

# SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE VERSATILITY OF A CONCEPT

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**Abstract.** This paper attempts to discuss the 'versatility' of the concept of social representations, in the context of the Anglo-saxon tradition of social psychological research. This is done by analysing some of the concept's internal features - what we call the 'openness' of the concept -, along with the various ways in which it has been incorporated by other approaches within social psychology - bringing about what we call the 'closure' of the concept. It is suggested that the theory has provided a 'convenient social package' to social psychological perspectives historically criticized as being asocial. The use of pre-established methods and techniques combined with social representations theory provides a "safe" territory to do research, where one introduces something allegedly "novel", i.e. the social, and at the same time does not assume the full consequences of that novelty. We argue that while the very openness and flexibility of the concept might invite convenient combinations, these are usually achieved at a cost. The theoretical integrity of the concept is compromised, mainly by treating social representations as a technological answer to theoretical lacuna of other perspectives. The outcome is a premature epistemological closure of the concept, which disempowers its otherwise lively theoretical resources.

This paper explores some of the modes in which the concept of social representations has been used in the field of social psychology, particularly in the Anglo-saxon tradition of research. Its major concern is to discuss the versatility of the concept considering the historical conditions of its entry into Anglo-saxon social psychology. This is done by analysing some of the concept's internal features along with the various ways in which it has been incorporated by other approaches within social psychology.

"Versatility" is regarded here as the outcome of two interrelated conditions. It refers to the particular characteristics of the theory of social representations, which we will call the "openness" of the concept. At the same time, versatility refers to the various appropriations of the theory, that is, how it has been used, mingled with and incorporated by other approaches within social psychology. By analysing these various appropriations, we will seek to demonstrate the conditions for the "closure" of social representations as a concept.

In looking closer into both of these facets of versatility, we build upon the premise that possible applications, combinations and juxtapositions of a concept are practices<sup>1</sup> that do not

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<sup>1</sup> Practices here assume the meaning given by Bourdieu in "The Logic of Practice", 1990. We are aware that the word can lead to misunderstanding in the English speaking world, being mainly associated with technical or methodological practices. In this paper, we call practices all the human activities which comprise an idea and a way of doing things, embedded within and simultaneously creating socio-historical conditions.

arise exclusively from the concept itself. Rather, they are the outcome of an interplay between features of the concept and historical and institutional conditions (Bourdieu, 1990).

The conceptual interaction involved in the transformation of a scientific object (in our case the concept of social representations), is always enacted by social actors whose actions are contextually contingent (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Therefore we start with a simple rule of analysis. It does not suffice to unfold the intrinsic qualities of a concept, rather we need equally to explore the transformation it undergoes in the hands of others (Latour, 1987). That means considering the concept in the light of the history of the discipline and its conventions and models of practice.

### THE DISCONTENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The theory of social representations makes its entrance as a specific and propositional notion within social psychology at a critical period in the discipline's history. In the Anglo-saxon world this period was labelled by some as the "crisis of social psychology" (Elms, 1975; Gergen, 1973; Rosnow, 1981).

Questions concerning the underlying assumptions of social psychology, the distance between theory and practice and the conception of the social were debated, epitomizing a discipline at odds with itself, trying to respond to the provocations and difficulties the social reality was presenting to it. The 70s also saw the emergence of the field that came to be characterized as social cognition - an outgrowth of the prevailing paradigm in general psychology. Although this field re-vitalized social psychological research, it did little to alleviate the crisis. Rather, it sharpened the questioning of where to find the 'social' in social psychology, or 'what' and 'which' is the social in social psychology (Forgas, 1981).

Social psychological research and theoretical/methodological questioning were deeply constrained by the situation described above. The crisis cut right across day-to-day social psychological research posing new questions in the field; the *lack of the social* in social psychology became a major problem to be tackled by social psychologists.

In this context, the appearance of social representations theory had an impact on the general state of the discipline (Moscovici, 1973; 1981; 1984). It contributed to the crisis and questioning of social psychology. The very concept of social representations, as proposed by Moscovici, criticised the traditional dichotomies of subject/object, theory/method, and individual/social. It postulated that societies have a history which is at the very root of social psychological phenomena, instituting them, building them up and shaping their significance (Moscovici, 1984).

Further, and most important to the present paper, social representations theory offered a solution to the crisis. How is this solution achieved? Fundamentally, through the use of social representations theory as a "convenient social package" to be elaborated within the discipline. Such use has permitted, and still permits to a great extent, a convenient rearrangement of research practices. What we call here a convenient social package, is characterized by the mere application of the notion of social enshrined in social representations theory, but decontextualized, stripped of its full implications. In another words, social representations theory is just added to different perspectives without any epistemological considerations. It becomes a device to fulfil the "lack of the social".

Thus, the question that confronts us is twofold. Is it the concept itself and/or the modes in which it is appropriated in social psychological research practices, that promotes this

treatment of a convenient social package? It seems to us, that "versatility", as it has been defined before, is the precondition of this treatment.

## THE VERSATILITY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

### (a) The openness of the concept of social representations

The term openness should not be confused here with vagueness, an attribute very often ascribed to the theory of social representations by its critics (Jahoda, 1988; Potter & Litton, 1985). There is no doubt that the whole debate on the definition and the clarity of the concept has proved to be very fruitful. Our aim here, however, is to illustrate those features of the concept that make it open and versatile, rendering the theory of social representations a chameleon-like character.

From our point of view, there are three main postulates in the theory that bear out the openness and, at the same time, invite convenient combinations.

(i) At a conceptual level social representations are presented as an all encompassing concept. This is clear primarily, in Moscovici's often quoted definition, where he describes social representations as "...cognitive systems with a logic and language of their own...", not representing "...simply 'opinions about', 'images of' or 'attitudes towards' but 'theories' or 'branches of knowledge' in their own right, for the discovery and organization of reality...Systems of value, ideas and practices..." (Moscovici, p.xiii in his forward to Herzlich, 1973). The above description comprises a variety of different social psychological research fields and their corresponding concepts (e.g. attitudes; opinions). Rather than being mutually exclusive concepts or a distinct focus of research, they are all claimed to be part of the phenomenon of social representations.

(ii) Secondly, social representations are put forward as irreducible "explanatory devices" (Moscovici, 1984). That is, their position is always a step further on the explanatory ladder. They are the ground from which many social psychological phenomena stem. In this sense, the claim that attributions are determined by social representations is exemplary (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). Social representations theory therefore, does not seek to replace previous social psychological concepts, but to *incorporate* them. It is this feature of the theory that contributes to its openness and gives ground to the claim that the study of social representations should be the task of social psychology (Moscovici, 1984).

(ii) As far as causality is concerned, Moscovici regards social representations as final explanatory devices. However, he does not argue for a linear causal model or for a predictive power as understood and mainly tested within the Anglo-saxon social psychology (c.f. some of the research on the relationship between attitudes and behaviour). It is the *description* of social representations that gives them their explanatory power and not their ability to test hypotheses in a statistical sense. If you consider that a description is not a prescription, the concept is open to any possible operationalization.

(iii) Finally, the social element in the theory of social representations is *constitutive* rather than a separate entity: the social does not determine, but *realises* itself in the individual. Such a conception of the social and its relation to the individual appeared to be rather novel within the discipline. There was no salient pre-established path of examining such a theoretical formulation and again, the concept was open to new, or more apt versions of old ways of operationalizing the notion of the social.

## (b) The closure of the social representations concept

It is time now to discuss the uses of the concept that bring about its closure. There are, however, two points which require clarification in order to avoid misunderstandings. We are going to discuss here *certain ways* of doing research and approaching different theoretical concepts. Nevertheless while specific practices will be criticized, this does not mean that we are arguing against theoretical combinations. On the contrary, such effort is needed and the history of science has proved how fruitful theoretical articulations can be (Bachelard, 1968). The second point concerns the limits of our endeavour. This analysis is aimed at a restricted part of the production of social psychological knowledge. It is not our intention to exhaustively review the relevant literature, but to provide the reader with some examples that are indicative of our argument.

Having said that, let us tackle our problem. When talking of closure we are referring firstly, to that moment in the process of transformation of a concept, where an "immutable" solution has been reached. Immutable in the sense that the concept becomes a given entity that circulates without further elaboration or conceptual development. As a consequence, it becomes similar to what Latour (1987) has described as an "immutable mobile". In order to attain such an "immutable solution" the concept undergoes a process of detachment from its own theoretical foundations and it is used deprived of its epistemological presuppositions.

Regarding social representations, the closure is brought about by a set of practices which we term "gluing practices". Such practices do not adopt the concept of social representations as an alternative conceptual framework to be explored, but just add it to a pre-existing approach. This is done without challenging and eventually redefining from the roots the social reality that is under consideration (Augustinos, 1990; Echebarria & Paez, 1989). Such gluing practices have different - although related - forms. Those forms are:

### (i) The operationalisation of the 'social'

The operationalisation of the social is one of the principle ways, through which the concept of social representations has been mobilised in social psychological practices.

What we often observe is the definition of the 'social' as merely a "high percentage", that is, agreement among a high number of individuals on a given issue. In such cases, the 'social' is operationalised as agreement. Conversely, 'low percentage' indicates an absence of the social. Out of all the possible elements that characterize the social, only those that express proportional relationship between individuals, are selected and manipulated in the research process.

Curiously enough, it is sometimes possible to observe the opposite. The 'social' is transformed in the divergence between individuals on any subjective standpoint. For example, in certain cases, groups are expected to differ on given issues. In the research process this expectation takes the form of exploring different standpoints among social groups towards an object. Again the unit of analysis is the individual, but the 'social' is ascribed to her, in that she represents the group of which she is considered to be a member. Such group labels are then used to explain and predict responses (Echebarria & Paez, 1989). In short, the social is operationalised as a single variable.

In both cases just mentioned, the social is operationalised as the "glue" that adheres different components together. From the concept of social representations only the notion of the social is extracted and subsequently used as if it were the concept itself. Such additions of

the 'social' do not redefine the social psychological phenomenon explored. They merely 'gloss over' the problematic differences between various approaches without any real conceptual development.

Here both faces of the versatile nature of the concept and the relationship between them become apparent. Social representations theory, by presenting the notion of the social in a novel manner, opens the way to a convenient selection of elements for operationalisation.

(ii) The statisticalisation of the concept of social representations

There exist sophisticated techniques of data manipulation, that are in themselves devoid of content but in which a social representation can apparently be neatly fitted. Here we are referring to the proposed use (Purkhardt & Stockdale, in press) and actual use of advanced, mainly multivariate statistics. For example, there seems to be a body of research where every cluster, identified in cluster analysis or multi-dimensional scaling, is equated with a different social representation (Echebarria & Paez, 1989). A social representation is then defined as a cluster, when the cluster is in fact a way to extract groupings from a set of data. It is rather ironic that all the informal criticism and anxiety of researchers working in the field - often expressed as 'how do we know when we have found a social representation?' finally finds a response: 'when we have a cluster'. It is even more ironic when we consider the fact that cluster analysis itself has documented drawbacks, not least of which, that if a priori related items are the input, clusters generally appear (Charfield & Collins, 1980).

We are not arguing against the use of advanced statistical methods *per se*, but trying to demonstrate how the 'premature closure' of the concept can arise from the constraints and limits imposed by the application of sophisticated techniques without methodological considerations. The manipulation of the data however, can never go beyond the quality of the data and the method of data collection. The problem does not lie in the sampling of individual cognitions (Farr, in press); rather, it arises from the metamorphosis they undergo through statistical techniques. Individual cognitions are structurally re-arranged into social representations.

Here closure involves equating the concept of social representations with the outcome of sophisticated statistical manipulation. Any conceptual elaboration, or questioning about the existence or nonexistence of social representations is put aside. Social representations take on a technical meaning.

(iii) Gluing practices at a conceptual level

The last aspect we would like to point out in the 'gluing practices' relates with the conceptual integration of social representations with other notions in social psychology.

Most of the attempts to bring together the concept of social representations with other approaches in social psychological research are guided by the realisation that social representations can offer them a 'social' perspective. Attribution theory and the notion of schemata are instances of such attempts. From the initial realisation that social representations can offer a societal perspective to approaches criticised as being asocial, the effort proceeds to establish the similarities and differences between them. When sufficient similarities are established, the concept of social representations is taken up to provide the all important missing component, namely, the social. The concept of social representations enables social reality to be present, at the conceptual level, in conjunction with concepts which - in their very mode of constitution - have not considered the social reality at all (Augoustinos, 1990;

Augoustinos & Innes, 1990). However, although the concept of social representations is there to foster a societal perspective, the social reality is absent from the *development of the research process*. It is just added *ex post facto* to explain the results (Augoustinos, 1990).

The concern here is not to criticise attempts to combine concepts and approaches. As we have argued before, conceptual combinations can be of great value. What we criticise however, is the fact that, having proposed the combination, the methodological development of the research does not take into account the full consequences of that combination. For concepts presuppose a *reconstruction* of the reality they try to explain, which is always and necessarily mediated by underlying conceptions: Conceptions of *what is the social, which is the relationship between the individual and the social, and between theory and method*.

The conceptual integration which merely adds a new notion without working through such presuppositions inevitably leads to the concept's closure. This closure perpetuates research practices that develop as if they have absorbed a new perspective, when in fact they remain unchanged.

It is true that the very openness of the concept of social representations allows for almost any conceptual combination; as we have stated previously social representations intends to be an all encompassing concept and a final explanatory device.

### IMPLICATIONS

Our major concern has been to interrogate some of the characteristics that the interaction of the concept of social representations with other approaches in social psychology assume, and what is about the concept itself which allows for this to occur. We are not proposing a prescription of how social psychological theory and research should proceed. But we do hope to have contributed to what we consider to be a necessary exercise of reflection and self-reflection.

Bearing this in mind, we would like to draw some of the implications arising from the versatility of the concept of social representations.

1. In the cases we have discussed as gluing practices, closure emerges from a selection of certain elements or aspects of the theory of social representations. The selected aspects are then worked on, in a way that reduces the concept to a single notion, leaving aside its other aspects. In most cases, that single notion becomes the expression of the social, while for example, the structure, i.e. the figurative nucleus, or the functions of social representations are left out. Perhaps such a selection would not be a problem in itself, were it not for the closure of the concept reproduced in subsequent research.

2. The above segmentation is not surprising, considering that the main attraction of social representations for other approaches is its inherent social nature. However, the social remains, in essence, *unexplored* in so far it is approached in the research process through unchanged practices.

3. The introduction of a grain of novelty which does not shake established research practices appears to establish a secure position within the field. The use of well-tried methods and techniques combined with social representations theory provides a "safe" territory to do research where one introduces something allegedly 'novel', i.e. the social, and at the same time does not assume the full consequences of that novelty.

4. The theoretical integrity of the concept is compromised, mainly by treating social representations as a technological answer to theoretical lacuna of other perspectives. As a consequence the concept is muted - it is nominally there, but it cannot speak with its own voice.

## CONCLUSIONS

At a time of crisis in social psychology, many researchers looked for a way of introducing the social into the discipline. Moscovici's social representations appeared and very conveniently offered a repertoire to convert existing approaches into more acceptable social perspectives. Social representations were *anchored* in the ground of existing practices - much of their epistemological basis neglected or lost as *objectification* in statistical procedures and other heuristics, occurred. In this way some uses of the theory are impoverished. While social representations may be superordinate to many social psychological phenomena, we need more work on an autonomous theory of social representations rather than marriages of convenience to fundamentally individualistic approaches.

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