

## SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

### Introduction

Drawing on Durkheim's terms collective and individual representations, the concept of social representations (SR) was developed by Serge Moscovici in 1961 in his study of everyday understandings of psychoanalysis in France. In the last 50 years SR has become an established field within social and cultural psychology. As a whole, this research demonstrates that social representations are systems of communication and social influence that constitute the social realities of different groups in society. They serve as the principal means for establishing the shared knowledge, common practices and affiliations that bind social members together (Duveen, 2001) and thereby act to support systems of inclusion and exclusion.

### Definition

In the most common definition, Moscovici (1973) explains that social representations are "A system of values, ideas and practices", that serve (a) to establish a social order that enables individuals to orientate themselves and master the material and social world they live in, and (b) to enable communication among members of a community through a shared code for social exchange and for naming and classifying various aspects of the social world including their individual and group history (p.xiii).

This highlights the primary function of social representations: the purpose of making "something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 24), as is evident in Moscovici's study on psychoanalysis (1961), Jodelet's classic study on social representations of madness (1991) and more recent studies on the public understanding of science (Bauer, Durant and Gaskell, 2002).

Social representations thus enable the achievement of a shared social reality. On the one hand, they are created to conventionalise objects, persons and events by placing them in a familiar context. On the other hand, once established, they serve to influence social behaviour and social identities by imposing themselves in social interaction and limiting socio-cognitive activities.

SR theory allows for the co-existence of competing and contradictory forms of knowledge in one and the same community, culture and individual (Wagner, Duveen, Verma & Themel, 2000). *Cognitive polyphasia* implies that different and potentially incompatible systems of knowledge can co-exist within one social group and can be employed by one and the same individual. In these knowledge encounters, social representations are created and transformed through processes of anchoring and objectification. *Anchoring* is a process of classification which locates the strange or foreign within the familiar. *Objectification* is a process of externalization by which representations are projected outwards into the world through images or propositions (Moscovici, 1984).

## Keywords

Social knowledge, social identity, inter-objectivity, cognitive polyphasia, anchoring, objectification.

## Traditional Debates

An important debate within SR research concerns the relationship between knowledge and practice or action (Marková, 2000). Social representations define what possible responses to certain events within a particular context are seen to be reasonable by different communities (Wagner *et al*, 2000). They describe how a particular response chosen by a particular individual to a particular stimulus is sensible in the conditions in which it has been generated.

Another debate concerns the extent to which representations are collectively shared. The theory has been critiqued on the basis of the presumption that every mind needs to be infiltrated with the same images and explanations to develop a consensual view of reality. Rose *et al*. (1995) argue that social representations are shared but not consensual, meaning that a level of sharedness is involved in a common code for communication, but that social interaction is none-the-less characterized by fragmentation and contradiction.

Finally, Moscovici (1961) distinguished between reified (scientific knowledge) and consensual (common-sense) universes. Howarth (2006) argues that science itself is not asocial, and that the difference between the consensual and the reified points to a process of reification that privilege certain social representations as 'expert knowledge'.

## Critical Debates

Howarth (2006) has argued that SR theory should be understood as a critical theory that is fundamentally about the "battle of ideas" (Moscovici, 1998), the ways in which particular representations defend certain interests and protect certain identities as well as the possibilities for agency, contestation and transformation. Elcherath, Doise and Reicher (2011) demonstrate the ways in which SR research is valuable for political psychology and addresses questions of inter-group conflict, contested ideologies and political agency. As Moscovici asserted it is vitally important to address the politics inherent within social representations as otherwise social researchers will be guilty of the claim that we "calmly ignore social inequalities, political violence, wars, underdevelopment or racial conflict" (Moscovici, 1972, p. 21).

## References

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### Online Resources

Papers on Social Representations: [www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/](http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/)

European PhD programme on Social Representations: [www.europhd.eu](http://www.europhd.eu)