

## **Knowledge Universes, Social Representations and Codes: A Comment On Souza (2020)**

JOAO WACHELKE

Instituto de Psicologia, Federal University of Uberlândia, Brazil

The concepts of reified and consensual universes are central to social representations theory, addressing the relationships of different kinds of knowledge in terms of their validity, production and communication. Often the nature of specialized knowledge from the reified universe is thought to be of a different kind from that of representations. Souza (2020) argues that Moscovici, while introducing the two universes, clarified that they both had a representational nature but were different in their functioning and social roles. Souza then proposes that the two universes reflect subjective positioning towards knowledge, which is observed in the results of interview data analyzed through top-down hierarchical classification. I suggest that the framing of social representations as codes from a semiotic point of view, as well as the consideration of code properties, can contribute to understand the differences regarding the two knowledge universes. Finally, in methodological terms, the interview, as a technique that fosters conversation, seems to stimulate research participants to first define the topic of interest in terms of reified knowledge, due to its social legitimacy as a code, and later provide their personal views based on experience, i.e., consensual universe knowledge.

**Key words:** consensual universe, reified universe, social representations, codes, interview.

Souza's paper (2020) concerns the nature of the consensual and reified universes, essential concepts in social representations theory, as well as their inter-relationships. It presents two main points. The first one is theoretical. Focusing on the opposition of knowledge from authorities, such as science, religion, law or politics – reified universe – and common sense, the world of representations – consensual universe –, Souza argues that Moscovici's position is that scientific knowledge, while judged and expressed differently from lay thinking, is also formed by representations. Therefore, it is also historical and social, but perceived to be independent from people's opinions, and to reflect views formalized by specialist rules rather than specific social positions.

As such, Souza disagrees with Purkhardt's (1991, 1993) interpretation of Moscovici (2008) on that matter. Purkhardt states that Moscovici conceives reified universe knowledge as truth outside the influence of history and social groups. Souza demonstrates that Moscovici characterized specialized knowledge with a representational nature in some writings (e.g., Moscovici, 1987, 1993). Souza then develops the idea that the consensual and reified universes involve two ways of understanding social representations objects, through different subjective positions. The consensual universe relies on personal experience and opinions, validating every person's knowledge, whereas the reified universe is knowledge given by authorities legitimated to provide what society understands as the truth, or something close to it.

I find this first point particularly relevant because it switches the conceptual understanding of the differences between the consensual and reified universes from the assumption that there are two forms of knowledge, each involving different processes and functioning, to the consideration of the legitimacy of representations in terms of their social validation and properties. This second point of view is more parsimonious, in that we are able to postulate a same process of social knowledge that results in representations assessed by people as more or less shared by other groups, and therefore specific to social positions, or relative to what is considered an accepted description of truth.

The idea of the reified universe as something separate from representational knowledge is indeed difficult to conceive. If social representations are forms of social knowledge that correspond to the interpretations of the world generated and shared by people in groups and societies, then how to justify science or another kind of reified knowledge as a description of the world without a subject of knowledge?

That would amount to the same as considering an interpretation without an interpreter, an impossible description of the world as it is, without a mind or culture to think it. Jodelet (1989) stated that a social representation is always a subject's representation. The same is true of any kind of human knowledge, i.e. any representation whether as a psychological event or a public text. From a semiotic point of view, even the physical world, although existing independently from us, depends on humans' perception and sensation structures to provide elements correlated in experience in order to be known. Every science, at the least, makes use of signs, of discourse, to describe the world (Deely, 1990). We only think in signs (Peirce, 1992), that is, through establishing relations among elements of experience. Just like social representations about everyday life, specialized forms of knowledge are descriptions of the world that rely on elements of social experience such as images and language.

This is true for both the natural and human sciences. That the human sciences do not result in some univocal truth is clear, as they are knowledge about knowledge on the world (Prieto, 1977), or as Bonfantini (1987) put it, interpretations of interpretations, inferences about human acts. But the sciences of nature cannot achieve the reality of material things themselves whatsoever. They are points of view dependent on the relation with a subject from a social group. When they seem neutral or objective – here, objective is taken as relative to characteristics of a thing itself, regardless of a knowing subject – what we have is a coincidence of points of view regarding that object in terms of non-neutrality (Prieto, 1977), i.e., social agreement<sup>1</sup>.

Souza then states that the two universes relate to different positions adopted by the subjects concerning knowledge, the places from which people speak from his paper's title. When expressing themselves or mobilizing representational knowledge, people think about and refer to what they know and learnt from the authorities of the social world – reified universe – and their own, personal, everyday experience – consensual universe. Their discourse is marked by those different positions.

The consideration of the nature of social representations as codes, in the semiotic sense, can add more detail to that understanding. Semiotics, the doctrine of signs, is an appropriate point of view to account for the phenomenon of social representations. Moscovici (2008) stated

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this becomes more apparent when scientific theories or concepts are fruitfully studied through social representations research, as shown by Bertoldo et al.'s (2015) study on European scientists' social representations of nanotechnology or Fryba's (1995) one on Czech social scientists' social representations of... social representations!

in *Psychoanalysis: its image and its public* that "... representing an object means both according to it the status of a sign, and getting to know it by making it significant" (p. 20). He also mentioned the code-like nature of social representations, by affirming that representations furnish "...members of a community with a medium of exchange and a code that allows them to name and classify clearly the various parts of their world and their individual and collective history" (Moscovici, 2008, p. xxxi).

Based on authors such as Eco (1976), Deely (1990) and Prieto (1966), we can state that a code is a public correlation rule, a convention for the interpretation of experience created and maintained by a social group. Just as a thought is private, a code is public as it relies on experiences that are intersubjectively accessible (discourse, images, sounds...). Without getting into the details of the sign relation and its functioning, we can conceive the code as a generic concept, encompassing all kinds of interpretation rules that are known and shared socially, directed to understanding and action in everyday life. Their collective nature, the fact that they are pertinent to more than one person, means that they transcend individual experience. Such concept of code is very general and comprises the totality of social knowledge forms. This includes shared beliefs, cultural norms, behavioral scripts, ideologies and, of course, social representations, knowledge systems closely related to the consensual universe. At the same time, other systems of thought like science, religion and technical knowledge, associated with the reified universe, are codes as well. Although involving differences in terms of their formation and operation processes, they share with representational knowledge the fact that they are collectively constructed and maintained, and their role as principles or rules for knowing and practice.

A classical discussion in the field of social representation theory concerns the criteria that characterize a social representation. Common mentioned criteria are that a social representation must be shared and endorsed by a social group, that its object must have relevance for group life, that it must be connected to group practice, that it must have a structural organization, among others. It is thus assumed that not every instance of social knowledge is a social representation, but only social knowledge that conforms to certain criteria.

Therefore, if the concept of codes describes all forms of social knowledge, we can treat a social representation as a specific kind of code<sup>2</sup>. In order to achieve that, we must add the

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<sup>2</sup> I have tried to develop the understanding of social representations as codes elsewhere (Wachelke, 2012), but at the occasion I was more concerned with matters related to the structural approach to social representations and dealt with conceptions of code and convention that were a little different from what I am suggesting here.

conditions that the code in question relate to objects pertinent to social life, that there be some consensus regarding the interpretation, that there be a group or community that acknowledges it, and so on; in sum, the usual criteria to speak of a social representation.

The systems of social knowledge associated with the reified universe attend to different criteria. For example, contrasting with social representations, the practical dimension is not a requirement for scientific knowledge, and scientific objects are often of no remarkable importance in the everyday lives of people. But due to their common code nature, we can rely on a unifying framework for the evaluation of the differences between reified and consensual knowledge. A further distinction between the reified and consensual universes, aside from the subjective positions related to them, might be in their different socio-historical properties as codes. Social knowledge, in the form of codes, can be described in their concrete existence regarding whether they have an identity function or not – do the interpretations from the codes reflect a specific, well-defined social group, or are they common to many groups? –, in terms of their degree of social coverage – which groups endorse which codes? –, their majority or minority status, their degree of sharing and psychosocial support – do group members all agree in terms of their content or is there divergence? Does a whole society legitimate the code? –, their history – long established codes vs. recent interpretative schemes –, their political nature – are the codes associated with power relations? – their coexistence among other codes – is there a single code to interpret a social object or are there known alternative codes? Are they compatible or conflicting? –, and so forth (Wachelke et al., 2020).

Let us proceed to a brief examination of the code properties associated with science, a kind of specialized knowledge from the reified universe. It is considered valid by society in general – at least until recently, but I will return to that shortly –, it is created, diffused and shared by the scientific community, and perceived as neutral in terms of specific group interests, prioritizing a description of phenomena regardless of preferences. As mentioned earlier, there is no neutrality, which becomes apparent in terms of the existence of conflicting scientific positions concerning a given issue, but in the case of well established, traditional scientific facts, scientific knowledge is perceived as neutral and consensual. In many instances, if it cannot be said to correspond to the description of objects themselves, it is thought to be the closest possible to that, and thus mistaken by truth itself.

In contrast, the consensual universe of everyday experience is thought to express points of view from different groups with plural opinions, values and status in society. Sometimes it reflects traditional thinking previous to scientific inquiry, whereas at others it incorporates

recent practices and new issues. We might find local communities with a peculiar way of understanding their reality, as well as whole nations or cultures supporting an interpretation. There is then much possible variation in coverage, legitimacy, coexistence with other codes and history<sup>3</sup>.

When there is agreement in the scientific community, there seems to be a single code that stands apart from the many codes, many varieties of the consensual universe: a generally acknowledged scientific explanation strongly supported by research. In the agreement and unicity of the single code we have the appearance of objectivity, of attaining an understanding of the world that is equivalent to the world itself. In this distinction we can identify the separation and difference of the reified and consensual universes. In modern times, science has acquired a superior status, and a hierarchy of forms of knowledge gives primacy to science to describe the world as it supposedly is; it tends to be considered better than popular, traditional knowledge, somewhat disapproving it, although elements of both kinds of universe coexist polyphasically.

The second point addressed by Souza involves methodology and the different positions assumed by subjects regarding the two types of knowledge. Discourse from participants in social representation studies usually establishes a common ground that is considered valid or more objective to define the world. Next to it, they provide their own, lay thinking points of view. Souza points out that the first division of vocabulary in descending hierarchical classifications (or top-down hierarchical classifications, TDHC) performed by IRAMUTEQ and ALCESTE software, the main contrast in discourse of every such analysis, is usually a mark of the contrasts of the two forms of thinking. He provides examples of research in which such pattern is identified, and suggests some conditions that must be met in order for that to happen.

I would like to contribute to Souza's discussion concerning the interplay of positions indicated in his paper addressing a relationship involving that pattern and some characteristics of the interview as a research technique. Working a little outside the interview context, assessing the effects of different open-ended questions – discourse questions and free associations – on the results of social representations studies, I have observed together with Camargo that in discourse questions respondents look for coherence in their text, first defining

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<sup>3</sup> Socio-historic properties of codes can differentiate not only social representations from other kinds of social knowledge codes, but also among social representations varieties and configurations. As an example, properties such as having majority status, inexistence of alternative codes and high agreement characterize hegemonic social representations, whereas identifiable alternatives, divergence and possible political conflict describe polemic ones.

the representation object and then following it with comments of the opinion kind. This is different from what happens with free associations, in which responses tend to focus on hegemonic, shared, defining elements (Wachelke & Camargo, 2011). It is as if a discourse question resembled in ways a conversation, an utterance in dialogue, demanding both the establishment of what it is about and one's view of it.

If that happens in a discourse open-ended question in a questionnaire, then forcefully it characterizes an interview even better. Surely, interviews vary greatly in terms of the possibilities of expression given to interviewees, but an interview is a conversation much more than a discourse question is. According to Camargo (2020), "the interview involves an interpersonal relationship, face to face, in the context of a given social situation. It consists in a conversation with an aim"<sup>4</sup> (p. 37). Farr (1982) states that interviewing "...is essentially a technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are perspectives or viewpoints on events other than those of the person initiating the interview... (...) it is, in short, a peculiar form of conversation... (...) A conversation or interview is a co-operative venture" (p. 151).

In interpersonal conversation, if people in interaction are to understand each other, they must define the subject of their talk. Then, they can proceed to say what they think or feel about it. Those two phases correspond to the reified and consensual universes. If there is a shared, known reference that is pertinent both to the interviewer – or his/her community, imagined or present, as in a focus group setting – it makes sense to first provide a common ground to the talk. When there is a code that we believe to provide objective, valid knowledge, trespassing group borders and interests, then we will make use of it first, and advance our personal point of view later. In cases of topics to which science provides a convincing or legitimated explanation, we will refer to science; in cases when tradition or law do it, we will serve ourselves of such varieties of reified knowledge. On top of that we will oppose or combine beliefs and evaluations related to ourselves as subjects and our everyday experience, i.e., knowledge from the consensual universe.

Some characteristics of the interview procedure, then, explain the dialogue dynamics that mobilize and distinguish both kinds of knowledge. It is on the social properties of the codes associated with such kinds of knowledge that we can understand their relevance and use in that communication setting.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal translation.

Finally, as Souza mentioned, it is important to note that the opposition between the two universes might not be identified in some studies, as when their separation is incomplete. Still, we must remember that we are currently facing a crisis involving the role and status of science. Through the decentralization of communication and the spreading of traditional and antiscientific knowledge, as well as supposed alternative interpretations of science and the diffusion of fake news, the appearance of consensus is affected. How will the relationship between the two universes be, in such conditions? Will science change its role and be replaced by other forms of authority in the hierarchy of reified knowledge? Will the positioning of subjects pend to the side of everyday, consensual knowledge to the detriment of scientific points of view? We are about to see. Changes in the characteristics of the pertinent codes and in the relationships between the reified and consensual universes will certainly impact our understanding of social representation processes.

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JOAO WACHELKE is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Psychology of the Federal University of Uberlandia, Brazil. Research interests: social psychology, semiotics and social knowledge.

Email: [joao.wachelke@ufu.br](mailto:joao.wachelke@ufu.br)