The Use of Different Methodological Approaches in the Study of Social Representations

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we want to argue that researchers working within the theoretical framework of social representations should consider employing multi-methodological approaches.

Before going on to present the reasons that lead us to suggest this, we would like to say a few things about the phenomenon of social representations and some of the points of the theory that have been met with criticism. According to Moscovici (1973) a social representation is a system of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in and master their material social world and, second, to facilitate communication among members of a community by providing them with a code of naming and classifying the various aspects of their world and their individual world history. The function "of all representations is to make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar" (Moscovici, 1984, p.24). This is achieved by two mechanisms; anchoring and objectifying which are set in motion when people are faced by something unfamiliar. Anchoring comes to anchor unfamiliar and strange ideas into already existing categories, whereas objectifying turns these ideas into something concrete, understandable and controllable, by filling their gaps with substance.

The theory has been criticised on a number of points. The definition of social representations has been considered vague (Jahoda, 1988). The concept of "social" has been criticised as not fully exploited and being used in this context to imply individual representations or distributive intellectual representations (Harré, 1984). The familiarization function of representations has been seen as an unproven intuition that could be easily substituted by curiosity motivation or attraction to novelty (Jahoda,1988). Empirical evidence provided to support the theory of social representations has been considered as insufficient. Studies conducted within this theoretical framework have been criticised for not having a common theoretical orientation and for not attempting to develop the original theoretical formulations (Jahoda, 1988, Potter, Litton, 1985).

All these different criticisms have been extensively discussed, argued and counter-argued. The vagueness of definition has been supported as a virtue of the theory rather than a disadvantage. The social nature of representations has been exploited both in studies of taxonomic aggregates and of structured groups, exploiting this way both variety and differentiation in society as well as its structured and well defined parts. The familiarization process and the mechanisms of anchoring and objectifying have indeed been intuitions, but certain studies (e.g. Nigro and Galli, 1987) have been able to at least partly explore and verify the taking place of this function. Finally, as far as the empirical work on social representations is concerned, the variety of topics investigated and methods used might have

created the impression of lack of common theoretical orientation but one cannot argue that the theory did not instigate a vast body of research during the last three decades. This brings us back to the aim of this paper, where we intend to suggest that the use of different methods of investigation is the best approach for answering questions within the theory of social representations.

There are a number of reasons why we come to suggest this:

1. The very nature of social representations implies that we do not have a simple construct that could be investigated through a single method, successfully. Instead of a simple construct we have one that involves ideas, beliefs, values, practices, feelings, images, attitudes, knowledge, understandings and explanations.

Furthermore, one has to consider the social (shared) nature of social representations as well as their functions (i.e. to enable individuals to orient themselves and master their material social world and facilitate communication by providing a code of naming and classifying, Moscovici, 1973).

2. The fact that social representations acquire meaning, structure and image through verbal expression and communication creates one more complexity that has to be taken into account in the selection of methodology.

3. The nature of the construct leads researchers to ask different research questions both about social representations (i.e. what IS a social representation) and within social representations (i.e. how they function, how they are created, changed and so on). These different research questions need to be tackled by different methods. So, often, it is the specific target of the research that will define the research method(s).

Different researchers used different methodologies in the study of social representations without being able to single out one that could in itself provide a satisfactory tool for this purpose (Table 1).

This need for multi-methodological studies has been understood by many researchers who often suggest that although their results provide some answers to the questions they set out to investigate, other methods from the one(s) they employed might give more and better understanding.

According to Purkhardt and Stockdale (in press) "...any single method of research used to describe or represent complex social phenomena encompasses associated limitations, fallibilities and biases". On the same topic Verges (1987) agrees that "...an opinion poll, a scale of attitudes or a life history cannot be the only means of collecting the necessary information. Each one of these methods of collecting data does not provide sufficient information. They can however be partially useful for the study of representation and for that reason they must be incorporated into a specific set of questions".

We agree with both of the above opinions. So, our aim is not to diminish the value of any single method of gathering data, but to suggest ways of using many different methods, acknowledging each one's advantages and limitations, for a fuller understanding of social representations.

Table 1

Study	Method(s)
Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis (Herzlich, 1973)	In-depth Interviews
Cities as Social Representations (Milgram, 1984)	Interviews + Maps
Intergroup Alliances and Rejection within a Protest Movement (Analysis of the Social Representations) (Di Giacomo, 1980)	Interviews + Free Associations
The Social Representations of Mental Illness in Children and Adults (De Rosa, 1987)	Drawings + Scales of Social Distance + Semantic Differential + Questionnaires
The Effects of Representations and Behaviour in Experimental Games (Abric and Kahan, 1972)	Problem Solving + Creativity Task + Questionnaire
The Lattice of Polemic Social Representations: A Comparison of the Social Representations of Occupations in Favelas, Public Housing and Middle Class Neighbourhoods in Brazil (Canter and Monteiro, in press)	Sorting Task (Illustrations, Photographs, Labels, activities)
A Social Cognitive Approach to Economic Representations (Verges, 1987)	Questionnaire (open/closed questions) + Definitions + Matching + Grouping Words

STUDYING THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF EUROPEAN UNIFICATION

Our theoretical hypotheses and questions led us to choose the unification of Europe as the target social representation for the study to be discussed here. Our aim was to study in depth the familiarization process with a new idea with emphasis on the anchoring mechanism. We also wanted to show that different kinds and levels of involvement with a new idea are related to the way it is going to be understood, explained and represented. We were after a representation which we considered to be not well established and differentiated (since our target was something new that has not happened yet), however we had a clear understanding that even at this stage a representation is a very complex construct.

At the beginning our methodological approach was an eclectic one, involving questionnaires, interviews and content analysis of the press. We had a clear understanding of the advantages and limitations of each one of the methods we were planning to use. In a way we were trying to compensate one method's limitations with another method's advantages. Our methodological eclecticism was based on theoretical arguments, but still we believed that certain components of the specific target representation we set out to investigate were left out.

So, we went back to the definition of social representations and we tried to "break down" the construct in its components. This was an analytical process aiming at enabling us to decide which were the components of the construct as well as how (i.e. with what method) each one could be best empirically investigated (Table 2).

Table 2

Method of data collection	Component of social representation	Analysis of data
Questionnaire	Ideas, Beliefs, Opinions, Attitudes, Knowledge	Factor analysis, Reliability scaling, Correlations, Regressions
In-depth interviews	Feelings, Understandings, Explanations	Content analysis
Attribute check-lists	Images of target, Representation	Correspondence analysis, Multidimensional scaling
Questionnaire, In-depth interviews, Attribute check-lists	Differentiation	Factor analysis, Content analysis, Correspondence analysis, MDS
Analysis of the press	Images of the target, Representation as presented by press	Content analysis

We ended up with five methods which could enable us to elicit different groups of components of the construct:

a. A questionnaire specifically constructed which would enable us to investigate ideas, beliefs, opinions, attitudes and knowledge. This was considered appropriate since it would allow us to get to a rather large sample and ask a reasonably large number of questions, tapping this way on the spread of the representation within a specific population.

b. An in-depth interview with which we could tackle feelings, understandings and explanations. The interview (which is the method most often used in the study of social representations) would allow us to get to people's "naive" theories as they themselves would verbalise them. These verbalisations, as mentioned before, is the means trough which social representations acquire meaning, structure and image. However the sample here had to be smaller than the one that answered the questionnaire.

c. Attribute check-lists were to be used in order to get to the images of the target representation as our respondents see it. Check-lists were considered the most appropriate method to get to images because it could allow us to include long lists of characteristics and, in the same time, make the task easy and not too time consuming.

d. All of the above methods were to be used in order to get to our respondents' level of differentiation within the target representation. Differentiation has to be seen as specific to our theoretical questions. It is not a component of the representation but an index of its

complexity and elaboration. For this reason we had to use more than one methods to tackle it.

e. Analysis of the press was to be used to provide us with the images of the target representation as presented by the press and to enable their comparison with the images elicited from our sample.

Having decided on the different constructs to be studied and the methods to be used we proceeded into creating the appropriate tools.

a. The Questionnaire: included a knowledge quiz about the European Community and the unification of Europe as well as statements (Likert type) investigating beliefs, ideas, opinions and attitudes towards the Community and the unification.

b. The Interview: the interview schedule was constructed so as to enable interviewees to express their feelings towards the Community as well as specific member countries. Furthermore it included questions aiming at tackling interviewees' personal understanding of the effects of the unification as well as their own explanations of their opinions and feelings.

c. The Attribute Check-lists: here the aim was to acquire some information about respondents' own image of member countries of the EC. Two check lists were constructed. One was asking respondents to say how important different reasons were in order to make countries willing to join the Community (for example "Improve national defence", "Exploit other countries"). The second check-list was asking respondents to say how much different characteristics were applying to different countries and their people (for example "Prosperous", "Fashionable", "Suffers from terrorism", "Interested in defending Europe").

d. All of the above mentioned methods: were used in order to provide some information about our respondents' level of differentiating (i) between positive and negative effects from the unification (this was done by a long list of aspects of life that might be affected by unification and whether the effect would be positive or negative-Questionnaire and by the specific questions-Interview), and (ii) between countries (Check-lists). As was mentioned earlier we believed that our respondents' ability to differentiate, judge and recognise different levels within the target social representation would provide an index of its complexity for the specific sample.

e. Analysis of the press: a selection of news items, articles and comments were analysed to provide us with an understanding of the images about the European Community, the unification of Europe and different countries as presented by the press.

Data elicited from each one of the above mentioned methods was analysed in the appropriate ways. Very briefly the analyses conducted were the following:

a. For the Questionnaire data we used statistical analysis; i.e. factor analysis, reliability scaling, correlations and multiple regressions which enabled us to construct new variables and test models explaining the relations between them.

b. For the Interview data we used content analysis which enabled the presentation and discussion of respondents' feelings, understandings and explanations.

c. For the Attribute check-lists we used correspondence analysis and multidimensional scaling which allowed us to visually present how respondents see individual member countries of the EC and how they group them together in terms of similarities.

d. All of the above analyses were also used in order to acquire an understanding of respondents' level of differentiation. Statistical analysis provided us with the factor(s) within constructs, content analysis with the extent of differentiating positive and negative effects, degree of understanding as well as the level and dimensions of explanations, correspondence analysis and MDS with the differentiation between and within countries and one's own country.

e. For the Analysis of the press we again used content analysis which enabled us to present and discuss images of the EC, the European unification and other countries as they are pictured in the press.

Having conducted all these different analyses we had to use a synthetic procedure so as to bring all different components of the representation of European unification together. Results from each method were first discussed as separate entities. Next, they were all brought together, bringing, in fact, together the different components of the target social representation, thus creating a more complete picture of it. This picture consisted of respondents' ideas, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, feelings, understandings, explanations as well as their ability to differentiate within it. Finally, this picture was also compared and contrasted with the images coming from the press. This bringing together involved a search for commonalties and differences between and within the different components of the representation. For demonstration purposes we would like to use an example from our data. Figure 1 shows the points in space that some countries hold according to their characteristics (from the correspondence analysis). As one can see Britain is rather distanced from countries such as France, Italy and Greece and closer to Germany and the USA, indicating more similarities with the latter countries than with the former. This finding could be explained by questionnaire data (Table 3), where one can see that in general people were not very much in favour of the EC and specifically that their country is more important than Europe. This is also reflected and further explained by the interview data, where one of the common themes emerging was that "Britain is not happy within the EC" (Table 4), and by the analysis of the press where an often appearing theme was the "Dangers from EC" (Table 5). This way data elicited by the different methods were used to explain each other in order to provide a better understanding of the target representation.

Table 3

Results form the questionnaire *Opinions and attitudes about the EC.*

81 % of the sample score less than 20 in the scale measuring opinions and attitudes about the EC when maximum score could have been 30. The higher the score, the more positive the opinions and attitudes.

Table 4

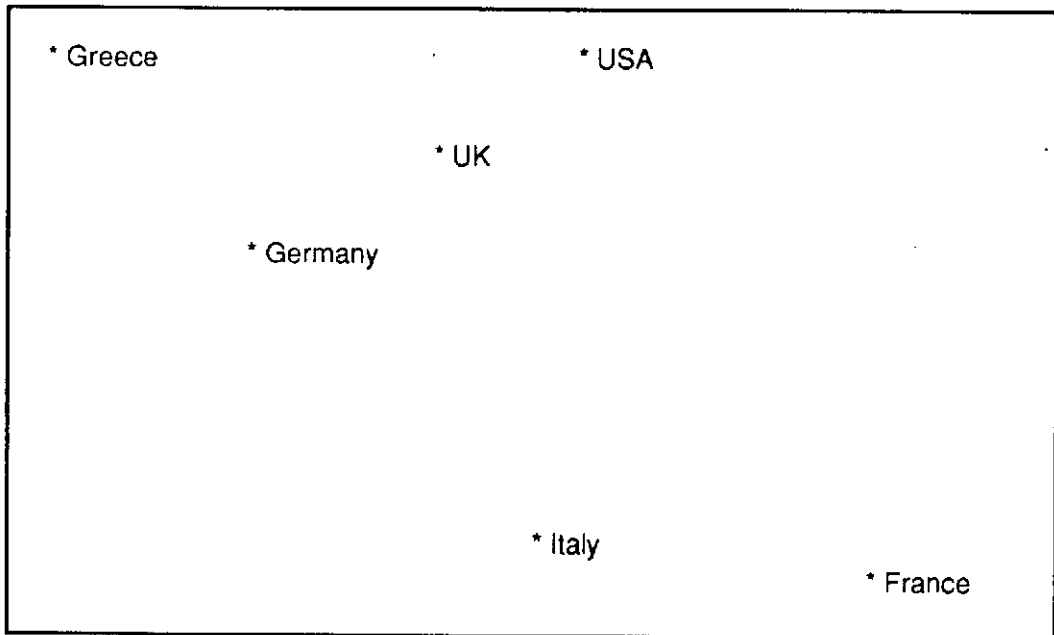Result from the interview. Theme: *Britain not happy within the EC.*

e.g. "... grants to EEC ... Britain is not getting a fair share ... France gets an awful lot more. I don't think we've done well. Some countries benefit more than we do."

Table 5

Result from analysis of the press. Theme: *Dangers from EC.*

"... great carnivorous monster threatening to devour British people and their traditions."

Figure 1

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 * Greece                          * USA


                          * UK


        * Germany




                          * Italy
                                      * France
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Pieces of information coming from different methods and different elements of the representation were considered in terms of what they were bringing into the completion of the picture. For example, information coming from the interviews; i.e. feelings, understandings and explanations, was considered very important in its contribution since in a way it was this that provided the components that differentiate social representations from other constructs (such as attitudes). It also provided people's verbal expressions which are the means through which representations acquire meaning, structure and image. On the other hand, information from the questionnaires and the check-lists were seen as valuable and necessary because it allowed us to talk about the spread of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and images within this specific population (Figure 2).

Further, consistency of information observed both within and between components and group-level analysis allowed us to test and confirm both the accuracy of the assessment of this specific representation as well as our hypothesis that there is a social representation and this is shared by our respondents. The common theme emerging from results from different methods was that, as far as our respondents were concerned, this representation is, indeed, not well developed. The idea of unification is still regarded as something new and frightening, which respondents tried to explain with what information they had available. Knowledge was poor, opinions and attitudes mostly unidimensional (people were either totally in favour or totally opposite groups of statements), feelings expressed rarely and with difficulty, understandings and explanations very primitive, images of countries mostly stereotypical and, again, unidimensional (a country was either all good or all bad) and the level of differentiation was very low. Finally, data from all methods reflected and were reflected by the images as presented in the press.

Figure 2
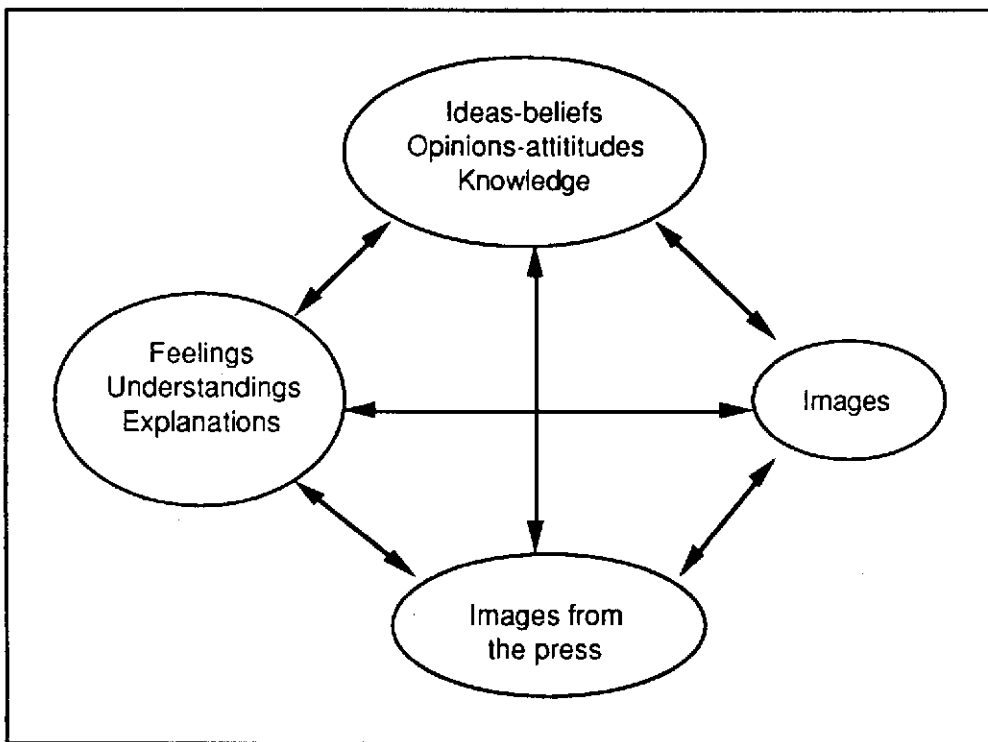
However, in cases where one would come across conflicting information coming from the study of different components of a representation, one should try to investigate further in order to explain such a conflict. We would like to suggest that conflict might be explained by a number of reasons:

a. certain components of a representation might be more salient than others; i.e. they are more easily accessible by different methods,

b. the conflict might be an artefact of the method(s) chosen, and

c. there might be an explanation of the conflict within the theory.

CONCLUSIONS

We would like to conclude that the analytic/synthetic approach we presented above allowed us a certain degree of confidence in reporting our findings.

We believe that it is important and necessary for researchers within the theory of social representations to understand and deal with the phenomenon in its complexity. Ours was a first attempt to combine different methods, research tools and analyses (in a structured way), which took us backwards and forwards many times before we were able to get a feeling of the representation we were after.

Still it has to be made clear that the way we analysed and synthesised this social representation was specific to our research. Other researchers wishing to use this approach have to start from the beginning; establish the components of their target representation and then find the most appropriate method to elicit and investigate each one of them.

We wish to proceed further with this idea and to see results from studies with similar multi-methodological approaches.

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