

## **Semiotics and Social Representation: A *Figure-and-Ground* Relationship of Mutual Cultivation**

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The link between Semiotics and Social Representations Theory is explored in this Special Issue. In particular, the *special issue* focuses on the dynamicity of psychic processes that is presented as a key topic to delve into the question of development and change of socio psychological phenomena within the flowing of human experience in historical and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, as this is a challenging topic at the very core of psychology as well as numerous other disciplines, this Special Issue is devoted to the exploration of such a subject through the lens of the fruitful interconnection between semiotics and social representations theory (SRT). In fact, both these approaches share the focus on the dynamicity of mental processes at the crossroads of personal and social influences on human nature. At the same time, differences emerge between them but these variances, far from being considered as barriers, draw together with common tenets a prolific space for a mutual cultivation.

All the papers included in this Special Issue offer a full account of the richness of the dialogue between the two disciplines, with interesting and fecund ideas deriving from the encounter between semiotics and SRT. However, while in some cases these are clearly expressed and examined through an in-depth exploration of their theoretical, methodological, and empirical implications, in others they remain in the background, while keeping their heuristic valence that calls for further expansion.

Hence, in this editorial, we chose to give emphasis to three of these facets with the main aim of outlining a *fil rouge* that may link the papers, across the commonalities, differences and even divergences. Thus, we hope to offer the readers further points for consideration, as if they were “food for thought”, within the broad context of a debate overcoming the atomization of ideas within the post-modern psychological science as observed by Zittoun in her contribution. Quoting Moscovici (2001) “unity within a research area is not a value in itself”; however, lack of dialogue “can lead to an impasse”.

Beyond both the specific subject and theoretical ground of each paper, with their emphasis on the concepts of symbol, significance, and especially meaning, all the contributions of this collection appear to have a common interest in the dynamicity of the socio-psychological processes at least in a threefold sense: the fundamental relation between individual and social, the temporality and historicity of the psychological phenomena, and the propulsive force of emotions.

### **WHAT DOES IN-BETWEEN *MEAN*?**

In this Special Issue, the focus on the dynamicity of psychic processes has its main counterpart in the centrality of meaning making that is regarded as the focal analysis unit in its various and changeable forms. In particular, meanings are not intended as static but rather as dynamic entities in continuous development in the extent to which they intrinsically refer to something else. The issue precisely deals with the absence of neither the necessary nor inherent link between the forms and the objects of signification. Following Markovà (2000), it can be suggested that meanings can be “characterized” and not defined, in the sense that they are always in the making and under change, since they “are dynamic phenomena that exist only in relation to something else like figure-and-ground, and one can never capture them in their entirety” (p.430).

Accordingly, it is the subjects' turn to establish a connection between the two, thus ultimately transforming the arbitrariness (Duveen, 2007) or arbitrariness (see Kemple in this Special Issue) into communicable formulas. This is made possible insofar as individuals do not live in a social vacuum, but are immersed within the flow of daily life where complex set of conventions as well as of public and communicable necessary "*a posteriori*" semiotic relationships lie at their disposal (Duveen & Lloyd, 1998). In particular, the situated nature of human experience calls for an accommodation of the unsolved tension which derives from meanings being "in-between". The unsolved tension between opposites, that is at the very center of social life, generates a movement of re-presentation and knowledge transformation that basically establishes a *re(gu)lation* between the two (see Valsiner in this Special Issue). These are the individual/personal and the social/environment, the self and the other, the subject and the subject, the *Ego* and the *Alter*.

More importantly, a further issue concerning the fundamental relation between opposites emerges, requiring further expansions. In particular, it seems that sociality does not correspond to something external and somehow opposed to individuals, but as external condition imposed on persons or something necessary for human agency (Raudsepp 2005). The relational paradigm that proposes the inter-subjective nature of the mind (see amongst others, Luborsky & Crits-Cristoph, 1990; Mitchel & Aron, 1999; Storolow, Atwood & Brandchaft, 2001), the interdependence of the individual and the social, in whatever is conceived (i.e. a social actor, a social group, "a crowd"), further proposes that there is neither the individual before the social nor social beyond individual. An insightful hint in this regard is provided by Shweder (see Rosa & Pievi in this Special Issue) who affirms that

"the basic idea is that no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings size meanings while every human being has his or her mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings...a sociocultural environment is an intentional world because its existence is real, only as long as there exists a community of persons whose beliefs, desires, emotions, purposes, and other mental representations are directed at it, and are thereby influenced by it" (p.2).

The multilevel nature of socio psychological phenomena is not new – foremost examples are the socio-, onto-, and micro-genetic levels of analysis (for an overview see Moscovici, Jovchelovitch,

Wagoner, 2013) or the four levels of analysis and explication (Doise, 2006). Nonetheless, the *dialogue* amongst authors within this special issue unveils an important distinction that is, on the one hand that between the adoption of social (i.e. macro) and individual (i.e. micro) levels of analysis and, on the other, the constitutive valence of the *in-between* (not-disjointed) dynamic towards the subject/individual and the other/social. If this is accepted, the challenge is to examine the way the *in-between not-disjointed relation* between the individual and the social constitutes the meaning making process (see Salvatore & Venuleo in this Special Issue).

Semiotics provides an important contribution to understanding such a constitutive valence through the semiotic dynamic. This refers to the extent to which signs, which are intrinsically self-independent (see Kemple in this Special Issue), and neither individual nor social, constitute meanings that exist at the interface between the two. This is not a speculative argument at least to the extent to which the “ways in which one can meaningfully abstract social-level beliefs from individual level data remains a point of discussion in the theory” as well as the issues of the socialization, anchorage or social and cultural grounding of semiotic mediation is still open to challenges (see Glâvenau, Suerdem and Rizkallah in this Special Issue). The distinction between the constitutive level and the analytical level drives us to the second facet we aim to briefly point out, that is temporality.

### **WHAT DOES TIME PERSPECTIVE *MEAN*?**

The understanding of time underlies both the concept of social representations (Psaltis, 2012) and the process of social representing. The former captures the context-specificity of social representations (Moscovici, 2001) circulating in given historical occurrences (Jovchelovitch, 2012); the latter apprehends the functionality of the process of social representing that enables individuals to cope with the uncertainty of the immediate future (Magioglou, 2003). This expands the application of social representations theory further than the static description of contents and practices to embrace its “elongation in time from the past towards the future – as in case of “the evolution of common sense” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008) – as well as from the present towards the future – as in the case of the evolution of personal life trajectories (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010).

However, the mutual cultivation between Semiotics and SRT introduces a further point for consideration. The focus on the dynamic nature of mental processes leads to challenging the time categories of past, present and future; are they either longitudinal measures that entail setting sense-making within specific historical utterings or rather are they psychological timespans that constitute the mental processes and their cyclical dynamic? Or, on the other hand, are they both?

The notion of the historicity of time highlights the situated nature of human experience and can be adopted as a heuristic device to observe, interpret and explain the development of socio-psychological phenomena over time. However, time is also a constituent of mental complex phenomena and in this case, the temporal dimension of dynamic structures corresponds to the time course of their cycles (see Veltri in this Special Issue).

The temporality of psychological processes has been a challenge within psychological science for a long time. Zimbardo & Boyd (1999, 2008), for example, proposed six time frames – past-negative, past-positive, present-fatalistic, present-hedonistic, future, and transcendental-future – to explain the process by which time serves individual and social functioning and to measure its dynamic influence on human cognition and action. Accordingly, time perspective is a foundational process whereby flows of experiences are assigned to temporal categories to give meanings to events. The influence of a temporal frame functions through an “abstract cognitive process of reconstructing the past and constructing the future enabling the person to transcend compelling stimulus forces in the immediate life space” (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999, p. 1272). In fact, on the basis of the Lewinian tradition, such a theory clearly affirms the constitutive valence of temporality towards psychological processes.

Conversely, the notion of time within a psychoanalytic framework escapes the conceptualization of temporality through past, present and future categories in the sense that these categories feature the act of meaning interpretation rather than the process of sense making. According to the Freudian theory of the interpretation of dreams, the experience of time lacks the unconscious primary processes where past, present, and future coexist; rather temporal factors shape the interpretative act thus making time come to existence. Ultimately, it appears that the interpretation corresponds to a mental function whereby a temporal dimension is built by the mind during the sense-making dynamic (see Salvatore & Venuleo in this Special Issue).

The notion of time is a challenging issue that posits relevant methodological questions for the study of change and development of socio-psychological phenomena. Bringing the processes of representation and sense-making into time is something different from bringing time into the process of representation (see Valsiner in this Special Issue).

### **WHAT DOES EMOTION *MEAN*?**

Notably, the interdependence between the individual and the social is a basic tenet both for semiotics as well as SRT. Valsiner in this Special Issue explains how social representations intervene in regulating the “system of meaningful action, by specifying the socially appropriate needs the persons may want to satisfy, blocking the inappropriate ones” (p.12.25). This goes hand in hand with the understanding of human agency by virtue of which individuals are active and reactive to occurrences, actions, and others. Thus, neither the conventional nor the collective characters of social representations are disowned but rather importance is attributed to the process of construction of personal meaningful views of the world in relation to the conventions of the community within given historical and cultural contexts (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005).

Accordingly, the understanding of intentionality is focal to a further comprehension of the unsolved tension between the individual and the social as well as to examine the dynamic nature of meanings as a unit of analysis. An important contribution to this is given by Zittoun with her analysis of the development and change of personal life trajectories over time.

In particular, the focus on emotions as catalysts of the semiotic process stimulates interesting and fruitful considerations about their inhibiting and promoting force over the change of social representations. In fact, even if it has been recognized that the emotional experience plays an important role in “the construction of meaning attributed to the object” (Guimelli & Rimé, 2009), we agree with Joffe that “the role of emotion has received surprisingly little attention”.

In the background of the mutual cultivation between semiotics and SRT, it seems that emotions do not consist merely of highly individualistic patterns but are rather somehow anchored in a representational field that grants them a definite historical and cultural valence. At the same time, social representations are “infused with emotional valence” (Joffe, 2002) and this may account for the fact that in the case of conflict between social guidance and individual will,

emotions participate in the creation of signs to overcome such a conflict. Hence, the question of the relationship between social representations and emotions is far from being explicitly determined, at least if it is accepted that there can be little doubt about the conceptual difference between the existence of shared social representations of emotions (Scherer, 1992) and the emotional tension of being attracted to and alarmed by a stranger that is at the very base of social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984).

Furthermore, the intriguing idea of the emotional valence of social representations refreshes the issue of their “characterization” (Markovà, 2000). Thus, it has been explicitly advanced to conceptualize social representations as cognitive-emotional processes (Markovà & Wilkie, 1987). However, in our view, this needs further consideration at least in relation to the emergent mutual cultivation between the emotional valence of social representations and the social anchorage of emotions. We argue that the notion of semiotic regulation can be a stepping stone towards such a direction especially in enlarging the concept of cognitive polyphasia “as necessary adaptation of human psyche” (Valsiner, 12.26) to become interconnected with that of emotional negotiation of signs, so that development can seemingly result from both. Finally, the cultivation between SRT and Semiotics seems to suggest that emotions, and more generally affect, play a decisive role in the sense making dynamic.

## CONCLUSION

In this editorial, we aimed to highlight three issues that, in our view, justify the mutual cultivation effort between Semiotics and Social Representation Theory. Our intention was not to provide definitive answers but rather to shed light on some concerns in order to feed a constructive debate amongst scholars from both the disciplines. The structure of this Special Issue is set on three original contributions and six commentaries, all of which develop original ideas and challenges towards one of the main papers. However, in performing our editorial task, we noticed that the papers had been placed together on the basis of their contents rather than their “formal status” within the Special Issue. In other words, we observed that each full paper opens up to some questions that are not necessarily “characterized” by their commentaries. At the same time, the

commentaries seize aspects of the mutual cultivation between semiotics and social representations that are not examined by the full paper they comment on.

This leads us to conclude that the internal dialogue amongst the authors of this special issue provides a strong justification for understanding the profitability that inheres in the encounter between these two approaches, and that will serve scholars to achieve in more tangible terms a focus on their dynamic relations that characterizes much socio-cultural psychological theory at present.

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