

**26th International Lab Meeting – Winter Session 2015
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Key Lecture

Advanced Training in the meta-theoretical analysis
of the specialised literature on
Social Representations and Communication



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

Multiple representational objects:
focus and methods of body-
related research studies in the
Impact-Factor (ISI) literature

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“Political” background

- ISI Impact Factor journals – increased weight in the academic world
- Scholars adapt their manuscripts not only to the journal formatting requirements, but also to its paradigmatic preferences

Research questions

- How is the SR approach employed in the IF studies? – in terms of
 - Research methodology
 - Theoretical comprehensiveness
 - Scientific benefits in comparison to other approaches

Research approach

- Normative approach on these papers, by comparing their use of the SR theory with its “official” guidelines presented in the papers that have developed the theory
- The dilution of the SR epistemic principles in the IF literature

Methodology

- Specific area: body-related objects of investigation
- Meta-analysis of the SR-related ISI papers in 4 scientific databases: Sage, Wiley, Sciencedirect, ProQuest

Selection criteria

- IF journals
- Articles presenting empirical studies or discussing sets of previously reported empirical studies
- aimed at investigating SR of a body-related object: health, illness, organ donation, appearance

Results

- 30 papers
- Range: 1997 to 2014

Topics

- Specific illnesses (other than AIDS): 7
- AIDS: 6
- Health and illness (in general): 6
- Organ donation and transplantation: 5
- Pain: 2
- Sexuality: 2
- Breastfeeding: 1
- Body aging: 1

Data collection approach – most frequent

- Media studies: 7
- Studies on population samples:
- Interviews: 9
- Questionnaires: 4
- Focus-groups: 2

Most frequent journals

- Journal of Health Psychology (IF 1.82) 7 papers
- Social Science and Medicine (2.56) 7 papers
- British Journal of Social Psychology (IF 1.50) 2 papers
- Journal of Applied Social Psychology (IF 0.74) 2 papers
- Social Science Information (IF 0.59) 2 papers

Authors

- For most authors, their SR studies constitute a minority of their publication list
- One exception: Joffe, H.
- For instance: Joffe, H. (2002).
Representations of health risks: What social psychology can offer health promotion. *Health Education Journal*, 6(2). IF 0.69

Authors

- The others: more affiliated to the topic than to a specific theory
- The SR paradigm – employed along others due to its perceived benefits

Qualitative analysis

- Qualitative analysis of these studies in each of the 2 categories: Media studies & Studies on population samples

A. Media studies

- General tendency: SR as a general framework accommodating several concepts (media frames, attitudes, beliefs etc.) and layers: mass media and the public
- SR – theoretical background which allows for a coherent explanation of the influences of mass media on the public

A. Media studies

- SR used as a theory of the media social influence, in 2 steps
 1. media creates frames of the social objects depicted
 2. these frames form the foundation of intrapersonal attitudes about the phenomenon

A. Media studies

- Illustration: Joffe & Haarhoff (2002, Social Science and Medicine, IF 2.56)
- SR of Ebola in UK; 48 broadsheet and tabloid articles + 50 interviews with their readers
- associations between the content of media and the lay representations

BUT this approach:

1. implies a linear causality from the media content to the public SRs and further to people's behavior
- The audience is framed as passive receptors
 - This contradicts one of the basic tenets of the SR theory: there is no one-way social influence, from the stimulus to the behavioral response
 - The SR comprises both the stimulus and the response (the cognitive representations of the object and the social practices relevant to it)

BUT this approach:

2. it's not the actual SR under empirical scrutiny, but the low-level reactions to the object after the media exposure
- Low-level reactions: attitudes, beliefs (in terms of their valence and / or degree of correctness), emotions, motivations, behaviors.

Illustration

- Morgan et al. (2009, Journal of Communication, IF 2.08)
- General hypothesis: media narratives on organ donation (in TV episodes – House, Grey’s Anatomy, etc.) influence the recipients’ *knowledge and motivations* concerning organ donation (*willingness to donate*)
- these narratives perpetuate myths on organ transplantation (black market, reversibility of

BUT this approach:

3. the public is framed as composed of fragmented receivers with no communication among them
- The social dimension of the SR is ignored

- Although in the organ donation area, this dimension was explicitly highlighted
- Morgan (2009, Communication Theory IF 1.04): the social dimension of SR is the key moderating factor of the efficiency of organ donation campaigns
- “campaigns should include strategies to provoke *interpersonal communication* about the topic as a means of creating SRs that promote behaviors that support public health”

- the SR approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the mutual influences between mass media and the public
- The SR is the product of media coverage, individual attitudes and cognitions, and interpersonal communication
 - they combine to create a “*perfect storm*” (the SR) that shapes future collective behaviors

B. studies on population samples

Uses of the SR approach

1. looking for the pattern of content of the public response or reactions to an object
- building on the familiarization function of SRs
 - some explicitly deal with the objectification and anchoring processes

Illustration

- Moloney & Walker 2000, Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, IF 0.54 – the genesis of the SR of organ transplantation
- objectification: Dr. Christian Bernard (1967)
- anchoring – network of meaning associated with the medical profession

- generally, the SR-centered investigation – the first approach on a novel topic;
- further studies build on these results in order to aim more specific psychological phenomena
- multi-stage approach; the initial, SR-centered study informs the decisions concerning the following investigations

BUT in this approach

- in some studies, it's not the SR that is actually investigated, but the individual reactions to the SR object on one or two layers
- Low-level reactions: attitudes, beliefs (in terms of their valence and / or degree of correctness), emotions, motivations, behaviors.

Illustration

- Goodwin et al., 2004, Journal of Health Psychology, IF 1.82 – AIDS in Eastern Europe; SR = correct / incorrect knowledge on the topic

BUT in this approach

- Another deformation of the SR approach in looking for patterns of public response: SR studies as an “opinion survey” – collecting and classifying beliefs about the topic
- medical journals – superficial assimilation of the SR theory

Illustration

- Cedraschi et al., 1997 - Arthritis & Rheumatology IF 7.87
- the impact of a back pain primary prevention program on the participants' SRs of back pain
- method of investigating RS: open-ended questions: "For what reasons can one suffer from backache?"

- cognitive representations, no connections with the social dimension (context, communication, identity)
- this cognitive approach on the SRs doesn't deal with the variations in participants' representations and the socio-cultural factors that generate these variations
 - but high impact factor journals – reinforcing this misuse of the SR paradigm

The SR perspective as a mean to otherwise unattainable ends

2. the exploratory approach - the investigation of an unstructured reality
 - The SR perspective allows for the categorization of results at various layers – cognitions, attitudes, needs, emotions

2. the exploratory approach

- The SR perspective chosen as a loose theoretical framework
- The researcher is interested in an ideographic approach, generating narrow subtypes

Illustration

- Flick (2000, Journal of Health Psychology, IF 1.82) – interviews aiming to reveal the health concepts of nurses and clerks
- Questions: What is ‘health’ for you? / In your opinion, who should be responsible for your health? / Please tell me how your day went yesterday and when the topic health played a role in it.

Illustration

- Results:
- Health conceptions: Health in a vacuum / Reserve of health / Health as lifestyle / Equilibrium
- Illness conceptions: Illness as destructive / Illness as liberator / Illness as occupation

The SR perspective as a mean to otherwise unattainable ends

3. greater access to participants' psychological intimacy (qualitative approach – interviews, drawings)
 - “more open” instruments, that give participants the freedom needed in order to express their more intimate reactions

Illustration

- Aikins, 2003 (Journal of Health Psychology, IF 1.82)
- *Content and sources of knowledge on diabetes*
 - Five causal theories of diabetes: sugar, hereditary, physiology, poor quality foods and sorcery
- *Biographical disruption and meanings ascribed-*
Diabetes disrupted five interrelated dimensions of everyday life: body-self (the inter-relationship between the physical and psychological body), social identity, personal agency, economic circumstance and nutrition

**Further scientific benefits of the SR
theory – in the studies on the SR of
organ donation**

Organ donation – further benefits

4. explaining empirical contradictions above the classical individualistic approaches
 - The dominant approach in explaining individual body-related behaviors: the theory of planned behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975): behavior is a function of attitude and perceived norms

- In the organ donation area, this approach is frequently useless, as it can't explain the contradictions between behavior and attitudes
 - between statistics (low organ donation rates) and the declarative layer (positive attitudes)
- RS – employed as a more subtle tool in order to advance the understanding of the true underpinnings of organ donation behavior and the efficiency of mass campaigns

Organ donation – further benefits

5. RS allows for the extraction of opposing frameworks of meaning and the understanding of the nature of such dialecticism
- Any SR can accommodate contradiction and debate

- Thinking in oppositions, or antinomies, is part of cultural socialization; “what is long is referenced by what is short, what is day by what is night” (Markova, 2000)
- The “themata” of all SRs consists of mutually interdependent taxonomies (Markova, 2000)

- such a contradiction can stem from the opposition between the *normative* and *functional* dimensions of the SR (Guimelli, 1998)
- The *normative* dimension - linked to the values, norms or stereotypes of the group to which the representation pertains, and allows evaluative judgments to be made about the social object.
- The *functional* dimension - the instrumental relations that individuals maintain with the social object, related to their social practices

- In the organ donation arena, the contradiction is inherent: life / death (organ donor – organ receiver)
- Each pertain to a different dimension of the SR of organ donation

- Normative positive response to organ donation: noble idea, worthwhile altruistic act – defined in terms of values and societal outcomes
- Functional response - qualifiers of the normative response: fear about brain death, disfigurement, trade in human organs; the role of the medical profession

- This functional response reflects the personal relation of the individual (organ donation is completely positive, unless it becomes a personal matter)
- organ donation and transplantation are *located within the medical world, and the emotive outcomes of this to the donor and the donor's family*

- Moloney and Walker (2000, 2002, 2005): the SR of organ donation and transplantation (at least in Western Australia) is centered around conflicting images of a ‘gift of life’ and the ‘mechanistic removal and replacement of body parts’

Conclusions

In part of the IF studies, the SR approach is applied in a biased manner:

- Oversimplification
- Disregard for its theoretical complexity
- Apparent scientific legitimization of a superficial approach on the topic
- Altering its epistemic principles: linear causality, SR as a collection of opinions

Conclusions

- When used properly – distinct added values compared to other approaches:
- Exploratory freedom and depth of understanding
- More complex and valid explanations of behavior

Conclusions

Conditions:

- Scholars willing to invest effort in understanding the theory
- Topics that cannot be resolved through the classical psycho-social approaches