SPECIFIC PROCESSES OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Jean-Claude Abric

Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France

If one wants to deal with the issue of specific processes related to social representations, I think it is worth recalling that characteristically, these representations integrate two components:

—A cognitive component, coming from the fact that a person or a group has an active role in the appropriation and re-structuring of reality - this is what Moscovici calls "psychological texture" of the representation (1974).

—And a social component related to the fact that these social representations are collectively produced and generated by social interaction, and they participate to "the elaboration of a reality that is common to a social group", to quote D. Jodelet (1989).

Social conditions, in which a representation is elaborated or transferred, directly determine the coming into play of these cognitive processes. Therefore, the logic of social representations is a specific logic, a socio-cognitive logic (that can in fact be compared to naive thinking) of a particular type integrating both the rational and the irrational, accepting what seems to be contradictory and a particular mode of thinking which begins with solutions or taken positions to define the problem or the object.

Therefore, the processes which are set to work in social representations will aim to fulfil two major functions that Moscovici, in his text of Ravello (1993), assigns to social representations:

The cognitive function aiming to anchor, to stabilise, and the social function aiming to maintain or create collective identities and equilibrium.

Moscovici defines what appears to us as constituting the two general questions regarding the processes of social representation:

—In which way do these processes socially develop ?

—How do these processes get cognitively organised ?

From the accepted hypothesis that they are the two essential questions, we must now look into how they have been approached in studies on social representations, and the kind of answers which have been given. At the present time it seems that the studies are organised around three lines of thinking corresponding to three essential processes:

—The elaboration processes of a social representation.

—The functioning processes.

—The transformation processes.

What is absolutely necessary to the elaboration of a general theory of social representations is the knowledge of the totality of these processes. Although these three types of processes are closely linked, they have nevertheless be distinctively approached, and not always successfully.

The elaboration process: at the present time, they are best known through Moscovici, who, in 1961, defined two essential processes in the genesis of social representations: objectification and anchoring.

The objectification is the process allowing an abstract theory (in this case, psychoanalysis) to become concrete. Available information are sorted out, selected and simplified. They are also "de-contextualized" (that is to say, dissociated from the initial theoretical discourse). These information having been selected, and de-contextualized, are then organised in a specific way: they constitute the imaging core, the figurative model representing a key element in the genesis of a social representation, as this element represents for a group or a person a status of fact, it will be used as a frame of interpretation and categorisation of new information.

The first processus necessary to the elaboration of a social representation consists then in transforming what is abstract into something concrete, or, to quote Farr, in making for "the invisible to become perceptible".

As for the anchoring, it is a process which consists in integrating new information within a system of familiar categories, in rendering, as Moscovici says, "familiar what is unfamiliar".

Anchoring is what makes possible the absorption of novelty into an old setting, and as such, it "constantly modules some aspects of representations depending on their insertion in specific social relations" (Doise, 1992), it integrates the representation in a network of significance heavily marked by social values. It generates a system of interpretation, it offers a framework for the determination of behaviours in creating expectations, needs and anticipations.

More recently, in 1992, at Ravello - during the first international conference on social representations - Moscovici put forward a new hypothesis which we consider essential: the hypothesis of Themata which we will summarise as follows.

There are durable and stable cognitive units which mould social representation. These canonic themata "motivate and constrain people in their cognitive search. That is what comes up to their mind when they are hit with a unfamiliar information and communicate about it". In a way they constitute the origin of representation: they are "source ideas".

Moscovici describes the constituting process of a representation as follow:

An object (madness, aids...) become a part of exchanges if it hooks on a thema - anomaly, deviation, contagion - which constitute the somehow virtual content of the representation. This virtual content will become the real content of the representation through the anchoring process one function of which would be to anchor the thema to a context, a network of significance.

Although the concept of themata is relatively simple and certainly important to understand how the content of a representation is being made, it is only a hypothesis which to be confirmed, and a processus to be discovered.

Second category of process: the functioning process of representations

Flament, Guimelli, Rouquette, Verges and Moliner's empirical works, as well as mine, led to the validation of a hypothesis I had presented in 1976 regarding a specific characteristic of social representations known as the theory of the central core.

We shall briefly summarise our vantage point. Any social representation is made of a central core and an ensemble of peripheral elements. The central core is the main element as it determines the significance of the representation as whole (its generating function), but it also determines its structure (its organising function) ; the peripheral system occupies a major role in the functioning and the dynamics of representations.

The central core of representation is stable, coherent, consensual, and considerably influenced by the group collective memory and its system of values. If we adopt Moscovici's hypothesis, I would add that it is within the central core that we will find the "canonic" themata.

The central core of a representation is somehow the stable, un-negotiable and non transformable part of the representation: it is the norms and rules which cannot be transgressed without putting in jeopardy the representation itself. I did say rules (functional dimension) and norms (normative dimension). At this point, Moscovici (1992) presents again a new hypothesis which seems to me particularly interesting in helping to understand the functioning of a social representation. "The central core is made of beliefs of a different nature from peripheral elements" which he calls normative or extraordinary beliefs (cf. Wittgenstein), that is to say, beliefs not based on facts, but on "rules of life", on values. Given the fact that values probably constitute a important part of the central core of social representations, it seems necessary to underline this non cognitive part of social representations. If, as we think, values are strongly present within the cental core of a representation, we can postulate that a large part of its content is generated by these values.

Nevertheless, the functioning and the organisation of the central core need to be researched, despite some work made very recently on the subject (J.C. Abric et E. Tafani, 1995 ; P. Rateau, 1995).

The role and the functioning of the peripheral system are relatively well known thanks to the research work made by Flament. It is made of schemes and constitutes the interface between the representation and the reality. It assures of the concretization of the central system in terms of taking position and behaviours. As it is more supple, it allows the central core to adapt to the constraints and characteristics of the situation, and it also protect the central system. It is in the peripheral system that interindividual variations will be given the possibility to develop themselves within a same representation, making possible for the social representation to have a king of individualisation.

We think that the differentiation between peripheral and cental core throws light on the third type of process: the transformation of social representations.

The transformation of a social representation will only be effective when its central core itself will be transformed. That is why we have defined three types or three processes of transformation (Abric, 1994). A "resisting" transformation (or superficial transformation) whereby the only changing elements are the peripheral ones, a "progressive" transformation (as shown by Guimelli in 1988) which occurs when the central core is changed by integrating new elements without breaking down the existing

central elements ; and a brutal, direct and complete transformation of the central core which occurs when the defence mechanisms are unable to fulfil their role.

We have sketched the present state of questions and knowledge regarding the processes which are specific to social representations. One can easily measure the remaining of work needing to be done, and its important stakes. The knowledge of those processes is a necessary condition to the development of the theory and to the realisation of scientifically based research.

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