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Andreouli, E. & Sammut, G. (2017). Contemporary cultures and intercultural encounters. In E. Andreouli & S. Taylor (Eds.), *Advancing social psychology* (pp. 149-186). Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Chapter 4: Contemporary cultures and intercultural encounters

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Introduction

This chapter considers what happens when we encounter something new, which may appear strange or different; for example, when we move, migrate, or even when we encounter a new idea. In this chapter, we will discuss such encounters of the modern age. In particular, we will discuss **intercultural encounters**, that is, encounters between people of diverse cultural backgrounds who have different perspectives from each other.

We will focus particularly on some of the ways in which intercultural encounters play out in the context of everyday life. In this chapter, we understand **culture** as part and parcel of everyday life that we are immersed in (see Chapter 3). As opposed to notions of 'high-culture', we are interested in the mundane ways that culture is manifested in everyday practices, particularly in the ways in which people construct common-sense knowledge about the world around them. Encountering different cultures is not something rare happening to people when they travel to 'far-away places'. It is something that takes place in everyday life, as each of us interacts with people of different cultural backgrounds. In these circumstances, as Giddens (1991) aptly notes, no one today can live according to a cultural tradition without knowing at the same time that their practices are one choice amongst other possibilities.

In this context, a number of practices in our contemporary era have been established for the purpose of promoting intercultural ties that aim at facilitating understanding between different cultures. Take for instance the European Union's ERASMUS Plus programme. Originally set up as a student exchange programme within the European Union, it has expanded to 33 countries targeting various schemes including education, training, youth and sport. At the time of writing this chapter, in 2016, the programme was said to command a budget of 14.7 billion euros benefitting millions of users. But, intercultural exchange does not necessarily involve a visit to some other part of the world. Cultural diversity is part and parcel of contemporary societies. The intensification of processes of globalisation and the increase in human mobility mean that cultures are no longer contained in specific places. This becomes particularly evident in large metropoles like London.

With these ideas in mind, the chapter will first discuss how today's societies differ from traditional societies in terms of cultural diversity, and it will reflect on the impact of this in everyday life. We will focus particularly on common-sense knowledge, which is an important element of culture from the everyday perspective adopted in this chapter. We will discuss common-sense knowledge using social representations theory, a key theory in the growing socio-cultural approach in social psychology, which you read about in Chapter 3. We will use some recent conceptual developments of this theoretical approach to explain what happens when people engage in intercultural encounters, that

is, when they encounter different cultural viewpoints or perspectives. We will suggest that while intercultural encounters offer potential for enrichment, they can also create tensions between culturally different communities. Intercultural encounters challenge the "natural, permanent, and inevitable" nature of our own cultural beliefs and practices (Asch, 1987, p. 7). Encountering alternative ways of living brings home the possibility that things could be done differently from what we ourselves are accustomed to, that is, what seemingly works well for us. This possibility constitutes a challenge in itself – if things can be done differently from what we know, they could also possibly be done better, or worse. The chapter will consider this issue of cultural diversity and discuss the possibilities for and barriers to intercultural dialogue.

1 Cultural diversity in modern societies

The distinction between the 'old' and the 'new' has been a common thread running through this book. For example, in Chapter 1 you read about some of the ways in which globalisation and the rise of neoliberal ideology have led to changes in the ways we understand ourselves and the kinds of expectations we have of others. With regards to intercultural encounters, which is the focus of this chapter, a key change that distinguishes contemporary societies from traditional societies (feudal European societies, in this context) is the increase of socio-cultural diversity.

ITQ1: What does diversity mean to you? What are some of the ways in which people may be different from each other?

When you think of diversity, you might often think of ethnic diversity. However, you could also think of other types of diversity – for example, social class, age, nationality, gender, sexuality and religion, among others. We are all members of different communities, each of which gives us a particular position in society and a particular perspective on the world. For example, younger and older people are often said to have different politics, with younger people being seen as more open to minority rights. However, it is not easy to draw clear-cut boundaries between different communities (for example, the 'old' and the 'young'), as the groups with which people are affiliated (such as age, social class, and so on) may overlap and interrelate in various ways. There are many ways in which people are both different and similar to each other. The increasing differentiation of social roles and diversity of worldviews that we find in modern and late modern societies (Giddens, 1991) suggest that processes cultural diversification may be amplified today.

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One can think of many examples where this diversity of viewpoints becomes evident. For instance, it has become common practice to seek advice from different experts when we fall ill. We will most likely consult medical doctors, the most acknowledged experts on matters of health and illness. But we are also likely to seek the help and advice of alternative medicine therapists, such as acupuncturists. In fact, the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK has come to embrace some of these alternative therapies in its official guidelines. For example, for the treatment of 'low mood and depression' the NHS guidelines include, at the time of writing this chapter (2016), meditation alongside more established pharmacological treatments. We can observe therefore the coexistence of different types of knowledge about what illness is and how to treat it, each of which may be used for different purposes or in different contexts. As an overall trend in contemporary societies, knowledge about the world has become more open-ended and more flexible.

A related issue is that the legitimacy of knowledge in the face of alternatives can be more easily disputed. Indeed, one of the impacts of increased diversity is that nowadays there are so many different sources of knowledge that their legitimacy is not given, but can be challenged. Today, it is very common to scrutinise the knowledge that is produced by different institutions, be they the

state and political leaders, religious authorities, and even science. Whereas in traditional feudal societies it was authorities such as the Church that had ultimate power to define 'the truth', in modern societies there are diverse centres of power, so that what counts as legitimate knowledge may be contested by various actors in society (Duveen, 2000).

An example of this 'battle of ideas' (Moscovici, 1998, p. 403) are the social movements of the 60s and 70s as well as more recent social movements (see Figure 1). Social movements, such as the women's movement and the civil rights movement, did not only struggle for legal rights. They also fought a symbolic battle over the meanings of gender and race. They contested dominant understandings of gender and race as biologically determined and advanced a de-essentialised view of social groups, that is, a view that contests the idea that there are natural differences between groups. These social movements illustrate that legitimacy of knowledge is not guaranteed by the power of a single authority but it can be hotly contested. While there may still be dominant and more established 'truths' today (in the form of 'hegemonic representations', as we will show later in the chapter), these 'truths' are more easily challenged than before.

Figure 1. Demonstration for same sex civil unions in Italy. Source: http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/after-the-approval-of-the-bill-cirinn%C3%A0-thousands-of-news-photo/514140870

ITQ 2: Can you think of some other examples where knowledge authorities are contested in contemporary societies?

What we have described so far contrasts with traditional societies (European feudal societies in the context of this chapter), where common-sense knowledge was more solid and based on a single expert authority. Such traditional forms of knowledge can be described using the concept of collective representations developed by the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1898/1996). Collective representations are taken-for-granted forms of knowledge that are uniformly shared by people in a given community. According to Durkheim, they operate like social facts. These are not facts in 'real' terms, but within the community in which they are shared, they have a great deal of power and influence. Through shared collective representations, traditional societies were able to remain relatively uniform and homogeneous in a way that guaranteed their continuity and cohesion. For example, in many traditional societies the existence of god was a social fact, a widely accepted 'truth' that influenced the way these societies operated. Collective representations, such as religious beliefs in traditional societies, are therefore not easily interrogated. Rather, their legitimacy is unquestioned because it stems from a central authority, such the official institutions of the Church.

The transition from tradition to modernity is also characterised by the development of mass communication (Duveen, 2000). Newspapers have been considered the prime example of such mass communication in modern societies, but, of course, nowadays we are witnessing a tremendous expansion of communication technologies, particularly online communications, such as social media. This adds to the heterogeneity of knowledge in contemporary societies. With easier and much more extended communication between people, there is more opportunity for the diversification of knowledge and for the development of new ideas. As will be shown in the next section, communication is central for understanding how contemporary societies produce systems of common-sense knowledge.

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2 Contemporary cultures and everyday knowledge

In the previous section, you saw that Durkheim's (1898/1996) collective representations can be used as a framework for understanding traditional societies, but they cannot sufficiently explain common-sense knowledge in contemporary societies, because their uniformity does not correspond to the complexity of modern cultures. Following on from this discussion, this section will present the theory of social representations, a theory about the construction and transformation of everyday knowledge in contemporary societies.

2.1 Social representations

Building on the ideas of Durkheim, the social psychologist Serge Moscovici (1984) argued that modern societies construct what he calls 'social' rather than 'collective' representations. This may seem like a minor change in wording, but it signifies an important conceptual shift. By using the term 'social', Moscovici sought to draw attention to the fact that common-sense knowledge is socially constituted and transformed through processes of communication in everyday life. Compared to collective representations, which were conceptualised as facts imposed onto people through the power of tradition, **social representations** are the products of 'thinking societies' where there is argumentation, exchange of ideas and debate. Such processes of argumentation within and between different communities give rise to diversity of worldviews and representations, as discussed in the previous section.

Moscovici himself described the distinction between collective and social representations as follows: "What we wished to emphasize by giving up the word collective was this plurality of representations and their diversity within a group" (Moscovici, 1988, p.219). Contrary to collective representations which are relatively stable and homogeneous, social representations are plural, dynamic and contested, reflecting the modern world in which knowledge is circulated by various centres, none of which has complete authority (Moscovici, 1984). The focus of the theory of social representations is on change, rather than continuity.

As forms of everyday knowledge, social representations are a framework for thinking about the world and they provide a common frame of reference for groups and communities. They constitute the symbolic environment that enables community members to communicate with each other. In a way, social representations are ways of world-making (Moscovici, 1988), because they establish shared social realities for communities. From a socio-cultural perspective (see Chapter 3), social representations can further be seen as the 'stuff' of culture. They are the values, ideas and practices that make up specific cultures (Duveen, 2007).

Social representations can be defined as:

"systems of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing

them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history" (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii).

Therefore, social representations have an instrumental function (mastering the world) and a communicative function (enabling communication within communities that share the same social representations) (Gillespie, 2008).

In order to master the world and cope with the pace of change in contemporary societies, people need to adjust their common-sense and familiarise themselves with unfamiliar concepts or issues. The aim of social representations is to 'make the unfamiliar familiar' (Moscovici, 1984). Put differently, social representations turn this increasingly unfamiliar world into a 'domesticated world' (Wagner, 1998). When new social objects appear in the public domain, people develop new knowledge in order to incorporate these new objects into their common-sense. To take an example, the social representations of infectious diseases, which are transmitted via contact, such as the swine flu and AIDS, allow people to make sense of new and threatening objects. So, alongside the development of medical knowledge about the causes and treatment of such diseases, we also have the development of lay explanations. For instance, when AIDS emerged in the 1980s it was largely attributed to homosexual practices and it was seen as divine punishment for immoral behaviour (Eicher & Bangerter, 2015). Another lay explanation of AIDS, more frequently found among stigmatised minorities, was that it was created by the US government to exterminate minorities (ibid.). In both these lay explanations (there were others too), AIDS was understood as an outgroup problem, thus these social representations served to reduce the threat from a largely unknown and highly dangerous disease.

2.2 Social representations of psychoanalysis

Moscovici's research on the social representations of psychoanalysis constitutes a seminal study in the field of social representations, and it can serve as an example for explaining social representation processes. As you will read about in Chapter 12, psychoanalysis was initially developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis was at the time a ground-breaking and controversial theory. Contrary to the clinical theory and practice of its time, it focused on the notion of the unconscious as the locus of psychological life. Psychoanalysis was also heavily contentious because of its emphasis on sexuality, not only in adult psychology but also in child development. It is not surprising that psychoanalysis was received with much criticism. However, the scientific debates around psychoanalysis are not the focus of this chapter (you will read more about these in Chapter 12). Here, we focus on the ways in which psychoanalysis, as an unfamiliar object, came to be familiarised and became part of everyday culture.

While the details and complexities of psychoanalytic theory remain unfamiliar for most people, most of us do have some understanding of psychoanalysis. In fact, we use this understanding to make sense of people around us in our everyday lives. We may think, for instance, that someone who is very orderly and organised is 'anal' (which is short for 'anal retentive' in psychoanalytic theory). Or, we may think that childhood experiences are particularly important for shaping later relationships. We may even try to interpret our dreams so that we can understand our inner and unconscious desires and fears. We may not realise it, but all these ideas, and many more, originate in psychoanalytic thinking. We have, in other words, constructed social representations of psychoanalysis and we use these as a frame for everyday thinking. This allows us to master the world around us (because we have a frame with which to understand other people and their actions) and communicate with others (because we share this frame with other people) (see Section 2.1).

This was Moscovici's (1961/2008) starting point when he conducted his study on the social representations of psychoanalysis. Moscovici was not interested in whether people were right or wrong in their understandings of psychoanalysis (contrary to much research on **social cognition**; see

Box 1). He was interested in the ways in which this scientific knowledge became appropriated into everyday culture, in a way that allowed people to make sense of their everyday realities.

Box 1: From social cognition to social knowledge

The theory of social representations reflects an alternative approach compared to more mainstream social cognition research in social psychology (Sammut, Andreouli, Gaskell & Valsiner, 2015; Staerklé, 2011). Work within the social cognition tradition seeks to integrate social and cognitive psychology and, therefore, it tends to focus on cognitive processing in relation to social issues (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2014). Because of its focus on individual thinking, social cognition has been criticised for over-emphasising the role of the individual actor in social psychological phenomena. It has also been criticised for discounting the value of common sense and dismissing it as biased and irrational (e.g. work on attribution biases – see Lazard, 2015). The theory of social representations, on the other hand, pays close attention to the social embeddedness of social psychological phenomena. According to the theory, individuals are inextricably embedded in their social, cultural and political contexts. Therefore, the individual and its social context are not seen as separate entities, but as inherently interconnected (Marková, 2000). Further, the theory of social representations, taking a more contextual approach to social knowledge, does not assess the validity and truthfulness of common sense but rather, focuses on understanding the functions of this type of knowledge in everyday life – for example enabling people to interpret the behaviour of others, as in the psychoanalysis example.

Moscovici's (1961/2008) study was an exploration of the social representations of psychoanalysis in the French society of the 50s, using survey data and media analysis. The focus of the study was particularly on three communities, the Communist Party, the Catholic Church and the urban-liberal community. In the study, Moscovici found that each of these groups constructed different representations of psychoanalysis. Their different identities and histories shaped the ways that they understood psychoanalysis.

Moscovici paid particular attention to processes of communication. He was interested in the ways in which the types of communication employed in different communities have an impact on the kinds of social representations that are constructed (see Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). Moscovici suggested that the media associated within the urban-liberal community adopted a communicative strategy which he labelled 'diffusion'. This strategy was related to the formation of rather loose opinions about psychoanalysis without taking a rigid stance towards it. On the other hand, the Catholic Church employed a more strategic and goal-oriented communication strategy: propagation. This led to the formation of attitudes that partially accepted psychoanalysis on the terms dictated by the Church. With this type of communication, psychoanalytic ideas that were in line with religious practices (e.g. drawing parallels between confession and psychoanalytic techniques) were accepted, but the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality was rejected. Finally, the communist press at the time adopted a communication strategy that Moscovici described as propaganda. Through propaganda, psychoanalysis was constructed as a tool of the American capitalist ideology which went against the values and ideology of the Communist Party. The representation of psychoanalysis took the form of a stereotype based on the polarisation between the American/capitalist and Soviet/communist ideologies. Through this negative stereotype, psychoanalysis was resisted and rejected by members of this community.

These findings led Moscovici to argue that social representations are inextricably social forms of knowledge. Contrary to other social psychological work on meaning-making (e.g. attribution theory,

attitudes), the theory of social representations suggests that knowledge is constructed through communication, not through individual cognitive processes (see Box 1). Therefore, social representations are 'social' both because they are shared within communities and because they are constructed through social interaction.

2.3 Anchoring and objectification

Social representations are developed through the work of two socio-cognitive mechanisms: **anchoring** and **objectification** (Moscovici, 1984). Through anchoring, new ideas are understood in terms of already existing familiar categories in a given cultural context. Thus, an unfamiliar idea acquires an identity, a set of features that characterises it. Anchoring gives social representations a historical foundation and links them with the identity of a community. For example, in the psychoanalysis study, the communist press anchored psychoanalysis to the ideas of capitalism and class enemies. The Church, on the other hand, anchored psychoanalytic clinical practice to confession because of their common focus on in-depth discussion. Anchoring is therefore a way that social representations connect the past and the present of a community and maintain a degree of continuity between new knowledge and past knowledge.

The second mechanism of knowledge construction is objectification. The process of objectification produces shared symbols and figures through which abstract ideas become concrete and tangible. Objectification may take different forms. Images and metaphors are important ways through which abstract ideas can be concretised and familiarised. For example, the psychoanalytic model of the psyche is commonly represented as an image where the individual psyche is divided in two, the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious is represented as being on top of the unconscious putting pressure on the unconscious beneath it – which then leads to 'repression' that in turn creates 'complexes' (Moscovici, 1984) (see Figure 2).

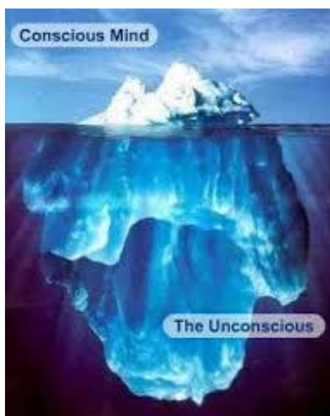

Figure 2. The iceberg metaphor of Freud's model of the psyche.

Through the process of objectification, psychoanalytic abstract concepts, such as 'complex', 'neurosis', 'repression' and many others, have become understood as 'real' traits. In other words, from analytical concepts used to explain psychological processes in psychoanalytic theory, they have come to be regarded as 'real' entities. This objectification of psychoanalytic ideas in everyday culture provides people with a framework with which to understand and relate to each other. Moscovici (1984) notes that through objectification, the gap between representation and reality is bridged; what is represented becomes what exists. For example, it can be argued that the elimination of such

terms (‘complex’, ‘neurosis’ and so on) from our everyday lexicon would fundamentally change the way we see other people.

2.4. Dynamics of stability and change in contemporary cultures

In the previous section you saw that social representations are bound to the communities which construct them. You may be tempted to think that all people within a community would share the same social representations. However, this would over-simplify the complexities of contemporary cultures. While social representations are shared systems of knowledge, they are not consensually adopted by members of social groups. Rather, they constitute common frames of reference towards which groups and individuals may be positioned in different ways. In this theoretical approach, diversity, debate and even conflict between competing views, are central.

Social representations conventionalise the objects that make up our social world, but they are also open to change. On the one hand, they are grounded in the history and tradition of specific cultural traditions, but on the other hand, they can incorporate new cultural elements. Therefore, the social representations theory can allow us to understand both how cultures remain the same across time and also how they change. The theory captures the tensions between change and conventionalisation that we find in contemporary cultures.

This tension between stability and change can be explained in more detail if we distinguish between different types of representations. At one extreme, we have so-called hegemonic representations. These are quite dominant, pervasive and hard to change. Hegemonic representations are not reflected upon: they take the form of relatively unquestioned assumptions about the world. In this way, they resemble Durkheim’s collective representations that we discussed previously.

An example of such hegemonic social representations is the ideology of neoliberalism (Staerklé, 2015). As you saw in Chapter 1, neoliberalism refers to a set of values which promote the logic of the market as the organising principle of society. Neoliberalism incorporates individualism because it emphasises the values of individual control, individual freedom, self-interest and, more generally, the idea that individuals are independent from each other. Neoliberalism can be understood as a hegemonic social representation because it is pervasive in contemporary western cultures. It is part and parcel of our everyday common sense and it permeates all aspects of our lives. For example, it is commonly considered natural that people are self-interested and seek to maximise their own personal gain in social situations. Indeed, much of psychology is based on this assumption of the sovereign individual (see Chapter 2). However, there is nothing natural about individualism. Rather, it is a way of representing the person in western cultures. Indeed, in non-Western cultural traditions, one finds more collectivist representations of the person (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Chapter 3).

Contrary to hegemonic representations, contexts of broader change and debate create the ground for the development of emancipated representations. Compared to hegemonic representations, emancipated representations reflect more heterogeneous contexts whereby different communities construct different representations of the same issue. Different social representations of health and illness, for example based on the biomedical model or on spiritual beliefs, can be understood as emancipated representations. They reflect the diversity of cultural traditions that we find in contemporary societies, but they are not necessarily in direct conflict with one another. Indeed, as we will show in the next section, they may be simultaneously adopted.

Finally, polemical representations are constructed on the basis of antagonistic social relations and tend to be mutually exclusive. Polemical representations are present in contexts of intense controversy. For instance, in British debates about the European Union in the context of the 2016 ‘in/out’ referendum, the European Union is represented in opposing ways. For the ‘in’ camp, the European Union is a source of political stability and economic development; for the ‘out’ camp, on

the other hand, it represents a threat to Britain's political and economic sovereignty. These are polemical representations: they are in conflict to each other and divide public opinion.

The configuration of power and the intergroup dynamics play an important role in which social representations acquire more legitimacy. At the time of writing this chapter, the EU referendum has yet to take place and polls show an equal split between those who want to remain in the EU and those who want to leave. We suggest here that the outcome of the referendum will depend on which representation of Europe becomes more dominant. This, in turn, depends on which social representations are advanced by which social groups. More powerful groups in a society have more authority to produce representations that are considered truthful or legitimate, compared to more marginalised groups (Howarth, Andreouli & Kessi, 2014).

The remainder of the chapter will consider further this diversity of representations within the same society and reflect on the possibilities and barriers to intercultural dialogue in these contexts.

3 Intercultural encounters

Many consider intercultural exchange as an obvious opportunity for enrichment by learning new things and expanding one's horizons. Think, for instance, about what contemporary cultures would be like without intercultural exchange through immigration. For example, in the United States of America, where immigration is seen as part of the national story, diversity is often understood as a source of national pride and as a source of development, entrepreneurialism and creativity. On a more personal level, those of you who have moved to a different country or place, will probably feel that you have gained from this experience; you may have met new people or seen new ways of doing things in a way that enriches your experiences and broadens your perspective.

Yet, whilst the benefits may seem obvious, intercultural exchange is not always unproblematic. Some practices that are the order of the day for some may be actively contested by others. This is evident in much of the history of western colonisation, whereby western powers sought to 'civilise' colonised populations by imposing their cultural traditions, for example, religion.

Intercultural encounters, therefore, offer potential for enrichment, but they may also constitute a cleavage between communities. In the following sections we will explore these issues. Drawing on relevant work from the social representations theory tradition, we will reflect on how different social representations may be combined to produce mixed cultural formations, but also how different social representations can be resisted and rejected. We will discuss, in particular, the issue of the plurality of social representations as well as some more recent work on perspective-taking and intercultural dialogue in contexts of cultural diversity.

3.1 Plurality of social representations

As we briefly discussed in the introduction, intercultural encounters are not only a matter of travelling to 'other' places and meeting 'other' cultures. Although there is still a connection between places and cultures, as some cultural traditions are more commonly found in some parts of the world than in others, cultures have also been separated from physical locations. This is an impact of human mobility and globalisation, which you read about in Chapter 1. For instance, while Mediterranean food can be found more easily in Mediterranean countries, it can also be found in northern countries. Therefore, intercultural encounters are not something we do when we go on holidays or move to a different place. It is a fundamental part of contemporary multicultural societies (see Chapter 5). Taking a socio-cultural approach (see Chapter 3), we understand these encounters as encounters between systems of everyday knowledge, that is, as encounters between diverse social representations. In this chapter, you have already seen many examples of such

intercultural encounters, for instance, in the example of the coexistence of biomedical and spirituality-based representations of health and illness.

This phenomenon of coexisting diverse beliefs in the same social setting or, indeed, in the same individual, is known in social representations theory as **cognitive polyphasia** and it was identified by Moscovici (1961/2008) in his study of the social representations of psychoanalysis in France (see Section 2.2). Moscovici noted how the social representations developed by the Catholic group, the communist group and the liberal group coexisted in France at the time. Whilst these social representations were very different from each other, there was no conflict in French society over which one was 'correct'. Rather, the French public was able to draw on three distinct frameworks in making sense of the new phenomenon of psychoanalysis. As we have seen, the communists represented psychoanalysis as new propaganda serving the interests of the ruling class. The Catholics aligned some tenets of psychoanalysis with the Catholic doctrine and opened thus some space for engagement with certain psychoanalytic notions. The liberals showed a marked openness towards psychoanalysis as a new form of psychological treatment that could benefit some individuals. In this way, the French public could draw on different social representations of psychoanalysis to develop their own understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, cognitive polyphasia can be located both at the societal level (with the existence of diverse representations in a society) and the individual level (with individuals being able to draw on diverse social representations in different contexts).

ITQ3: Can you think of other examples of cognitive polyphasia in contemporary cultures?

So far this chapter has focused on describing how social representations are constructed and how they help people orientate themselves in the social world. An issue that we have not yet addressed are the ways in which, in such conditions of cultural plurality and cognitive polyphasia, different social representations may relate to each other. In other words, are there different manifestations of the phenomenon of cognitive polyphasia? Social psychological research suggests that there are various ways in which different social representations may be combined and relate with each other (see Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2015).

Different social representations may coexist side by side but be called upon separately in different contexts. In this type of cognitive polyphasia, which social representation prevails at a given point in time depends on people's particular needs and interests. For instance, western medicine and alternative medicine are based on distinct explanations for what causes illness. They can be described as distinct social representations of health and illness, as they involve completely different explanations of which human activities foster good health and remedy illness. Whilst distinct, these social representations can co-exist within the same community. In their study of the health beliefs of the Chinese community in England, Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998) demonstrated how the Chinese community in London adopted both conceptions of Western medicine and Chinese medicine in a complementary way. For instance, Chinese people reported using the primary health service in England for access to technology that enabled them to understand their health condition, that is, what illness they may have been suffering from. They then resorted to Chinese principles in their health behaviours to restore good health, even if the understanding of their own health was acquired using Western medical technology (Gervais & Jovchelovitch, 1998, p. 55). Which social representation prevailed, based either on Western medicine or Chinese medicine, depended on whether the individual was looking to diagnose a condition or to restore their health. In this way, both social representations served a purpose. Another example comes from migration studies, which have showed that migrants may draw on different cultural traditions in different domains of their lives (Navas et al., 2005). For example they may draw more on the cultural knowledge of their country of origin when they are at home, where they may interact more with people with whom

they share the same cultural background, while at work they may assimilate more into the mainstream culture of the country where they have settled.

In the examples above, social representations do not mix; they simply coexist. In some cases, however, social representations can be combined to generate a single mixed representation. This would be a case of what is often called 'cultural hybridity' whereby different cultural traditions mix with each other to form more complex cultural formations. This term is often used to describe diasporic communities. In the words of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, "the diaspora experience…is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall, 1990, p. 235, original emphasis).

This form of cognitive polyphasia is also evident in many religious orientations today. Whilst drawing on particular notions of the supernatural, many religions today are nevertheless able to integrate natural accounts for the manifestation of certain phenomena such as those offered by scientists. For instance, the NHS in Britain includes a chaplaincy programme to cater to the spiritual needs of patients. Believers who suffer from some type of illness do not rely on divine intervention alone by praying for a miracle cure. Rather, they use medical knowledge in diagnosing and treating their conditions, and at the same time they may pray for divine inspiration and strength of character. Divine will is understood to be exercised through the hands of the physician. Medical knowledge in this example does not displace religious understandings of health and illness. Rather, the religious and biomedical representations of health and illness may fuse in a way that incorporates both natural and supernatural causes. Similarly, what is often called 'New Age Spirituality' incorporates diverse aspects of different religions creating a mixed social representation of wellbeing. An individual might, for instance, wear a chain with a cross, attend organised religious events and practice some form of meditation or yoga (see Figure 3). Whilst all of these behaviours can be traced back to distinct cultural traditions, they do not seem to be irreconcilable with one another in contemporary social representations of health and wellbeing.

Figure 3. Yoga class. Although yoga is based on eastern religious traditions, it has become very popular in the west.

http://www.istockphoto.com/photo/group-of-people-in-yoga-class-gm503461926-82537603?st=6a7e580

A key issue to consider when thinking about the coexistence of representations in diverse societies is the issue of power. In Section 2.4 we briefly discussed the importance of power dynamics over which social representations become hegemonic while others are marginalised. To use a migration related example again, such conditions of power asymmetry can be found between migrant communities and more dominant cultural majorities. When migrants are pressured to assimilate to the mainstream culture and 'shed' the cultural traditions of their country of origin, in such asymmetric environments, this can lead to a state of cognitive polyphasia whereby majority cultural traditions become the dominant norm while minority traditions are displaced (see also Chapter 5).

In this section you have seen how different social representations can coexist within the same setting. The term 'cognitive polyphasia', initially introduced by Moscovici, describes this phenomenon. You also saw that cognitive polyphasia is not a simple phenomenon of coexistence of distinct social representations in diverse settings. Rather, this section discussed some examples of different ways that social representations may relate to one another – for example, mixing together or displacing one another. Importantly, the way that social representations interrelate depends on the kinds of social relations in which they are embedded. In the following section, we will discuss this issue further by considering how people relate with the perspectives of others, which are based on social representations that differ from their own.

3.2 Perspective-taking in intercultural encounters

Comment [E3]: The chapter is abo social representations but this secti on perspective taking could be read implying different kinds of people (i corresponding to the different perspectives). Please clarify

In the previous section we discussed intercultural encounters in terms of the plurality of social representations in contemporary diverse societies. Considering an individual level of analysis we can explain intercultural encounters using the notion of **perspective taking**. Perspective taking refers to people's ability to comprehend somebody else's outlook from that other person's point of view and use this comprehension as a basis for social relations. You may have encountered this term before, particularly in cognitive and developmental psychology. In this field of research, psychologists have studied what is called 'Theory of mind' (Holliman & Critten, 2015; Hewson, 2015). Theory of mind refers to the human capacity for inferring the mental states of others based on verbal and nonverbal cues that are given out in the course of social interaction. For instance, we might be talking to someone who happens to be in a bad mood. We do not have any objective assessment of the mood of the other person, but we can infer that they might be in a bad mood today because their responses might be snappy. We therefore develop a 'theory' of the mood of the other person (hence *theory* of mind), and we proceed to tailor our own reactions accordingly. For instances, we might refrain from making a joke about the other on this particular day. Perspective taking is an extension of this process and has been introduced in the social sciences by Mead (1934). We do not simply take a guess as to what the other's mental state might be. We are able to understand, more deeply, that our subjective experiences might not correspond to the subjective experiences of others, and vice-versa. Which means that we understand that others do not have access to our own internal mental states, just like we do not have direct access to theirs (Asch, 1987). However, through social interaction, we become able to take the perspective of the other and understand the other's own subjective mental states by imagining what our subjective experiences would be like were we to find ourselves in the other's position. We then become capable of relating with the other on the basis of what we understand their subjective experiences might be in this situation rather than our very own. This is how perspective taking permeates social interaction. For instance, we can understand the satisfaction of winning an Olympic gold medal even though most of will never experience this event directly.

Comment [Office4]: Mead, G.H. (1934). Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviourist. Chicago, IL: University Chicago Press.

Perspective taking, however, is not a seamless process and is prone to misunderstandings. For instance, one could expect that the other might find a particular event gratifying when the corresponding subjective experience for the other might not be so. Such misunderstandings are routinely resolved through communication and dialogue. But these difficulties in understanding the

perspective of the other are compounded in intercultural encounters. This is due to the fact that subjective experiences are framed by one's cultural understanding of an event, in other words, the social representations that one is personally accustomed to. For instance, Sammut, Bauer and Jovchelovitch (in press) demonstrate how one's experience of a queue might be subject to intercultural misunderstandings. In certain cultures, the social representation of a queue is that of a single orderly file of individuals, as is the case in Britain. In other countries, such as certain Mediterranean countries, a triangular queuing arrangement is perceived as orderly – this is how people queue in these countries. Consequently, in a given queuing condition, one individual may perceive order whilst another may perceive disorder, depending on the social representation of queueing that prevails in that individual's own culture. Such misunderstandings may well precipitate discord, as happened in the Daboma Jack incident in Malta in 2015 (see Sammut, Bauer & Jovchelovitch, in press). Mr Jack was racially abused, arrested and prosecuted after he sought to organise a queue at a bus stop in Malta. Witnesses reported that Mr Jack caused an unnecessary commotion as there was no problem to begin with and he should just have taken up his place in the queue – one which Mr Jack did not even perceive. In certain intercultural situations, perspective taking may be very difficult to achieve due to underlying discrepant social representations.

Comment [Office5]: Sammut, G., Bauer, M.W., & Jovchelovitch, S. (in press). Knowledge and experience: Interobjectivity, subjectivity and soc relations. In A. Rosa & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

One study that explored these issues was conducted by Sammut and Gaskell (2010). Sammut and Gaskell conducted a study on religiosity, science and atheism, following a documentary presented by Richard Dawkins, entitled 'The Root of all Evil?', which aired on British television in 2006. The study involved a series of interviews with believers and nonbelievers, carried out in London, which explored respondents' views on religion and its consequences in light of the arguments presented in Dawkins's documentary. Sammut and Gaskell identified three types of perspectives in their study: monological, dialogical and metalogical. These perspectives varied with regards to the extent to which individuals engaged with different social representations and they determined the extent to which perspective-taking could be achieved.

According to the authors, monological perspectives are closed to dialogue with a different position. Monological perspectives do not entertain the alternative perspective at all. The alternative is dismissed as wrong or bad and denigrated on the basis of stereotypical views of the other's perspective. For instance, asked about their views on other people who hold different religious beliefs, a respondent in Sammut and Gaskell's (2010) study replied that: "Ehm, I think maybe they've been taught wrongly, they have been taught the wrong things" (p. 55). In this perspective, we can see how different religions are labelled as wrong. Other religions are seen as simply untrue. Here, difference becomes some sort of deficiency and others' perspectives are not recognised as valid. On the contrary, they are seen as incorrect and in need to be righted in line with the respondent's own perspective.

By contrast, people who hold dialogical perspectives acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative perspectives as long as some fundamental elements of their own perspectives are not violated. In their study, Sammut and Gaskell (2010) report, for instance, that legitimacy to alternative perspectives was granted as long as these were marked by tolerance and non-judgmental attitudes. In a sense, therefore, dialogical perspectives grant alternative perspectives some right to exist even if they are seen as wrong. Unlike monological perspectives, they do not impose their version by dismissing alternatives. Dialogical perspectives allow a degree of co-existence and plurality of beliefs. In Sammut and Gaskell's (2010) study, certain believers reported that religious belief is a good thing and people should be free to believe whatever they want even if they themselves consider it to be wrong. According to respondents demonstrating dialogical perspectives, no one is in a position to correct somebody else's wrong beliefs unless these are harmful to others.

Metalogical perspectives, on the other hand, took the coexistence of diverse beliefs one step further. People who hold metalogical perspectives are open-minded and grant others the possibility that they might be right even if they themselves do not believe it to be so. In these cases, the encounter with an alternative representation serves as an occasion for reflexivity whereby people

may come to question the certainty of their own beliefs. Some respondents in Sammut and Gaskell's (2010) study reported that even if they genuinely believed what they believed, they could actually be wrong, at least from some other perspective. Metalogical perspectives require an understanding that the truth of our beliefs is relative and contingent on different understandings of the world. For instance, asked about one's views concerning the teaching of religion by parents, a respondent who asserted he was atheist replied: "But, I could be wrong, one of these religions could be right […] it's not what I believe but it could be the case" (p. 57). Metalogical perspectives demonstrate what Latour (1999) calls 'relative certainty', by contrast to absolute certainty demonstrated in both monological and dialogical points of view.

To sum up this section, you have seen how people may adopt certain views in monological ways and close themselves off to other alternatives, as opposed to dialogical and metalogical perspectives which are more open to engagement with difference. Similarly, some social representations are hegemonic and do not permit dissent, as opposed to others that are more open and that allow for engagement with alternatives (see Section 2.4). In intercultural encounters, these issues come to the fore as one's way of doing things might not correspond to somebody else's way of doing the same things. Successful perspective-taking requires recognising the legitimacy of other representations, rather than trying to correct or dismiss the other's 'wrong' beliefs. Realising the potential of intercultural encounters, however, is often limited by barriers that discount the other's perspective in an effort to preserve one's own.

3.3 Barriers to intercultural dialogue

In the previous section you saw that adopting monological perspectives leaves no room for engagement with alternatives. Lack of engagement with alternative representations can also be the result of the social representations we may have of others. For instance, stereotyping and stigmatising representations of other groups can lead to the dismissal of their perspectives. Dominant representations of gender provide a useful example. These social representations are long-standing and construct a naturalised dichotomy between men and women in terms of skills, personalities, capabilities and so on (see Chapter 10). Men may commonly be perceived as capable in issues related to work and politics. Women may commonly be perceived as capable in issues related to family and care. These stereotypical representations have been widely challenged over the years and in contemporary Western societies are considered largely offensive. Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that women in Britain did not gain equal voting rights to men until the Representation of the People Act came into force in 1928, that is, less than one hundred years ago. And whilst much has been achieved since, gender equality at the workplace, or in politics, still remains evidently far off.

ITQ4: Can you think of other social representations that stereotype particular groups and limit their participation in society?

Achieving gender equality, or any other form of equality, requires individuals holding stereotypical beliefs about others to 'warm up' to the idea of equality. It requires individuals to understand gender differences not in terms of natural biological differences between the sexes, but in terms of a historical inequality between genders. To frame this along the lines of what we have discussed so far, it requires individuals whose perspectives are embedded in traditional social representations of gender to relate with alternative social representations that, unlike traditional ones, grant equality across gender. As we have seen above, this is not a straightforward affair. Rather than engaging with alternatives they encounter, people may resist alternative views in an effort to retain their own perspectives and to preserve the current state of affairs.

In resisting others' representations, individuals may use rhetorical strategies that block the dialogical potential of intercultural encounters. The rhetorical strategies that individuals use to resist dialogue with alternative social representations are known as **semantic barriers** (Gillespie, 2008). In recent developments of the theory of social representations, semantic barriers are described as strategies that enable individuals to be aware of alternatives and to socially represent these alternatives as somehow lacking or deficient. Essentially, these strategies serve to immunize an individual against 'converting' to a different representation. They block off any interchange between the main representation and an alternative.

Stigma can function as a semantic barrier, as you saw above in relation to gender equality. The social representation of genders as equal can be rejected by stigmatising women as somehow inferior to men. Also, in Moscovici's (1961/2008) study of psychoanalysis, several such examples of semantic barriers can be found (see Gillespie, 2008). For instance, the communist press resisted dialogue with psychoanalysis by stereotyping it as a form of ruling class propaganda. Similarly, the Catholic press resisted dialogical engagement with psychoanalysis by labelling certain elements of psychoanalytic theory, such as its theory of sexuality, as irreverent.

Another way of discounting an alternative representation and impede dialogical engagement is to label that perspective as founded in ignorance (Sammut & Sartawi, 2012). The attribution of ignorance is a semantic barrier that suggests that the other is incapable of understanding the correctness of our own perspective. This might be because the other lacks sufficient knowledge. Or perhaps they believe the wrong things. In any case, the implication is that one does not enter into dialogue with ignorant people. One educates them such that they end up adopting one's own 'correct' interpretation. Sammut and Sartawi (2012) have explored the attribution of ignorance amongst Muslim communities in London. Participants in their study were aware of stigmatising views against them by the wider local community. To avoid this stigma, some participants of the study sought to distance themselves from pejorative labels by excluding what they claimed to be 'radical' perspectives. They achieved this by labelling these other perspectives as ignorant and un-Islamic. Rather than dialogue with different Muslims to resolve discrepant interpretations of Islam, respondents in the study lamented some Muslims' failure to understand the true teachings of Islam. Consequently, they excluded fellow Muslims of a different Islamic orientation and positioned themselves as correct, rightful and legitimate Muslims.

Another semantic barrier involves undermining the motive of the group associated with a particular perspective. This has been shown in two studies on immigration in Greece and Ireland, reported by Gillespie, Kadianaki and O'Sullivan Lago (2012). One of the respondents in this research justified his expressed discomfort with asylum seekers in Ireland by arguing that asylum seekers are criminals on the run who claim asylum in another country to avoid prosecution. The respondent was aware that asylum seekers file a claim for asylum with the host country that needs to be justified. However, drawing on a stigmatising social representation of asylum seekers as criminals, he argued that their claims are excuses and that to avoid facing negative prospects in their country of origin, they would say anything that would permit them to stay. The respondent thus undermined the motive of asylum seekers for legitimate asylum. He argued instead that their claims are a cover-up for evading the law. Another argument the authors report in their study that similarly undermines the motive for asylum is that asylum seekers are only looking to secure generous welfare payments in the host country. These claims served to dismiss dialogical attempts with asylum seekers without a hearing, and they reflect a broader distinction, in public perceptions, between 'legitimate' and 'bogus' asylum seekers. This distinction is very common asylum debates (Andreouli & Dashtipour, 2014), such as during the 2016 refugee crisis (see Figure 4), and it can serve to undermine the motive of asylum seekers and delegitimise their claims to seek asylum.

Figure 4. Refugees arrive on a dinghy on the Greek island of Lesbos, after crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey. Photograph: Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP/Getty Images http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/18/eu-strikes-deal-with-turkey-to-send-back-refugees-from-greece

Evidently, positive intercultural encounters may not be easily achieved where alternative perspectives are not engaged in genuine dialogue. The motivation for the use of semantic barriers is essentially to preserve one's own perspective in the face of challenge. But just as semantic barriers can be used to limit alternative views, they can also be used to silence potentially damaging perspectives. For instance, one way to silence a perspective in our contemporary times is to label it as prejudiced. This is because of the widespread norm against prejudice in Western societies where to be seen as racist is extremely morally reprehensible (Billig et al., 1988). This does not mean that prejudice has been eliminated, rather that people try to present themselves as non-prejudiced. Thus, while not everyone would protest against racism (Figure 5), the vast majority of people would argue that they are not racist. In this context, labelling others as racist can be a way of dismissing their perspective.

Figure 5. Anti-racism rally in Melbourne, Australia, July 2015 http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/anti-racism-activists-chant-slogans-as-anti-islam-news-photo/481195528

In the same study by Gillespie, Kadianaki and O-Sullivan-Lago (2012) on immigrants in Greece and Ireland, the authors report how migrants distinguished between racist and non-racist members of the host society. Respondents argued that they could engage with the latter but not with the former. Migrants used semantic barriers to discount stigmatising views levelled in their regard, and

in doing so forged new dialogical space with those who recognised their legitimate migrant status. Migrants in Gillespie, Kadianaki and O'Sullivan-Lago's (2012) study were able to ward off stigma by attributing it to native Greeks who held anti-immigration attitudes. This allowed them to forge social ties with the majority of Greeks perceived as non-racist, isolating stigmatising views as aberrant and exceptional. Consequently, the respondents of this study were able to participate in social life and relate with mainstream society while disengaging from the part of the population that they saw as racist.

The study of semantic barriers shows how people use rhetorical strategies to silence different perspectives. At times, this is used to limit intercultural. At other times, semantic barriers serve to disengage with some damaging perspectives (as in the racism example above), but at the same time, they can help create conditions for dialogue with perspectives that are non-threatening. So, in a way, preventing dialogue with some groups of people may facilitate dialogue with other groups. Intercultural dialogue is, therefore, not a straightforward and easy process. It involves a complex negotiation of perspectives in a political context where some groups may be stigmatised and silenced while others may enjoy more recognition.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed intercultural encounters in diverse societies using a socio-cultural theoretical framework, mainly the theory of social representations. Using this theoretical framework, we conceptualised culture in terms of everyday practices. We moved away from the idea that culture is synonymous with forms of 'high art'. Instead, we approached culture in the domain of everyday life, focusing, in particular, on everyday common-sense. We also suggested that common-sense has changed greatly in the move from traditional to modern societies. This move can be understood in terms of a shift from collective to social representations. What distinguishes these two types of everyday knowledge is their degree of openness to new ideas. While collective representations are relatively stable, social representations are more open-ended, in a way that allows people to cope with the plurality and unfamiliarity of the contemporary world. As we showed with the example of psychoanalysis, new and 'strange' ideas, such as psychoanalytic concepts, can be incorporated into everyday culture through the construction of social representations. However, we also noted that all social representations are not equally open; rather, more hegemonic representations tend to be more pervasive and harder to change.

In this chapter we also discussed the dynamics of intercultural encounters, that is, encounters between different social representations. You saw, for example, that while contemporary societies are characterised by a plurality of social representations, this does not mean that all these representations are considered equally legitimate. Some representations may mix together to create hybrid forms of culture, while others may be displaced and silenced. The possibility of intercultural dialogue largely depends on processes of social recognition and perspective-taking. It is only when people can recognise an alternative perspective as legitimate that dialogue across cultural difference can take place. With these ideas in mind, we discussed some of the ways that intercultural dialogue is blocked, for example, through stigmatising other groups and, consequently, delegitimising their perspectives.

Finally, in this chapter we also touched upon the role of power for the production of social representations. We argued that in a given sociocultural environment, some representations gain more currency than others due to power asymmetries that exist between social groups. Consequently, the examination of the ways in which representations become dominant or are supressed, as well as the ways in which these power configurations are resisted, emerge as important concerns for social psychologists. These issues of multicultural politics will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

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