

# **MORE ON THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: CENTRAL CORE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS**

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*Abstract:* This paper addresses two important topics in the theory of social representations: the structure and the degree of consensus. While referring to our data on the social representations of children's development, we argue that the combination of two approaches, sociodynamic and structural is needed to account for the composition and nature of social representations. As far as the question of consensus is concerned, we maintain that this cannot be seen as a static and definitive data, but is rather connected to the antinomy inherent the central core of social representations, which enables the sociocognitive regulation caused by the feeling of affective urge.

*Social representations: with or without consensus?* With this question Claude Flament (1994a) opens one of his recent papers, where he defines precisely the relevance of consensuality in social representations. The problem of consensus is actually one of the aspects of the theory which is most debated in the papers that have appeared in the last years in International Journals, and it is a crucial issue since it is connected with two important theoretical and correlated discussions.

The first discussion refers to the recent positions assumed by the theorists of the French structural approach to social representations, of which Flament is an authoritative representative. According to this approach, every representation is organized around a central nucleus, stable and consensual, which is the fundamental and necessary element of such representation, since it determines both its meaning and structural organization. Flament maintains that it is actually in the degree of consensuality, guaranteed by the central nucleus, that the difference between the studies on social representations and those on individual attitudes can be found.

The second issue, strictly linked to the first one, broadens the debate to the comparison of the theoretical approaches developing such notions, that is, social cognition, as concerns attitudes, and the theory of social representations; it is still common, however,

to find authors who continue to consider social representations as an “attempt to reproduce cognitivist notions in social psychology” (Parker, 1994).

In an issue of the *Papers on Social Representations*, the two authors cited above make reference to a study which we conducted on mothers’ social representations of children’s development (Molinari and Emiliani, 1993). They define it on one hand as a study of attitudes and opinions *vis-à-vis* with education (Flament, 1994b, p.184) and on the other as an attempt to connect social representations with cognitive development in a cognitivist perspective (Parker, 1994, p.221).

The present paper is stimulated by the two critical comments cited above, and it is aimed at discussing both of them. We maintain that the object of our study does not concern attitudes and opinions, since our results clearly show the shared socio-cognitive processes which intervene to mould and regulate the system of knowledge subjects organize around a specific and “privileged” social object, as it is the child for his/her mother. These results were not obtained in a cognitivist perspective, as Parker asserts, but by following the principles of the theory of social representations, which allowed us to demonstrate the relevance of social dynamics and socio-cognitive regulations.

More in detail, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the combination of two approaches, *sociodynamic* (Doise, 1990) and *structural* (Flament, 1987), is needed to account for the composition and nature of social representations. In fact, each of the two approaches taken separately cannot be so effective: in particular, the sociodynamic perspective does not consider the generative and organizing functions of the central elements, while the structural perspective, which does not anchor the structure of knowledge to social dynamics, mainly focuses on the static and descriptive aspects of representations. In our opinion, the connection between these two approaches can open new directions for future research. As a consequence, we will argue that the characteristic of *consensus* is not an *a priori* and static condition which is necessary for the definition of the central elements of social representations.

### **THE SOCIODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

In a recent book published in Italian (Emiliani e Molinari, 1995), we distinguished between two perspectives which, in our opinion, summarize the theoretical and methodological foundations of social representations theory.

The first perspective, which we will not present in detail here, is *content-oriented* and it is located at the crossroads of several scientific disciplines, in particular sociology, anthropology and social psychology. In this perspective, social representations are considered as a sort of “map of contents” on a topic which is particularly relevant to the groups of subjects interviewed.

In the second perspective, which we call *sociodynamic*, social representations are instead located at the core of the internal debate of social psychology on the ways in which individuals arrange and merge the knowledge of their own world. In this view, social representations are not mere descriptions of contents of knowledge, but modes of socio-cognitive functioning (Doise, 1990), which start from the assumption that the individual is a socially inserted actor and that such insertions (Beauvois, Monteil and Trognon, 1991) determine the psychosocial specificity of the notion.

In this view, social representations are made possible in particular by three conditions: 1) the focus on a social relation particularly salient or a point of view which is important for the subjects; 2) the need to take a stand in everyday life; 3) the scattering of information deriving from the presence in our society of different and contradictory symbolic universes which individuals are forced to confront. As far as the topic of children's development is concerned, we assume that mothers are "excellent subjects" for whom the construction of a social representation is needed. In fact, they fully embody the three conditions described above: they are involved in an affectively significant relationship with their children, they have the need to take a stand during the routines of everyday life, and they are confronted with a jumble of information almost always contradictory, since a multiplicity of points of view can be found on children's development and education, both in the scientific literature and in common sense. This last point is mainly due to the fact that the final outcome of developmental processes is unpredictable and *mysterious*.

The research work we carried out in the last years on the mothers' social representations of children's development (Carugati, Emiliani and Molinari, 1990; Emiliani and Molinari, 1994) has followed the sociodynamic perspective. The results of these studies clearly showed that the mechanism which regulates and organizes the mothers' social representations is based on two crucial dimensions, that is, the social insertions of subjects (being a housewife, an office worker or a teacher) and the relationship with socially relevant objects (in particular, mother-child and teacher-pupil).

### **'THE THEORY OF THE CENTRAL NUCLEUS**

According to the French authors of the structural approach (see, among others, the recent works of Abric, 1994a; Flament, 1994a, 1994c; Guimelli, 1994; Moliner, 1995), the organization of social representations is held by a double system. The *central system* is socially determined, linked to historical, sociological and ideological conditions, and it constitutes the social and collective basis of representations, defining the homogeneity of the group. The *peripheral system*, on the other hand, is strictly dependent on the characteristics of the individuals and on their context; this system is much more flexible than the central nucleus, and therefore offers the possibility to integrate different information and practices, thus expressing the heterogeneity of contents and actions.

The central nucleus has two main functions: the *generative function*, which determines the meaning of a social representation and allows its changes, and the *organizing function*, defining the links among the different elements of the representation. As Flament states, "the central core is not a simple organizing principle, but a structure (in the strong sense of the term) giving meaning to the whole representation, that is, to the numerous peripheral elements, which for their part are negotiable" (1994a, p.104). The degree to which a particular element can be considered part of the nucleus cannot be located only on the basis of a quantitative or statistic dimension (salience), but also of a qualitative necessity, which is suitable for some salient traits, but not for all of them.

In brief, according to the French structural approach, every social representation is composed of non-negotiable elements (the nucleus), characterized by stability and resistance to communication pressure, around which the peripheral elements rotate, subject to negotiation and communication on the part of individuals. For these

characteristics, the central nucleus expresses the persistence and unanimity of topics, while the peripheral system accounts for the variability and diversity of the social field.

In a recent paper, Abric (1994b) introduces the distinction between the *normative* and *functional* elements of the central nucleus: the degree to which an element can be defined as normative is linked to the collective values of the social group, while its degree of functionality depends on the social practices of individuals.

Moreover, Abric describes an aspect of the nucleus which, in our view, is particularly important. He states that all the central elements are differently activated depending on the specific situation: in other words, the nucleus remains common and characterizes the whole representation, but it is not necessarily activated in all the subjects and in every situation, since it can be more active in one group than in another, or under only some conditions. As compared to the previous foundations of the theory, here for the first time the intuition of the existence of a regulation process is developed which affects the representation and is dependent on the contextual conditions where groups are involved.

### **STRUCTURE AND ANCHORING PROCESSES**

The research studies that we have carried out in recent years have been progressively concerned with the topic of the structure of social representations, tackled in a perspective which is intended to integrate on the one hand the *structural organization* of representations, implying the distinction between central and peripheral systems, and on the other hand the basic assumptions of the *sociodynamic perspective*, which considers as a priority the sociocognitive mechanisms dependent upon the social dynamics at work, and accounting for the moulding of social representations.

We are in agreement with the recent proposals of Abric (1994b), who mitigates the most rigid aspects of the central nucleus theory, while introducing the thesis that the activation of the central elements is largely due to the type of groups' *social anchoring*. Following these considerations, we maintain that the structure of social representations, that is, the organization between central and peripheral elements, is strictly interdependent upon the processes of anchoring of knowledge.

Let us try to make this passage clearer. The process of anchoring accounts for: a) the *integration of knowledge*, in terms of classification and denomination within well-known categories; b) the *allocation of meaning* to all the elements of a representation, both central and peripheral; c) the *instrumentality of knowledge*, given by the fact that the organization of representations reflects specific social dynamics to which it is functional. In this distinction, we can already find aspects of the structural approach (the distinction in central and peripheral elements) and of the sociodynamic perspective (especially in the instrumentality of knowledge).

A few years ago, Doise (1992) proposed a further distinction of the process of anchoring in three types. *Psychological anchoring* is described as the link between the opinions expressed towards actual practices and the more general knowledge of the same topic (for example, how much I feel I can influence the intellectual development of my child and what I think in general about cognitive development). *Sociological anchoring* is at work when knowledge or representations are moulded by the social insertions of groups of subjects (such as being a housewife, an office worker or a teacher). *Psychosocial anchoring* takes into account sociocognitive functioning and social

dynamics: in this last type, social representations are regulated by the identity dynamics due to the assumption of multiple social roles (as, for example, being at the same time a mother and a teacher).

While trying to combine the three types of anchoring and the functions of this process, we can see that the integration of knowledge is especially expressed in psychological anchoring, while the third function (instrumental) is at work both in sociological and in psychosocial anchoring. What in our opinion is not sufficiently expressed in the distinction proposed by Doise is the reference to the structural aspect, that is, to the allocation of meaning, which is the principle ensuring the interdependence between the central and peripheral aspects of social representations. This aspect is instead well-described by the theory of the central nucleus, according to which the salience of the structural elements of social representations is qualitatively determined by their links of meaning (generative and organizing functions). It is therefore in the definition of anchoring that the two approaches find a possible (and, in our view, necessary) integration.

### **PSYCHOSOCIAL ANCHORING AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS: 'THE CASE OF MOTHERS-TEACHERS.**

In the article published several years ago which we referred to at the beginning of this paper (Molinari and Emiliani, 1993), we pointed out the existence of a shared structure of mothers' social representations of children development. This structure, common to all the mothers sampled, was extracted through a covariance selection analysis, which allowed us to show that the elements of the social representations of children's development (the theories of character, of affective interaction, of the social role; the images of the intelligent child, the disobedient child and the tidy child) are interconnected in a network of links between general theories and images of one's own child. Furthermore, we showed that when taking into account the mothers' occupational status and the dynamics thus activated (being a housewife, an office worker or a teacher) the common structure turns out to be modified, and differentiated models (one for each group of mothers) can be identified; in this case, the different organization of representational contents highlights the relevance of social dynamics in the mother-child relationship.

However, in each of the three differentiated models, two links remain constant: one between the image of the positive child, intelligent and autonomous, and the type of explanation based on *affective interaction*, and the other between the theory of *character* and the image of the disobedient and stubborn child.

Character and interaction are, in our interpretation of the results, the elements of the central core of the social representation of children's development. The bipolar characteristic of the central nucleus is highlighted by Moscovici, when he discusses the concept of *themata* (1993; Moscovici and Vignaux, 1994), which are central notions of knowledge, ancient conceptions rooted in the collective memory, which last over time and take the form of oppositional systems, first of all that of nature and culture. What is crucial in our data is that the connections between the elements of the central nucleus (character and interaction) and those of the peripheral system (the images of one's own child) remain constant both in the common structure and in each of the differentiated models.

As a conclusion, we stated that the need to keep self-efficacy on those aspects which one considers most relevant in a child's development and which refer both to the nature and to the relationship with the object (mother-child) is revealed to be the central socio-cognitive dynamic which regulates and organizes the construction of social representations. With the reference to affective interaction, women express their pride to be mothers of an intelligent child, while the attribution to natural determinants is needed for justifying the child's most difficult traits, such as disobedience and stubbornness.

But we also have other results: when taking into consideration only the group of mothers-teachers, in fact, the identity and relational dynamics become more complex, since these women are called upon to express judgements on multiple and relevant aspects of their social and relational lives, that is, their own children and pupils, and the characteristics considered as important at home and at school. The psychosocial process of anchoring, which considers the dynamics activated by symbolic relations, determines in this case a different selection and organization of knowledge, allowing the resolution of the conflictual and contradictory elements produced by the increased articulation of the social and normative context (Emiliani and Molinari, 1995).

In particular, in the new situation the theory of character reduces its explanatory power, which is instead absorbed by the explanation based on the social role (in our case, that of mother and teacher), made salient by a strong feeling of double responsibility. On the basis of this explanatory principle, we can witness a composition of the elements of the representation which is different as compared to the model where teachers were only called into question as mothers (confronted with the images of child but not with those of pupils). The new model emerging shows on one hand that teachers consider the pupil's intelligence, order and obedience as the result of a positive and personal effort: his/her intelligence is explained through the theory of affective interaction, while order and obedience are linked to the degree of the teacher's authority. When referring to their own children, on the other hand, the mothers-teachers attribute to themselves the most valuable characteristics (intelligence and autonomy), but at the same time they recognize the difficulties, inherent their social role, to face daily the child's more difficult traits (disobedience and stubbornness).

In order to interpret these results following the foundations of the theory of the central nucleus, we maintain that interaction constitutes the *normative element* of the central core, since it concerns the teachers' professional training and it refers to the most valued characteristics for the pupil's success at school. Character is instead a *functional element*, which is selected when it is necessary to face daily practices (as when a mother is confronted with a difficult child), but which becomes recessive when the social dynamics are complicated on an affective and normative level.

### **'THE STRUCTURE: A PROBLEM OF METHODS?'**

When Flament states that social representations have to be characterized by consensus, he dissents from Doise and his colleagues who entitle the first chapter of a recent volume (Doise, Clémence and Lorenzi Cioldi, 1992) *Représentations sociales sans consensus*. These authors underline the non-consensual aspects, while the French psychologist asserts that the studies on social representations must be carried out in order to locate the consensual nucleus shared by a homogeneous sample.

To define an element as central, and therefore consensual, Flament states, it has to be characterized essentially by two properties, that is, by a *quantitative salience* (given by the degree of agreement among subjects that such element is associated with the object of the representation) and by a *qualitative necessity*, which means that some elements more than others, even with the same value of quantitative salience, are considered as necessary attributes of representations. In the social representation of work, for example, the elements “earning a living” and “job must be enjoyable” are both positively judged as far as quantitative salience is concerned, but only the first is a necessary aspect for the definition of a working activity.

In the specific case of social representations of children’s development, however, the above described principles (salience and necessity) no longer seem to be sufficient to investigate of the degree of centrality (and therefore of the consensus as defined by Flament) of the various elements at work. In fact, the results of our research studies show that there is no theory which acquires the characteristic of qualitative necessity for *all subjects* and under *all conditions*, since the different theories are all accessible and come into play only when activated by *specific social dynamics* connected with the position of the subjects and the type of relationship evoked. Instead, what has proved to be necessary is the dialectical functioning of sociocognitive mechanism based on opposite types of explanations: character and interaction.

Even the characteristic of quantitative salience is not so linear in our data: in fact, it appears that in purely quantitative terms the interactionist explanation is salient and consensual in that 83% of the subjects agree that it explains child development in general. Yet when referring to one’s own child, thus calling into question a more intimate relationship, the percentage drops to 49%. On the contrary, only 31% of the mothers agree about the explanation of character in general terms; however, this percentage rises to 50% when housewives refer to their own children.

The object of our studies is therefore particularly intriguing, since it is characterized by a degree of flexibility and instability given on one side by the pressures of daily life with children, and on the other by the assumption of specific social insertions. When a topic which is so intense in terms of involvement and responsibilities is concerned, the antinomy inherent to the central core allows to face the contradictory and ambivalent aspects of everyday life, through a regulative mechanism which links the elements of knowledge on the basis of the *affective urge* marking any salient relationship.

The degrees of salience and necessity have to be understood, in this case, through methods which allow the analysis of the structure of social representations taking into account the interplay of multiple anchoring: it is only evoking specific images of children in general, one’s own children, and one’s pupils that the central core and peripheral aspects of representations can be detected.

It is now clear that the interconnection between the sociodynamic perspective and the structural approach allows a complete interpretation of our data. Going back to the question with which we started this paper, we maintain that the problem of consensus is not resolved in these terms: social representations are definitely shared and consensual, but the degree of consensus cannot be seen as a static and definitive data. When a representation is activated for the need to explain our actions, we selectively choose among its different elements: in certain situations (and the quality of the implied relationship is a fundamental characteristic) it is clear the normative nature of the theory of

affective interaction, while in others the theory of character prevails, since it allows mothers to keep at a distance, when needed, the process of one's child growth.

As a *conclusion*, we would like to go back to the statements we posed at the beginning of the present paper: can we say that we are not studying attitudes and opinions in a cognitive perspective, but rather that the object of our studies concerns social representations of children's development? We think we have showed that the second is the theoretical perspective we share, and we put forward three reasons to underline the difference between a study of attitudes and one of social representations.

The first reason is *methodological*: true, we have collected our data asking each subject individually to answer a list of questions, but the main characteristic of our questionnaires is to make the subjects think of different targets (a child in general, their own child and, for teachers, their own children and pupils), thus evoking types of relationships with different degrees of salience. The focus of these studies is to "force" the subjects to assume a social position (that of mothers, when thinking of their own children; that of teachers, when thinking of their own pupils) and to call themselves into question on specific topics of their daily lives. Social dynamics and relevant relationships, therefore, are the interpretative keys of our works: is this not a main concern of the theory of social representations?

Moreover, on a *statistical* level we have looked for analyses which allowed us to analyse both the structure which is common to the different groups of mothers and how this structure is activated and moulded on the basis of their specific social position and the type of child which is evoked (for a detailed description of the statistical analyses carried out to find the structure of social representations, see Emiliani, Molinari and Schadee, 1993; Molinari, Emiliani and Carugati, 1992).

The third, and most important reason, is *theoretical*. Social representations cannot be investigated only through the analysis of declarative knowledge of a social object, since this type of knowledge is of a static and descriptive nature and eliminates *a priori* any element of contradiction. On the contrary, contradiction itself is indeed a key aspect of social representations, especially as concerns topics implying a high degree of responsibility and mysteriousness, since it allows to take stands in everyday life. In other words, the organization of social representations is influenced by its *content*, and contradiction, expressed through thematic antinomies, may constitute the central core, which enables the sociocognitive regulation caused by the feeling of *affective urge*: the topic of consensus needs to be discussed within this frame of reference.

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