



European/International Joint PhD in Social Representations and Communication International Lab Meeting - Spring Session 2015



European Commission REA-Research Executive Agency
FP7 - PEOPLE Initial Training Networks
So.Re.Com. Joint-IDP
(PITN-GA-2013-607279)



Funded by the European Union

The “Anthropological”, “Narrative”, “Dialogical” and “Subjective” paradigmatic approaches to Social Representations

at the European/International Joint PhD in Social Representations & Communication
Research Center and Multimedia LAB

26th - 29th April 2015



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Anthropological approach to SRT

Martha de Alba
Department of Sociology
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana - Iztapalapa

From an epistemological point of view, SRT has had an anthropological approach since the beginning, when Moscovici published his *Psychoanalysis, its image and its public*, in 1961.

In several papers (1993; 1998; 2001; Moscovici and Markova, 1998), Moscovici has announced his intention to focus on the study of social representations and communication phenomena, in order to create a sort of anthropology of contemporary world.

In his chapter *The history and actuality of SR*, Moscovici (2001) defines a social representation as “a certain recurrent and comprehensive model of images, beliefs and symbolic behaviors. [...] **Statically**, representations appear similar to theories which order around a theme a series of propositions which enables things or persons to be classified, their characters described, their feelings and actions to be explained and so on. Further, the ‘theory’ contains a series of examples which illustrate concretely the values which introduce a hierarchy and their corresponding models of action. [...] From a **dynamic** point of view, social representations appear as a ‘network’ of ideas, metaphors and images, more or less loosely tied together, and therefore more mobile and fluid than theories. [...] Representations are social, insofar as they are a psychological fact, in three ways: they have an impersonal aspect, in the sense of belonging to everyone; they are the representation of others, belonging to other people or to another group; and they are a personal representation, felt affectively to belong to the ego. [...] They] are formed with the double aim of acting and evaluating.” (2001, p. 243-244)

SRT assumes some principles: “the primacy of representations or beliefs, the social origin of perceptions and beliefs, and the causal and sometimes constraining role of these representations and beliefs” (Moscovici, 2001, p. 217). We can find the roots of his theory in the Works of Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky and Luria; and the details of SRT in Moscovici’s large production.

Here I will focus on cultural aspects of SR to develop an anthropological approach.

Moscovici considers that social psychology must cross the borders of its discipline to connect more with sociology and anthropology, if we really want to understand the complexity of our cultural world. His theoretic concerns are not only about the

relation person and society, but mainly about the way cultures recreates in this relationship.

Moscovici establishes the bases, and the research program, of a cultural psychology or anthropology of contemporary world in his speech entitled *Razón y culturas*, pronounced when he received the mention Doctor *Honoris Causa* from University of Sevilla in 1993. I will resume my reading of this paper, originally in Spanish and edited in French some years ago.

In this text, culture becomes the central object of research, because, according to Moscovici, after the Second World War societies have been facing a crisis of supreme values capable of reinforcing social ties. Culture provides such social values and supreme concepts that “guide the spiritual existence of each society” (Moscovici refers to Simmel in this quotation).

“In other words, what societies think of their ways of living, the meanings which they attach to their institutions and the images which they share are a necessary part of their reality, and not simply a reflection of it.” (Moscovici, 2001, p. 214)

Moscovici observes that in modern societies two forms of thinking coexist: one based on knowledge, other based on beliefs. Since Descartes, popular beliefs, common sense and traditional customs had been seen as mental errors.

Nevertheless, Durkheim had shown that symbolic forms of thinking (collective representations) such as religious beliefs, magical thinking or myths are the source of civilization. Culture, through its beliefs and rituals, drives the development of societies, articulating individual actions, giving them notions to name and understand their world. Social life and its collective representations are the basis of complex ways of thinking, such as science.

Following Durkheim, Moscovici proposes that we do not form a society based on negotiation and agreement because we are capable of reasoning; on the contrary, we are capable of reasoning because we live in society. Beliefs are not irrational, they have their own logic and meaning in each social and historic context.

Durkheim vindicates cultural beliefs as important for society as rational thinking. He establishes that all human beings have a similar rationality that makes them capable of creating collective representations. Those CR depend on their specific culture, time and situation. Durkheim also presupposes an evolution of rationality in human beings similar to the progress of societies, which goes from simple representations (religions) to complex representations of science.

Moscovici argues that Durkheim’s proposition creates a paradox: how to explain this common or universal rationality, establishing at the same time that CR depend on specific social and historic context.

According to Moscovici, anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl solves this paradox adopting a new point of view for studying collective representations: He considers that individuals from other cultures think different than Occidental individuals; that there is not a common rationality. He proposes to suspend our mental categories in order to search social representations that are original and specific to a certain culture. Moscovici (2001) underlines some important aspects of Lévy Bruhl's collective representations:

1. They have a holistic character: "the semantic content of each idea and of each belief depends on its connections with the other beliefs or ideas" (2001, p. 222). Taken isolated, a belief can appear irrational, but it takes sense when it is related to the whole system or pattern of ideas and behaviors.
2. They are intellectual and emotional: "We should not hesitate to treat representations as intellectual constructions of thought, while relating them to the collective emotions which accompany them or which they arose" (2001, p. 222).
3. CR are not a reflection of reality or society, but the texture of them. In order to discover their efficacy and their meaning, we better search CR in trivial aspects of language and behavior. We have a Spanish proverb that says: "entre broma y broma, la verdad se asoma", it means that when we make jokes, our beliefs arise, getting out of our control.

Lévy Bruhl defends the idea that each cultural group has similar intellectual capacities, but they are developed according to the specific logic and rationality of each particular culture. This rational criteria appears in the rules of language, of institutions and in the social representation of each culture.

Moscovici agrees with Lévy Bruhl about the idea that some social representations are based on beliefs (traditional thinking) and others are based on knowledge (modern thinking following non-contradiction principle). Nevertheless, he refuses Lévy Bruhl's intention to demonstrate that traditional cultures are less civilized because they make less use of non-contradiction principle. Moscovici argues that all kind of beliefs (primitive or not) accommodates to contradictions. So there is not evolution from primitive to civilized thinking.

Up to this point, CR appears to be an appropriate concept to study the sense and meaning that each culture creates through CR socially elaborated along its history. Nevertheless, Moscovici observes in CR problem of incommunicability, because it leads to a social solipsism: one culture, one representation. If each culture has its specific, contextualized and historic representations, how do cultural groups manage to communicate between them?

In order to overtake this incommunicability, Moscovici proposes to study social representations of cultures that are part of a society, our society. Instead of studying how natives think in other societies (as traditional anthropologists did), trying to understand, indirectly, how *our* natives think, he suggests to study differences and

similarities on SR of cultures belonging to the same society. It is important to follow the transformations of SR of these cultures to observe transformations in society and general culture. SRT considers also their contexts of communication.

Moscovici proposes that different cultures are able to communicate if they share similar representations. Different cultural groups keep together in the same social universe because they share common sense, beliefs, ideas taken for granted, that make possible every day communication and action. Social representations that coexist in public space are articulated by images and languages.

In fact, SR distinguish by two different process of communication:

Public representations, says Moscovici, are elaborated in the course of every day conversations, that follow the logic of natural language. They rely on the faith and trust in that reality that is taken for granted. We do not question the social basis of our behavior and beliefs in every day life.

Other kind of social representations correspond to symbolic systems elaborated by specific groups, such as religious representations, scientific theories or ideologies. They are communicated by specialized techniques, rituals and rules that materialize messages in codified discourses.

Both kind of SR coexist in persons and groups. For instance, a biologist can use specialized knowledge in his scientific community, but he guides by common sense in other contexts of his life. He can be accustomed to read his horoscope every morning.

It cannot be denied that modern societies gave primacy to rational and scientific representations over common sense. Postmodern society questions such a primacy.

Moscovici suggests that to understand our contemporary society we should substitute the principle "one culture, one representation", by another that overtakes the incommunicability problem: "one culture, two rationalities". He defines culture as a "set of representations and communications". As a universe where different people and groups (the in-group and the out-group) are together because they share representations.

Culture is not static or homogeneous, it is dynamic. That is the reason why Moscovici suggests to study the process of elaboration of cultures: how people elaborate their culture, dominate it or resist it. He proposes a research project that guide SRT towards three aspects of cultures: their reflexivity, their invention and their consolidation.

Reflexivity of cultures

Instead of consider culture as a set of rules controlling social life, Moscovici propose to consider it as a “space of reflexivity on relationships and modalities of common life shared by individuals” (p. 38).

Reflexivity is the set of ideas or beliefs that give sense to our relationship with others, that help to define the in-group and out-group identity. Social representation of others, of different groups integrating a society, have been constructed along history, they have to be studied in context and historicity. Moscovici says: “any culture has a shared representation of people belonging to it. Each social category is portrayed as a character of a play, of a script, who speaks certain language, has a certain way of living, has certain beliefs, myths, etc.” (p. 40). The ties that keep people together depend on the reflexivity that gives meaning to themselves and to their existence. In some cultures, some scripts and characters become visible or invisible.

As an example of reflexivity, Moscovici suggests to study discrimination, or reflexivity in general, as a phenomenon of social representation that one group elaborates about another, in a certain context and a moment of history. Is a complex cultural phenomena not enough explained by concepts like stereotype or prejudice, that reduce discrimination to irrationality that can be overtaken by information. We should ask: “How do we represent other cultures? How do we define other culture or group inside our own culture? Does this representation drive to a feeling of self-satisfaction, hostility or despise of that group?” (p. 42).

The invention of cultures

Moscovici proposes to study the model of social representations and practices of cultures that fight to gain identity and rights inside a society. Is the case of many minorities (ethnic groups or social categories) that project a possible world that respects social ties, values and civil rights.

The new cultural landscape of contemporary societies takes two directions: being multi-cultural (minorities that recycle and incorporate elements of the same culture) or pluri-cultural (groups propose a new structure, including nations, classes or minorities where they can insert and find visibility).

Multi-cultural direction emphasize recognition of social movements based on sex, ethnicity or language. Each movement represents a germ of culture that will develop inside the general culture including them. They create a sort of “sub-cultures” that share representations about their origins and their projects. In that sense we can talk about “youth ethnicity” (urban tribes), “sex ethnicity” (gay community, feminist groups), or afro-american movement at USA.

Pluri-cultural direction can be applied to cultural landscapes where groups create a network of economic, politic or communication relationships that keeps them together without menacing their cultural specificity and history. European Economic Community is an example of “pluri-culturalism”. We can also observe this movement

in countries where regions vindicate their cultural independence, like Belgium or Spain.

The consolidation of cultures

A study of culture in contemporary societies should include all kind of cultural productions, like common sense, art and science altogether, considering that mass media are diminishing their frontiers. Cultural consumption is bigger than ever at this moment, when art, literature, music are easily diffused thanks to technological development.

To understand our culture we should analyze documentaries, photography essays, television programs, music interpretations, secular myths, paintings, literature, and other cultural productions.

To conclude his conference, Moscovici invites us to research on specific cultures, expressed in concrete situations, historically contextualized.

Methods for an anthropology of contemporary world

Moscovici's *Psychoanalysis, its image and public* (1961) constitutes an excellent guide to approach SR in all their complexity and historicity. Using diverse methods (questionnaires, interviews, press analysis) the author demonstrates how scientific knowledge (psychoanalysis as an expression of modern culture) becomes part of the post-scientific common sense shared by different groups of French society.

But, I suppose that for PhD students of SR and Communication, this work is well known and I will not enter in more detail about it here. I prefer to present Jodelet's research about SR of madness in a French rural community. The reason is that this work is recognized as one of the first and most important research adopting an anthropological approach in SR field.

Jodelet (2000) suggests that this approach requires special attention on the construction of the research subject. We should observe the natural and spontaneous manifestation of social phenomena. "Only the sensitivity to natural development of actions and to its spontaneous styles of expression, can allow us to catch social representations, which are complex systems of beliefs, of ideas, of attitudes, of values and knowledge, that make possible transactions with others and the general world" (Jodelet, 2000, p. 130).

This author recommends qualitative methods to observe the cultural and social complexity of our subject of research: participative observation, informal verbal exchanges, conversations, open interviews, observations of practices, etc.

In her research about madness, Jodelet (1989) observes how SR of madness explain relationships that different groups of a rural community entertain with mental patients living with families belonging to that community.

In terms of Moscovici's research program for a cultural psychology, we should say that Jodelet's case study relates with reflexivity of cultures, because she observes how a community elaborates a relationship with others; how SR of madness guides relations with mental patients that form a particular group inside a specific culture.

The case study was a French rural community that had hosted mental patients for decades (since 1990), in the context of an alternative medical treatment of mental illness outside psychiatric hospital. The idea was that mental patients would feel better integrated to families of a rural community.

Host families received a pension and were supposed to receive mental patients inside their home. A medical center was built in the village for treatment and administration of the psychiatric program.

Jodelet made systematic observations in the community during four years (1970-1974). She studied SR of madness and practices related to them, focusing on the principal actors of this social-medical system: hospital, patients and local population.

The methodological procedure was pluri-disciplinary and multi-methodological:

1. Participative observation: during 4 years to collect data about relationships with mental patients in public spaces, collective spaces (churches, bars, etc.) and private spaces (houses and places of work).
2. Historic reconstruction of the psychiatric institution integrated in the community: documentary analysis to observe representations and practices related to mental patients and the local population along time.
3. Interviews with a representative sample of the hospital personnel: about organization and operation of the medical system in the community, opinions about its efficacy. Nurses visiting host houses became key informants.
4. Questionnaires: collect information about host houses (493 houses), caregivers (housekeepers in most cases) and patients (1,195 patients).
5. Interviews with 65 caregivers: method going from particular to general issues: narratives about patients, everyday life at home, and madness in general terms.

Combination of different methods allowed Jodelet to observe a complex social phenomenon like madness and social relationships with it. Discrimination and fear of madness and mental patients arose in subtle behaviors, intimate practices, details of everyday life in public and private spaces.