25th International Lab Meeting – 20th Summer School 2014
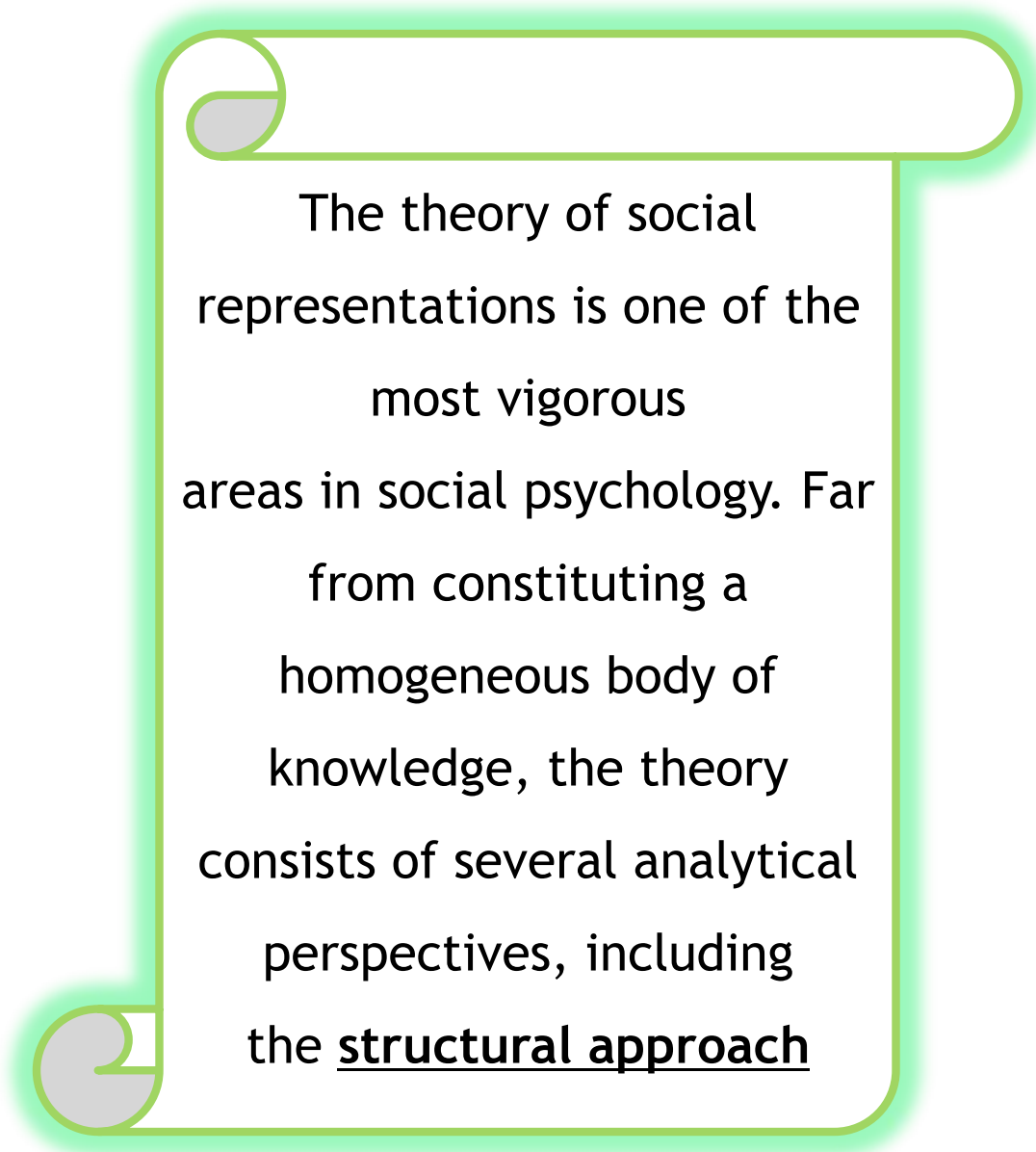## 13th – 19th July 2014, Rome (Italy)

Participants Presentation

Genesis, development and actuality of the Social Representation theory in more than fifty years (1961-2011 and beyond): the main paradigms and the "modelling approach"

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European/International Joint Ph.D.
in Social Representations and Communication

GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE <u>STRUCTURAL PARADIGMATIC APPROACH</u> IN MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY;
MAPPING THEORY, METHODS, THEMATIC AREAS AND APPLICATIONS

The theory of social representations is one of the most vigorous areas in social psychology. Far from constituting a homogeneous body of knowledge, the theory consists of several analytical perspectives, including the **structural approach**

The central core theory of social representations was initially developed by Abric (1976) and then flourished in the south of France with the work of the Midi Group – Aix-en-Provence

Abric used experimental methods to study the role of social representations in a situation of interaction, hypothesizing that the individual's behavior is determined by his/her representation (Abric, 1987 – Phd Thesis)

For Abric (1987), the representation is a 'hierarchical, coherent system organized around a core'

Besides Abric, there are also other authors that contribuited to the distribution and development of the theory. Some of them are: Flament, Guimelli, Rouquette, Moliner, Rateau, Tafani

This approach states that the representation is organized around a central core that gives the representation its meaning.

The core is surrounded by a periphery, the component that mediates between the core and concrete reality.

Central Core

Periphery
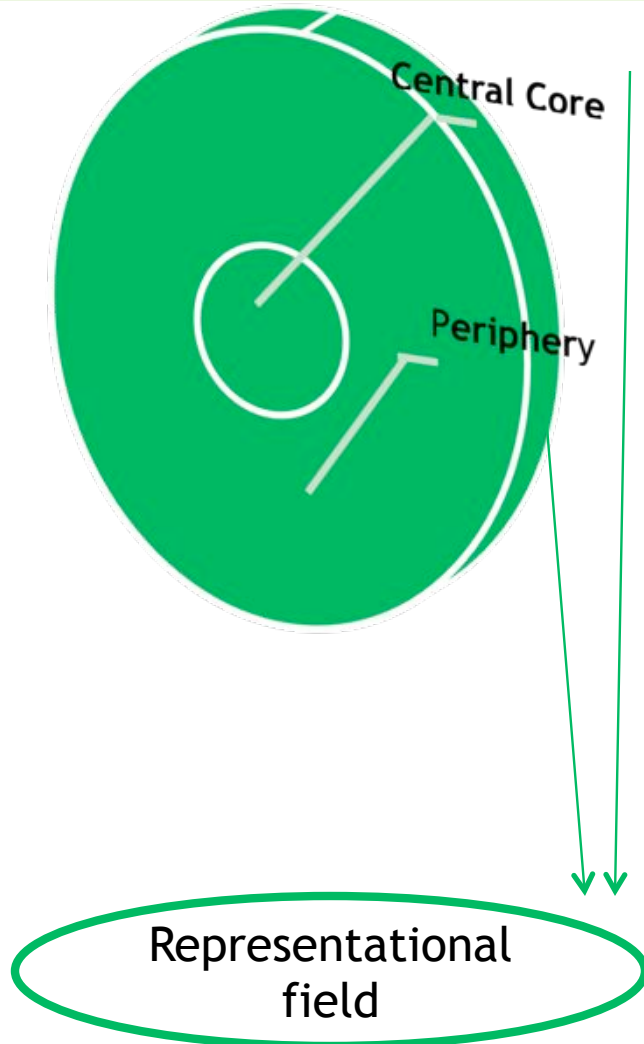
Both subsystems constitute the representational field.

Representational field

Research on social representation should explore the internal organization of representations in order to understand their conformation, functioning and eventual transformation.

CENTRAL CORE (words, metaphors, images, attitudes)	PERIPHERAL ELEMENTS
Is the essential component of a SR because it is he who gives meaning.	They make concrete the core elements
It consists of several elements around which the representations is formed	Sensitive to immediat context
Stable and resistant to change	They are more flexible and protect the core
Apparently, unable to bear contradictions	Are the interface between representation and reality
The modification of core elements entails a complete transformation of the representation	Protects the representation by different mechanisms: making conditional integration of contradictory information or giving new interpretations
Linked to collective memory and the history of the group	Flament: Prescribe behaviours
Consensual – defines the homogenity of the group	Oriented towards adaptation in everyday life
Not very sensitive to immediat context	Permits the integration of the individual experiences and past histories
	Suporting the heterogenity of the group
	Flexible Bears contradictions

Actually, the idea of the components of the structure of SR has come from the interests of theorists in two apparently contradictory characteristics of SR:

SR are both stable and moving, rigid and flexible

Consensual, and yet marked by inter-individual differences at the same time (Abric, 1993)

Central system
and
Peripheral system

The central core has two functions:	Peripheral elements have two essential functions:

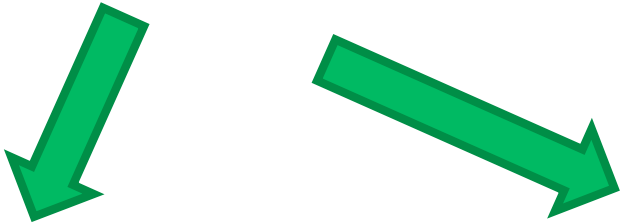| **_Creation_**: Gives meaning to every element of SR	**_Organization_**: Determines the link between the elements	It gives the individual modulation to a representation	It intervenes in the defense and transformation of SR

A major characteristic of the central core is its **salience** – they are the most frequent in discursive productions (they are better recalled than peripheral elements)

Flament (1994b) defined peripheral elements as **schemas**:
a sequence of acts within a situation - are functional because allow us to behave in a particular way in a specific situation (Flament,1989)

He distinguishes between two types of SCHEMAS

`strange schemas`

= In situations where normal schemas do not work, disagreements go directly to the central core, and under an irreversible situation, the representation suffers immediate changes, which is the extreme case. When practices oppose representations in an explicit manner, then the strange schemas appear, making possible the sudden transformation of the representational structure.

'normal schemas'

= peripheral elements indicate very specifically the action to undertake, permitting the representation to function economically without involving the central core

Criteria to distinguish core from periphery include:

salience (more frequent in discursive production)

symbolic value (core elements are essential to the definition of the representation)

associative power (core elements determine the relations between the elements of the representation).

Salience was considered the main aspect in defining the centrality of an element in the representational field.

Contingency

= the central core is composed of absolute prescriptions (unconditional, not negotiable), while the periphery is made up of conditional prescriptions.

Reversibility of the situation

= the perception of a situation as reversible or irreversible affects the transformation of social representations

According to Abric (1993) and Flament (1989), to consider the role of the peripheral elements, it is necessary to refer to two notions:

La ZONE MUETTE (zone mute) de la RS

Representation of "sensitive" objects - cognitions and beliefs that are likely to undermine the moral values or social norms valued by the membership of the subject group.

Representational field of the objects of this type generally includes "zones mutes" (Guimelli, 1998 Guimelli and Deschamps, 2000 Abric, 2003), Deschamps and Guimelli, 2004).

"Zone muette"

= subsets of cognitions or beliefs that are not expressed spontaneously by the subjects in the normal production of responses, mostly because of social pressures, normative order acting on individuals.

I. The subjects "hide" certain areas of the field of representation (these strategies of "hiding" can be exacerbated by the situation in which subjects are - Flament, Guimelli, Abric, 2006).

II. In other situations, these strategies can be revealed.

This is called strategy of "unmasking". They lead the subject to reveal some or all of these areas of mute zone.

These strategies can be highlighted by changing the instructions (situation "normal" vs. "substitution").

"*normal*" situation:
asks the personal opinion of the subject

"*substitution*" situation:

subjects are asked to give the answers to their own group membership (ex., as would "the French in general"; Ex. Guimelli et Deschamps, 2000 - gypsies)

Research techniques of the zone mute:

Principle: Reducing normative pressure

Two possible ways:

1. Reduce the level of involvement of the subject: technique of substitution

a. respond on his own name
b. respond on the name of others

2. Reduce the weight of the normative context (change context) technique of normative decontextualization:

a. Responses in "normal" context (talk with a member of my group reference)

b. Responses in "decontextualization"(talk to someone who is not part of my group - who does not share the same value)

Methods for obtaining the content of SR

1. Interrogative methods:

   a. interview (method very important– production of discourse)

   b. questionnaire (more standardized, quantitative data)

   c. inductive boards (planches inductrices) – drawings made by researchers illustrating the theme/object of discussion and the subjects have to talk freely about what they think

   d. drawings and graphic supports (graphic drawings made by the subjects – children)

   e. monographic approach (combination of participant observation, documents research, history, conversation with the subjects etc.)

2. Associative methods:

a. free association (subjects receive a word and they have to say all the things that cross their mind when they hear it – frequency and rang (importance of item)

b. associative map:

- free association
- free association of each pair of word formed previously

Methods of finding the organization and structure of SR

I. Methods of finding the connexions between the elements of a RS

1. **Construction of pairs of words** (starting from free association, using the interview the researcher can see the types of relations used by the subject in making the association- similarity of sense, contrast etc.)

2. **Comparison in pairs** (the researcher proposes to the subject all the pairs possible from a corpus of themes and the subject has to put each pair on a scale and to say how similar they are)

3. **Construction of sets of words** (the subject receives words and he has to regroup in sets the terms by putting them in sets that seem to match, then he has to explain the reasons behind his choice – we find semantic structures of SR)

II. Methods of ranking the items

1. Successive ranking (the researcher applies free association on a group of subjects, then the items most frequent are taken into consideration – 32, then these items are presented the second time to the subjects and this time they have to categorize each item according to 2 criteria: 16 items that are the most and the least characteristic for the studied object.
   For the 16 items considered more characteristic, the procedure repeats...
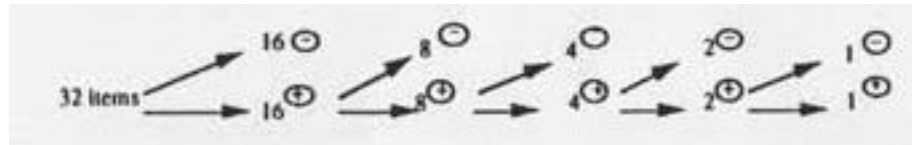
2. Successive choices in blocks:

20 items : 4 – most important +2
          4 – less important -2
          4 ------------------- +1
          4............................ - 1
          4............................ 0

1. Method for revealing the central nucleus

- It is presented a text inductor that corresponds to the subjects R of the object discussed. Then for controlling the centrality, we give a new information to the subject related to the studied object and we ask the subject if, taking into account the new piece of information, he has changed his representation of the object (ex. They presented a good group, then they introduced the presence of a leader) - in this way "the absence of a rank, hierarchy" is studied

2. The method of ambiguous scenario

- It is proposed an ambiguous scenario of the object represented -not positive, nor negative, so the subject interprets the facts according to his representation of the object

3. Basic Cognitive Schemas

We have a group of items – from previous free association – and then we study the types of relations between the word from the list of relationship operators, defined and formalized, theses operators being organized in families called SCB.
- contribution: possibility of understanding the different logical roles that elements perform within the structure:

28 connectors: - Guimelli & Rouquette : 5 SCB: lexical, neighborhood, composition, praxis, attribution

        - Rateau: 3 SCB: description, praxis, evaluation

For Abric (1994b), the royal road to the study of social representations is the monographic approach, which, inspired by anthropological methods, combines ethnographic techniques with sociological surveys, historical analysis and direct observation of behaviors and interactions.

Also, Abric talks about the necessity of using

multi-methodological approach, which is very important

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