Socialising Semiotic Mediation: Some Reflections On Rosa And Pievi's Paper

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This article aims to reflect on the relation between social representations theory (SRT) and a cultural psychological view of semiotics, as presented in Rosa and Pievi's paper (this issue). It is argued that a fruitful dialogue can be established between the two orientations, one that draws on similarities but also addresses and exploits several important conceptual differences. The article proceeds by outlining the areas in which SRT can be enriched by a semiotic account – such as incorporating a more clearly articulated theory of signs and unpacking further the role of mediated action and personal experience – as well as the ways in which the latter can benefit from engaging with the notion of social representations. Most of all, I propose that what a SRT-informed view of cultural psychology can offer us is a 'socialized model of semiotic mediation', one that grounds the construction of knowledge at the level of different groups and communities and observes its dynamic evolution over time in close relation to these social milieus. The transformation of knowledge and its individual and social determinants are considered in detail by SRT researchers and can expand the rather narrow focus on sign, object and meaning in more traditional forms of semiotic analysis. In the end, some methodological reflections are offered and the existence of social representations as a phenomenon is affirmed beyond the realm of purely scientific construction.

Keywords: Social Representations Theory, Semiotics, Signs, Mediated action, Temporality

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There are numerous benefits associated with the effort to bridge social representations theory (SRT) and cultural psychology through a discussion of semiotics. Not only is it the case that the notion of representation itself concerns both groups of scholars, but we are likely to reach important theoretical and methodological conclusions from engaging in this exercise. However, we also need to keep in mind that, while elements of convergence between the two approaches are illuminating when it comes to strengthening social and cultural theory, some of the most fruitful dialogues actually steam from non-overlap and even divergence. If we need to use any *common ground* as our point of departure, it is in potential *gaps* between SRT and a cultural psychological discussion of semiotics that we can find new scope for development and growth.

The collection of papers and commentaries in this special issue of Papers on Social Representations offers an excellent example of how this tension between sharedness and differences can be navigated and fruitfully used. Building a common theoretical framework for the two *paradigms*, even when they are concerned with almost the same phenomenon, is an ambitious task and can only start from a careful analysis of the relationship between sign and representation and between representation itself and social representation. It is this quest that stands behind Rosa and Pievi's (2013) paper and encourages them to focus on the methodological implications of a semiotic approach to the cultural and individual dynamics of social representations.

This commentary reflects on some of the ideas presented by Rosa and Pievi and, in particular, based on this reading, tries to systematise a few points of convergence/divergence between SRT and semiotics as discussed in cultural psychology. Together with the two authors, I also consider this exploration particularly useful, both theoretically and methodologically. Its importance can be highlighted, in my view, by an increased awareness regarding what one approach *tells* us about the other, what each brings to the dialogue as a continuation or development of existing ideas or, at times, as a new and valuable addition. In the end, some concluding remarks will be offered concerning the capacity of scientific discourses to accurately reflect personal and social experience and knowledge.

WHAT SEMIOTIC MEDIATION TELLS US ABOUT SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

There is little doubt that an understanding of semiotics is necessary for theorists of social representations. In the end, representations are constituted by systems of signs and they semiotically mediate, in this capacity, individual and collective action in the world. As Rosa and Pievi (2013) argue however, we need also to question what kind of *sign* is a social representation and, to answer this, raise the issue of how representations come to represent. The model for the semiotic structure of social representations, put forward by the two authors, is extremely relevant in this regard. It unpacks the *internal* structure of a representational field, starting from the basic Peircean triad of object (what is signified), representatem (the sign with formal / syntactic value) and interpretant (meditational sign with semiotic value). What is particularly useful in their depiction is the unfolding of an embedded semiotic structure, *advancing* in a dynamic, cyclical process, from symbol to rhema, dicent sign and finally to argument. Each of these build on previous stages of semiosis that make the object acquire not only personal, but also social significance. This *architecture* of a substitutive semiosis incorporates a temporal dimension inscribed also in Pierce's (1931/1958) conception of the recursive nature of semiotic mediation. It also serves as an analytical tool aiding researchers in their fine-grained analysis of what constitutes a representation: how symbols are engaged in utterances, in text, and finally in discourses in the form of arguments.

It is not accidental that arguments are associated with social representations since the latter have long been conceptualised as semiotic means engaged by different groups when in dialogue about a social object. Social representations become most apparent when dialogues turn into societal debates, something that Moscovici's (1961/2008) seminal work on the representation of psychoanalysis in France in the 1950s compellingly demonstrates. It is the argumentative appropriation of psychoanalysis and positioning towards it that members of different groups (Catholics, liberals, communists, etc.) accomplished through their discourses and disseminated into the public sphere of their time. Arguments, as Rosa and Pievi (2013) show, are a peculiar type of sign. Their reference is less to particular social objects as it is to other sign systems and, in this regard, they can be said to re-present social reality by coordinating existing conceptions (or, using a semiotic terminology, texts). While Moscovici (1973) himself extended the meaning

of a social representation beyond ideas to incorporate values and practices, arguments can be said to constitute the core of a representation at least as enacted in discourse by individuals, groups, and entire communities. A social representation is not a static thing but takes shape as an articulation of ideas within the constraints of previous types of semiosis, the cultural norms that establish rules for formulating and expressing them, and in the context set by existing (power) relations between groups. In sum, while not all arguments can be considered social representations and a set of arguments doesn't necessarily exhaust any particular social representation, the connection between the two can be considered an important bridging point between SRT and a cultural psychological semiotic analysis.

Besides revealing the semiotic structure and dynamics of a representation, cultural psychology can also enrich SRT by helping it conceptualise better the role of personal experience. As a matter of consensus, social representations are not only societal phenomena but phenomena that rely on individuals, their actions and agency. In contrast to more radical discourse traditions that were ready to announce the *death of the subject*, SRT theorists are very keen to maintain this *subject* as a key element in their analysis (Jovchelovitch, 1996). In the end, the data (*text*, broadly defined) collected by researchers in their efforts to uncover social representations comes principally from individuals and refers to their conceptions and experiences. The ways in which one can meaningfully abstract social-level beliefs from individual-level data remains a point of discussion in the theory. Here is where a semiotically informed approach can be most useful. Personal experience, as a *pan-semiotic text* (Magariños, 2008), is brought to the foreground in cultural psychology. Understanding semiosis at an individual level (including how individuals build and use representations) represents a key concern for this discipline. By adopting an ideographic method as well as focusing on case studies, cultural psychologists are capable of offering a detailed account of the micro-genesis and onto-genesis of social representation processes. Rosa and Pievi (2013) offer an interesting example in this regard when referring to the interpretations given by different Argentineans to a controversial poster playing on typical Catholic imagery in order to make a social and political statement. The model of the semiotic structure proposed by the two authors can be a good starting point for the analysis of individual-level semiosis as it relates to social-level representations.

Last but not least, cultural psychological models of semiotic mediation are important for SRT precisely because they subordinate signification to practical action in the world. The link between action and representation is of utmost concern for scholars working within the SR tradition but there is still progress to be made when it comes to articulating the two. Jodelet's (1991) celebrated study of madness is often cited as a good example of how representations are closely connected to individual and social practices. This research, focused on how psychiatric patients live together with locals in the small French community of Ainay-le-Château, revealed with striking clarity the ways in which the work of representation is reflected in day to day life and becomes materialised in action and objects aimed at reconstructing, practically and symbolically, the barriers that separate the *mad* from the *sane*. A cultural psychological analysis of this situation, grounded in a conception of action as semiotically mediated, would add new conceptual and analytical tools to the interpretation while keeping what people do in focus. If indeed social representations are "systems of values, ideas and practices" (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii), the nature of their articulation needs to be clarified. Post-Vygotskian approaches argue for the importance of signs and tools (including social representations) for performing action in relation to both self and others. The individual / interpersonal and action focus of these approaches could very well offer new inspiration for further developments of SRT.

WHAT SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS TELL US ABOUT SEMIOTIC MEDIATION

One distinctive contribution SRT can make to the cultural psychological framework elaborated by Rosa and Pievi (2013) rests in its potential to *socialise* this understanding of semiotic mediation. The basic semiotic unit, as envisioned by Peirce, relates a sign, an object and an interpretant. This triad focuses on the mediation between these elements as a dynamic process of meaning-making. In a similar vein, social representations are concerned with how meaning about a social object or phenomenon is constructed but its basic unit expands beyond object and sign. It importantly incorporates a subject – subject axis (where subjects are people but can also be collective social actors) into the basic unit of analysis. In this regard we could revise Rosa and Pievi's claim that "social objects are the substance social representations are made of" (2013, p. 6) in saying that they are constituted actually by *communication* about or around social objects.

This is not inconsequential. By firmly locating semiosis at the level of social interaction, SRT can add to our cultural psychological understanding of signs and signification. This further *socialisation* of semiotic mediation goes beyond interpersonal relations and their role in the construction of meaning (something captured early on by Vygotsky's views of development; see Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis, 2007), and grounds social knowledge about the world in dialogues that engage small groups and even entire communities.

A distinctive claim made by SRT is that social knowledge is not only constituted within groups and communities but it also transforms as it *travels* across different social milieus and becomes the topic of debate within and between them. This is one fundamental conclusion drawn from Moscovici's (1961/2008) work on psychoanalysis and its representation and subsequent studies using this framework usually concerned themselves with the context of knowledge production. The Toblerone model of social representations (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) captures precisely the dependence of the semiotic relation between object and its representation on the people who engage in the act of representation. Semiotic mediation concerning one and the same object is differently shaped depending on social context and any existing interpretation makes sense to an outside observer only when referred back to this context. The above of course is not a foreign conclusion to any cultural psychologist. When Rosa and Pievi (2013) say that semiosis is "carried out within the possibilities and constraints set by the interpretative practices of the community the interpreter belongs to" (p. 20), they allude precisely to this aspect. However, in their model, the social materialises only at the higher levels of semiosis (e.g. the argument level) and a question remains as to how self − other or ego − alter (Marková, 2003) relations are accounted for in the case of symbols, rhemas and dicent signs.

A direct answer to this comes again from the two authors when they refer to explanations of why individuals reach similar perceptions of the same object or performance. When applying the "same relational values of difference and identity" and performing a "similar semiosis" (Rosa & Pievi, 2013, p. 14), they can share a common intentional world and build a joint understanding of it. In this sense we can say that they operate within the framework of a unitary social representation. However, something that attracts a lot of attention among SR theorists is precisely how and why people achieve such a degree of sharedness in their conceptions. This is by no means a sign that the same social representation is held by each individual (as a *mental*

representation), on the contrary. Sharedness is not a given of social representations; it is an achievement of communication, dialogue, sometimes heated debate, around a social object with the potential of always generating divergence and difference (Rose, Efraim, Gervais, Joffe, Jovchelovitch & Morant, 1995). A common task for SRT and cultural psychology is to explain this dynamic and understand both how: a) given the diversity of personal experiences and semiotic acts in relation to one and the same object, people can reach and operate with more or less similar representations; and b) given some constraining rules of interaction and communication between individuals and groups, these unitary representations can make room for diversity and novelty. Reuniting the object – sign – interpretant axis with the subject – subject axis holds once more the key to this fundamental riddle of our psychological and social life.

Another common ground between SRT and cultural psychology can shed further light onto this issue: the interest in temporality. Scholars from both fields are brought together by a strong belief that to understand a psychological phenomenon one needs to consider it in its development. This movement can be socio-, onto- or micro-genetic (Cole, 1996) and efforts are constantly made to articulate the three levels in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of development. In this regard, again, the focus of semiotics and SRT might be slightly different: the former tends to prioritise individual acts of semiosis at micro- and ontogenetic levels, the latter usually highlights the social constitution of objects of representation at onto- and sociogenetic levels. In any case, the nature of change and its temporal unfolding are of interest for both. The way change is account for differs to some extent, cultural psychologists pointing mostly to material action and its mediated character, SRT researchers focusing on communication and inter-action. In relation to the aspect of change, Rosa and Pievi (2013) acknowledge that semiotics "can offer formal explanations, but cannot explain what fuels change, although it can be helpful in setting the boundaries within which those changes can take place", (ibidem, p. 23). For such explanations the two authors refer to functional reasons that go beyond texts themselves and involve the motivational and affective aspects of human individual and social existence. To some extent, within SRT, this issue is engaged with through the notion of the *project*. A key concept within the Toblerone model, the project, "akin to the experience of a common fate, links [subject 1] and [subject 2] via mutual interests, goals and activities" (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999, p. 170). This direct connection between the production of knowledge and the articulation of

(collective) projects would need to be reflected on further to enrich our understanding of basic acts of signification at different levels.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON SCIENTIFIC RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

An interesting methodological implication formulated by Rosa and Pievi (2013), following their semiotic framework for the analysis of social representations, relates to the claim that social representations are in fact constituted by the scientific discourse produced by people who study them. As a general premise, they are

> a sort of virtual entity that does not present itself as a phenomenon apparent to the senses or the mind; on the contrary, it has to be carefully grasped by applying methodological operations to turn it into communicable scientific forms (Rosa & Pievi, 2013, p. 5).

This is partially correct and equally applicable to most analytical frameworks in psychology, including the basic units referred to in semiotics. Semioticians for example, when identifying a particular structure as an object, sign or interpretant, apply a framework that is foreign to the phenomenon itself and generate new meaning in relation to it. To take the example of the image of Christ, it can represent many things for many people (as it certainly does for instance for someone who is from within or outside of Argentina) but in the target article this image also becomes, additionally, a *text* to be deciphered; an exercise of semiotic analysis, in its unfolding, awards objects the new status of *signs* to be interpreted within a scientific discourse, adding to their original meaning as political manifestos, works of art, etc.

This observation is not meant to suggest the above as a limitation shared by semiotics and social representation as I do not think the authors themselves viewed it as such. It is for both a useful reminder to pay attention to the fact that a scientific presentation of a representational process is, in effect, a re-presentation. A question thus arises regarding the validity of this re-presentation and Rosa and Pievi (2013) argue here for the necessity of "confronting the meanings

elaborated in scientific discourse with the significance of the discourses of agents belonging to the group studied", p.23). We are in full agreement about this point. What I would question though is the assertion that social representations are not to be considered phenomena belonging to the social world itself but exist rather as "constructs" to be elaborated by the researcher" (p. 6), "resulting from methodological operations carried out by researchers in their search for the meanings of the discourses circulating in a social space" (p. 20). To use a semiotic-inspired terminology, social representations as a sign (representamen) employed in the scientific literature do relate to *an actual phenomenon* in the social world (the *object*, e.g. communication between people about issues that are, initially at least, unfamiliar to them). The interpretant of this relationship might be however different, in each case, for a SRT scholar, a cultural psychologist or a lay person. It is an ongoing task for all these actors to coordinate their understandings and, in this respect, the current special issue has made some decisive steps forward in facilitating the dialogue at least between the first two. Engaging broader audiences into this dialogue can very well be our next big challenge.

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