower class," "rude," and "slow." But this figure reveals other interesting aspects. For instance, the lines representing the typicality of identity markers, sorted according to positivity, seem to follow each other closely, and they roughly run diagonally from bottom-left to top-right. This means that MAs construct their self similarly to that of the ingroup and that they have a rather positive image of both their self and their ingroup, i.e. they tend to withhold negatively evaluated characteristics and attribute positive ones to both identity constructs. The only significant differences of markers between the MAs' self and the ingroup are "educated," "traditional," "religious," and "prejudiced." In sum, MAs consider most positively evaluated characteristics as typical for themselves personally, as well as collectively, while rejecting most negatively evaluated characteristics on both the personal and the ingroup level.

If we now turn our attention to the representation of EAs' construction of the self and their ingroup, we see a marked difference (Figure 2).

While EAs, similarly to MAs, attribute positively evaluated characteristics to themselves personally and concurrently withholding negatively evaluated ones, this cannot be said about their evaluations of their ingroup. Numerous negatively evaluated characteristics, such as "prejudices," "rude," and "materialistic," are affiliated with their ingroup. They attribute positively evaluated characteristics, such as "honest," "respectful," "tolerant," and "cooperative" far less frequently to their ingroup, compared to themselves personally. Not

only does this indicate a relatively negative evaluation of their ingroup, but it also implies a large distance between the SR "self" and the SR "European Americans." The limited scope of this paper does not allow for a more detailed theoretical and substantial discussion of the finding, especially as they relate to identity construction and intergroup relations (but see Bergman, 1998). For our purposes here, it should suffice to restate that EAs have a positive SR of the self, a mixed SR of the ingroup, and that the content of the two are very different.
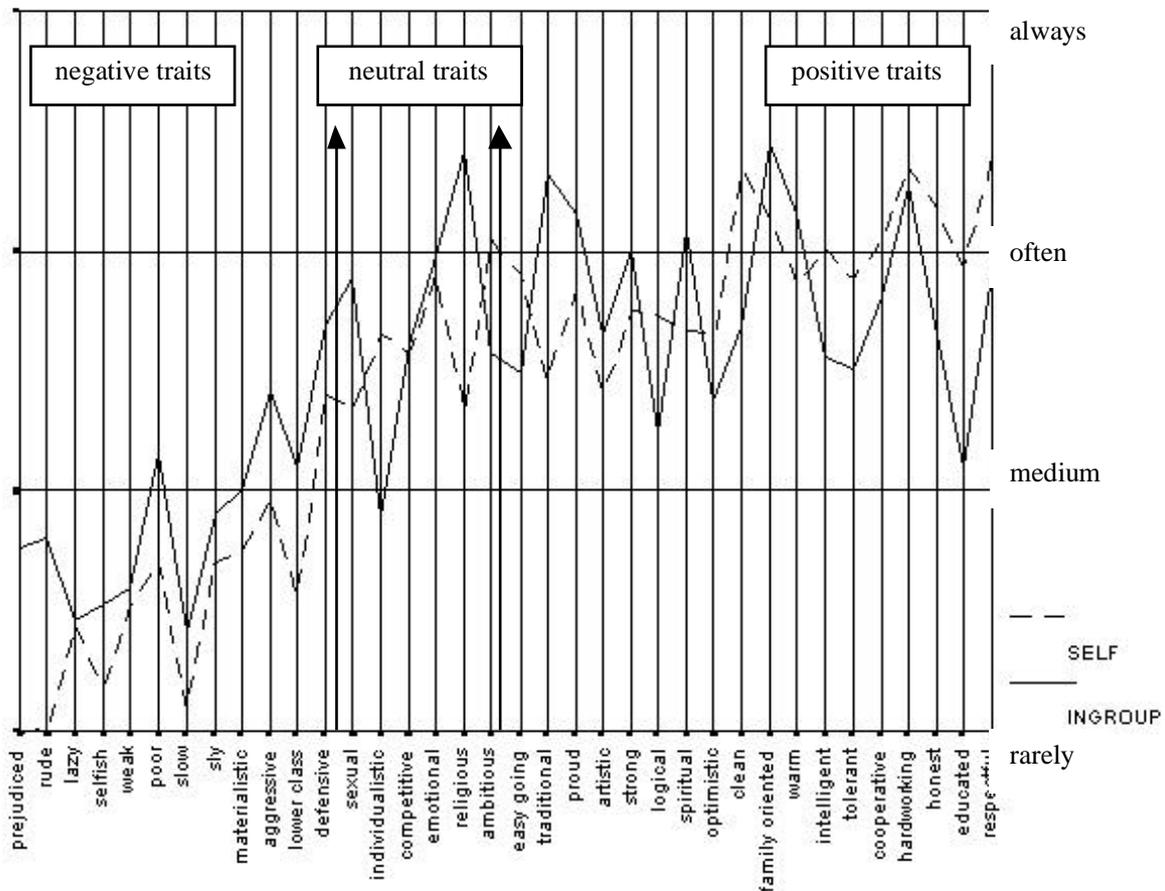

Figure 1
MAs' attributions of identity markers (self & ingroup; sorted by positivity)

In sum, MAs' ingroup attributions follow closely those of their self-attributions. EA ingroup attributions, in contrast, do not follow self-attributions. From these observations, we can state that the SR of the self is constructed independently from the SR of the ingroup among EAs, and interdependently among MAs. If we were to assign numbers to positivity such that -2 would stand for very undesirable characteristics and 2 would stand for positively evaluated characteristics, and if we would assign number to how typical a characteristics is, 0 for not at all characteristic and 4 for very characteristic, then we can calculate a primitive sort of difference of SRs between the self and the ingroup as follows: [(level of appropriateness of marker of self - level of same marker of ingroup)/n; and we can calculate positivity as follows: [(level of appropriateness of indentity marker)*(positivity)]/n. Table 2 summarises positivity and distance stantistics:
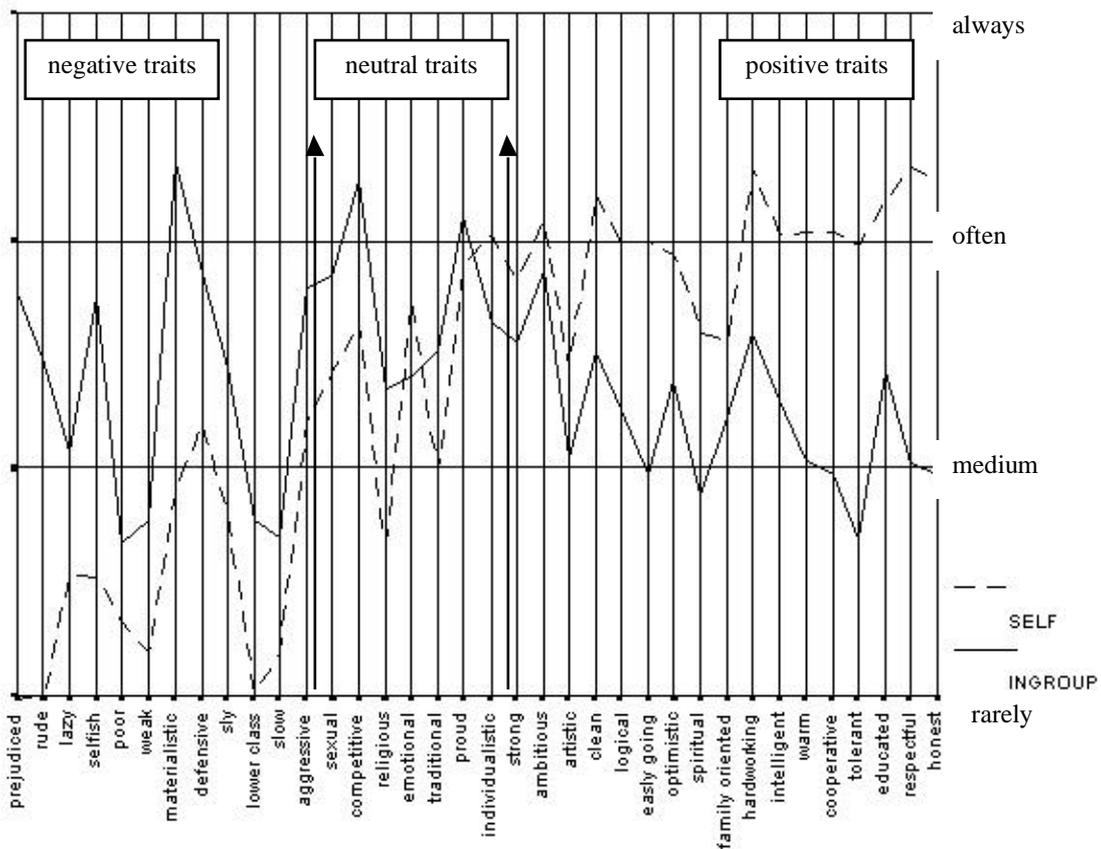
Figure 2
EAs' attributions of identity markers (self & ingroup; sorted by positivity)

Table 2
Positivity and distance of European American and Mexican American identity markers:[2]

	European Americans mean (standard deviation)	Mexican Americans mean (standard deviation)
	Positivity by group	
Positivity of self	54 (43.6)	62 (37.1)
Positivity of ingroup	9 (43.7)	46 (37.5)
Positivity of outgroup	22 (38.2)	19 (34.7)
	Distance by group	
Self to ingroup	62 (25.5)	49 (24.6)
Self to outgroup	61 (26.9)	64 (28.6)
Ingroup to outgroup	52 (27.9)	58 (28.6)

In the above table, the smallest distance between the SRs is indeed that between MAs' self and their ingroup (D=49). For EAs, the distance is significantly greater. Indeed, EAs' SR of the self is as distant to the ingroup (D=62) as it is to the outgroup (D=63)! In terms of positivity, we can see that the most positive SR is the MAs' self (P=62), followed by the self of EAs (P=54). By far the most negative SR in the entire table is the EAs' ingroup evaluation (P=9), which is far lower than the MAs' ingroup evaluation (P=46) or even their outgroup

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[2] From Bergman (1998)

evaluation (P=19). This point is not all that surprising and could be explained by a number of different paradigms, including the interdependent vs. the independent self-construal as elaborated by Markus and Kitayama (1991; 1994) or what Triandis terms allocentric vs. idiocentric (e.g. 1989) or individualism and collectivism (e.g. 1995; cf. Hofstede, 1980). Geertz and many others have made similar observations. It is not my intention here to reformulate rather known phenomena, but to show that we may actually be dealing with different forms of identity representations: it is not the difference in attributes that separates the groups, but rather the representation of the self in relation to the representation of the ingroup. And here lies the crucial difference between MA and EA social representation of identity. We have, thus, finally hit upon different social representations of identity. Is it now possible to speak of group membership that is distinct due to differing SRs - not in terms of their content but in terms of the relationship of SR to each other? One's identity is surely very different, if self- and ingroup identity are welded together, compared to an identity that is relatively free to define the self either as very close or very different from the ingroup. Amongst EAs, difference or similarity to their ingroup depends on the context and the relations that have been formed (see Bergman, 1998). And while we are talking about relationships, what about the differing relationships that EAs have to MAs? Shouldn't large within-group variations, as exist in both groups, give rise to very different representations of identity?

Result and Discussion C

Before we can elaborate on this final segment of this paper, I will have to briefly introduce acculturation. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovitz (1936: 149) defined acculturation as "phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture pattern of either or both groups." Erroneously, acculturation is often thought of as cultural assimilation of a minority group toward the majority group across time. Many have realised, however, that some minority group members either do not want to, or are not permitted to, assimilate into the so-called dominant culture. The time dimension was thus rejected but the unidimensional character - from assimilation to the "host culture" or segregation and maintenance of the "native culture" - has been largely maintained. But a unidimensional conception of acculturation does not allow for biculturalism, i.e. being able to understand and function within both cultures. In a unidimensional model, individuals are falsely assumed to adopt only one culture. Similarly, unidimensional assimilation does not permit a form of "culturelessness" or marginalisation (cf. Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937) or a rejection of both the native culture and the host culture. Marginalised individuals, however, are often found among gang members in urban areas in the US (Vigil, 1993).

The concept of acculturation needs to be expanded such that it is possible a) to assimilate into the new culture without necessarily losing values and representations of the native culture (i.e. biculturalism/multiculturalism, and b) to withdraw or not share values and representations of both cultures (i.e. marginalisation). This has been pointed out by various acculturation researchers, e.g. Berry (1994; see also Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986). Finally, so-called dominant groups or host cultures are unjustly excluded from acculturation considerations, i.e. they have not yet been studied with respect to acculturative changes due to long-term and continuous contact with a salient minority groups. My proposal here is, and my data corroborates this, that both groups acculturate to each other during long-term and continuous contact. Therefore, I argue that acculturation (i.e. biculturalism, segregation, marginalisation, and assimilation) should be studied *in both ethnic groups*, especially since

identities and relationships are not formed in a vacuum, but are part of a negotiation processes within-, *as well as* between groups.

Returning back to the topic at hand, it is obvious that, depending on acculturation style, SRs are likely to differ *within* an ethnic group. In other words, segregated European Americans (i.e. those who prefer their ingroup but avoid contact with the outgroup) are likely to have different representations of their ingroup and the outgroup, compared to assimilated European Americans (i.e. those who prefer contact with the outgroup and its culture but report less than average contact with their ingroup). Expressed differently, depending on acculturation style, individuals are likely to associate different qualities with their ingroup and the outgroup, are likely to interact differently, and have a different meaning-content attached to the groups. If individuals or subgroups acculturate differently, what happens to their SRs? Do they develop sub-group representations or are sub-group variations merely aberrations, "measurement error," or "noise"? The latter would mean that identity among Mexican American gang members is the same as that of military officers, pop singers, or attorneys.

In my research, I have used responses to questions relating to frequency and quality of relationships with ingroup and outgroup members to determine each participant's acculturation styles, i.e. biculturalism, segregation, marginalisation, and assimilation. Here, I have only the space to show two of the eight different possible sub-groupings (four for each group). The following figure has been obtained by combining cluster analysis with multidimensional scaling. Essentially, it is a two-dimensional display of, what some call cognitive-, meaning-, or mental maps.

Briefly (and very superficially stated), the identity markers located next to each other tend to go together, while Cartesian distances between adjectives in the figures imply that they do not go together. In other words, in combination with the information of table 1, we can have an insight into the mental associations between the identity markers. Markers referring to EAs' ingroup begin with the letter "a," and those referring to the outgroup begin with the letter "m." According to figures 3 and 4, the representation of the ingroup and outgroup among the segregated EAs differs from assimilated EAs. While assimilated EAs (those who report worse-than-average relations with other ingroup members and better-than-average relations with outgroup members) believe that "lazy," "selfish," "rude," "slow," etc. do not at all describe the outgroup, segregated EAs (those who have better-than-average relations with ingroup members and worse-than-average relations with outgroup members) are rather ambiguous about the appropriateness of these descriptors. Concurrently, assimilated EAs rate their ingroup lower with respect to honesty, tolerance, intelligence, respectfulness, etc., compared to the evaluations of the ingroup by segregated EAs. The typicality and the relations between identity markers, in short, the content of the representations of the ingroup and the outgroup, are *different across acculturation styles*. The following table illustrates difference across acculturation style with respect to positivity and distance of the SRs of identity:

From this figure, we can see that the difference between the average score of positivity of EAs and that of segregated EAs (P-EA) is, on average, positive (P-EA=10). This means that segregated EAs hold, on average, a more positive ingroup-identity, compared to the average EA. Assimilated EAs, on the other hand, evaluate their ingroup significantly less positively than the average (P-EA=-7). This trend is reversed for evaluations of the outgroup: here, the difference between the average score of EAs for the positivity of MAs and that for segregated EAs is negative (P-MA=-10), which means that segregated EAs have a more negative SR of the outgroup than the average EA. Assimilated EAs, in contrast, have a more positive SR of
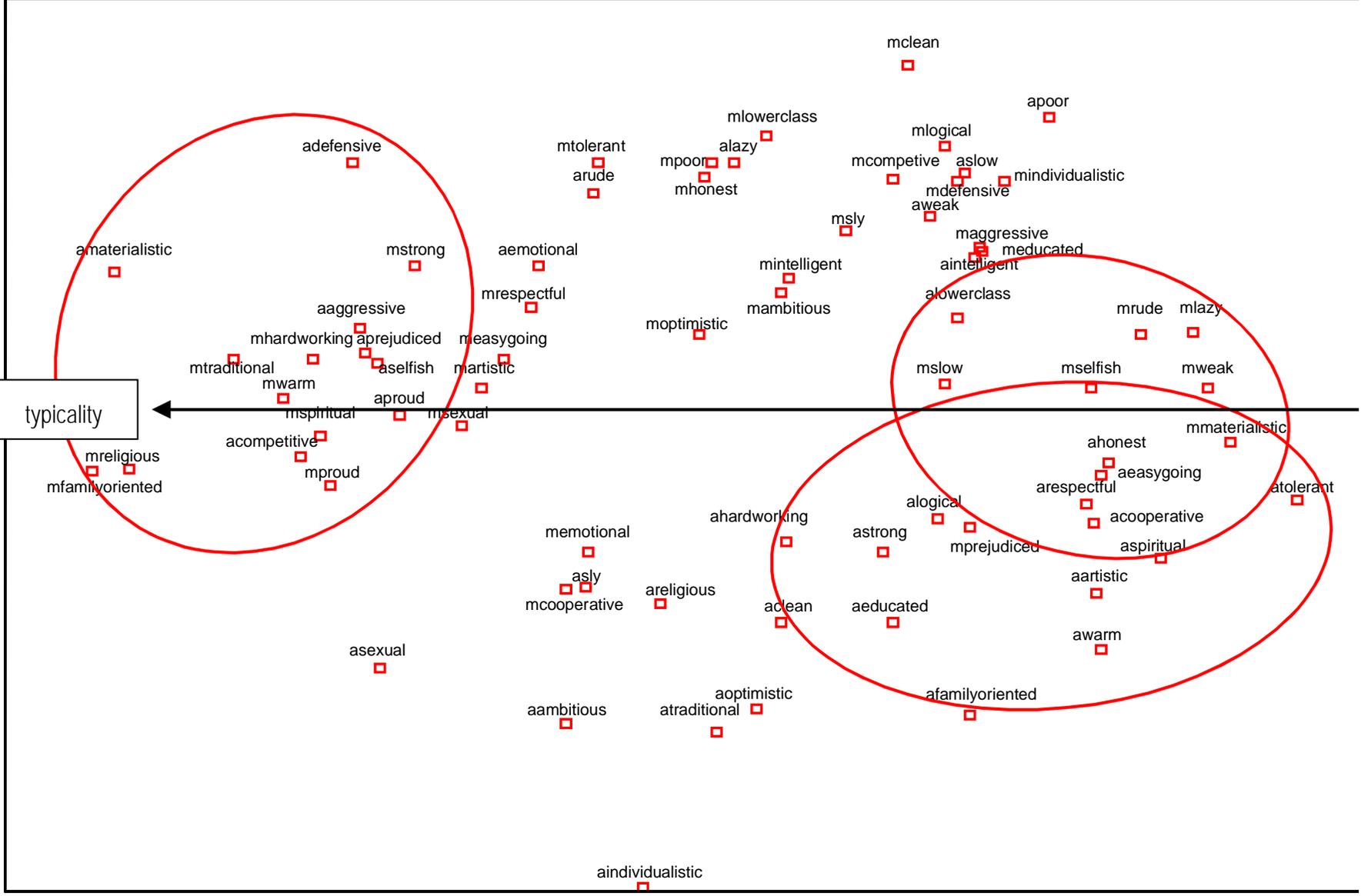
Figure 3 (page 4.11)
Segregated European Americans' mental map of ingroup & outgroup characteristics.

Figure 4 (page 4.12)
Assimilated European Americans' mental map of ingroup & outgroup characteristics.
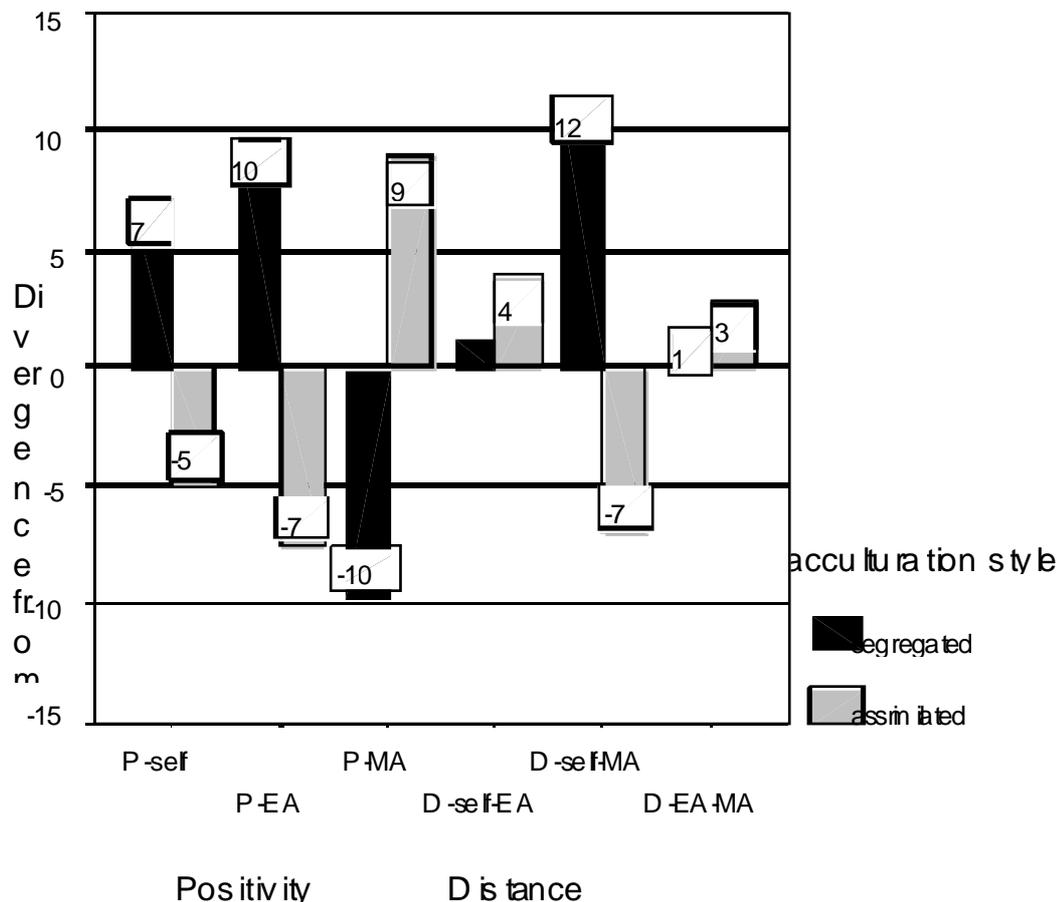

Figure 5
Assimilated and Segregated EAs positivity and distance.

the outgroup (P-MA=9). With reference to the distance between the SRs of the self and the outgroup, we can see from this figure that segregated EAs construct the self markedly different from the ougroup, compared to the average EA (D-self-MA=12). For assimilated EAs, the differences between the SRs of the self and the outgroup is less than average (D-self-MA=-7).

For the third time in this paper, we have arrived at another possibility of interpreting identity, this time at a sub-group level defined by acculturation style. Obviously, we could have chosen dozens of other criteria to subdivide our ethnic groups, including gender, social class, religiosity, education level, regional variations, etc. Surely, the content of the SRs of identity would differ there as well, and would, going back to Jodelet, provide different "practical and communicable ways of thinking that are oriented towards an understanding and mastery of the environment."

Summary and Conclusion

I have presented three levels of the representation of the objects of thought "self," "European Americans," and "Mexican Americans." At all three levels of analysis - supra-group, between-group, and within-group - we could say that representations serve to make the unfamiliar familiar through the attribution of characteristics to objects of thought. What remains to be understood, however, is the level at which we are allowed to refer to SRs. Is it at the supra-level, where representations converge between EAs and MAs to such an extent that identity markers are nearly the same for all three constructs? This level probably does not fulfil the minimum requirements of SRs because - although the constructions may carry the same anchors in terms of labels, they will differ in terms of proscriptive and prescriptive behaviour. Avoiding European Americans because one evaluates them rather negatively has very different consequences for Mexican Americans, than avoiding Mexican Americans for European Americans. In this sense, a negative or positive evaluation of the outgroup produces very different types of interaction patterns for the individuals in the respective groups due to the power differential between the MAs and EAs. I am therefore tempted to reject the idea that both are sharing the same SRs with respect to "self," "European Americans," and "Mexican Americans" - not on the grounds that they are constructed and evaluated differently, but on the grounds that they have different psychological and behavioural consequences.

Alternatively, we can argue that we are dealing with different SRs between the ethnic groups because the relationship between the self and the ingroup is clearly different. This level of analysis, however, required an *a priori* decision that Mexican Americans are different from European Americans and only then were we able to track down differences in SRs to support this claim. Although the content of the objects are similar, their relationship to each other is not. Thus, the relation of the personal self to the ingroup creates different claims, expectations, and obligations, depending on how the personal self is situated vis-à-vis the group. This level of analysis seems to go into the same direction as the statement at the beginning of this text: group membership is characterised by the sharing of SRs. In some way, however, we are proposing a tautology: first, we proclaim that SRs are different between groups, then we divide some collection of people (e.g. US Americans, Indians, students) into groups (e.g. Mexican Americans and European Amricans, men and women, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, Tories and Labour voters, etc.) since they seem to be different according to our linguistic and social scientific sensibilities, and we then search for differences. Every difference in the empirical data is automatically attributed to differing SRs. At this point, we tend to proclaim that different groups share different SRs. In a sense, this statement is not falsifiable: we find difference because we look for difference, or we find similarities – as in table 1 – because we look for similarities. Far from arguing that falsifiability should be an important component of our research, we should nevertheless be careful about our interpretations of our results. The point here is that just because we cannot find differences does not mean that they do not exist, and just because we find variations across groups does not necessarily mean that these represent differences in SRs. The last level of analysis illustrates this point further.

The third level – where I introduced styles of acculturation – shows how SRs of the ingroup and the outgroup vary distinctly *within* the ethnic groups. On this sub-group level, SRs still turn the unfamiliar into something familiar and they do prescribe and proscribe psychological processes and behaviours. Especially the findings from the ethnographic data and the follow-up interviews showed very clearly that evaluations and actions toward the ingroup and outgroup members are substantially different *within* the two groups.

To sum up our research results so far, the supra-level shows us that US society is socialising its members into a relatively united conceptualisation of identity with reference to the objects of thought "self," "European Americans," and "Mexican Americans." On an ethnic group level, we can observe that the relations between the different objects of thought differ, and that the relation between these objects leads to different psychological and behavioural consequences. On a subgroup level, we can observe that the within-group representations of identity differ in their experience and in their consequences. Gang members will certainly represent, and act differently toward, ingroup and outgroup members, than will white-collar employees from the same ethnic group. We may therefore have to concede that all three levels of analysis may tap into the SR of identity. In other words, we are not able to pinpoint the "real" SR among the three possibilities without going a few steps further. With reference to identity, we not only have to be aware of the malleability of identities across context, but, more profoundly, that identities are manifold at the same moment for the same person: European American and Mexican American identity can be concurrently the same, different across groups, and different yet again on a sub-group level. To describe the SR of identity at only one of these levels would yield an incomplete and misleading picture.

And this brings me to my next point and possibly a critique of a few studies on social representations: my three levels of analysis showed that it is the research focus and personal bias that strongly guided our findings. Therefore, we should not be satisfied with merely describing the content of social representations, but instead explicitly include (a) our purpose in studying similarities/differences between groups and (b) our assumptions which lead us to subdivide a collective into groups. Welsh truck drivers surely represent rhubarb pie differently from their colleagues in Japan, but – so what? What good is it to track down differences, especially since we start out with the idea that different social groups share different SRs, when we already know that different groups hold different SRs? Even if we are not interested in differences *per se* but rather in the differences of their content, we should still not be satisfied with merely describing the contents of social representations without having a specific purpose in mind. I hereby propose the WHY-TEST: everyone embarking on "I want to study the content of the social representation of X" should be able to give a substantial response to the question Why?

And finally, subdividing a collective according to practically any non-trivial criteria *will* yield differences in content. The "valid" level of analysis in terms of SR studies is determined by the research focus, especially since we are rarely interested in hypothesis testing when we study the content of SRs. Consequently, the data used in this paper can sustain the argument that Mexican Americans and European Americans essentially share similar SRs with reference to the objects of thought "self," "European Americans," and "Mexican Americans." It can also support the conclusion that both groups do not share the same identity because of the relationship of SRs to each other. Finally, the data can also show that SRs have to be studied on a sub-group level due to the very different acculturation styles, experiences, and interactions that take place within groups. Thus, a study of how people subjectively construct something from an unknowable objective universe may not only reveal our subjects' SRs, but also our personal way in which we, as social researchers, socially represent and thus, sub-divide, a complex, multi-levelled, multi-layered, and ultimately, objectively unknowable universe. Numbers may not lie, but they can be made to tell many truths.

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