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

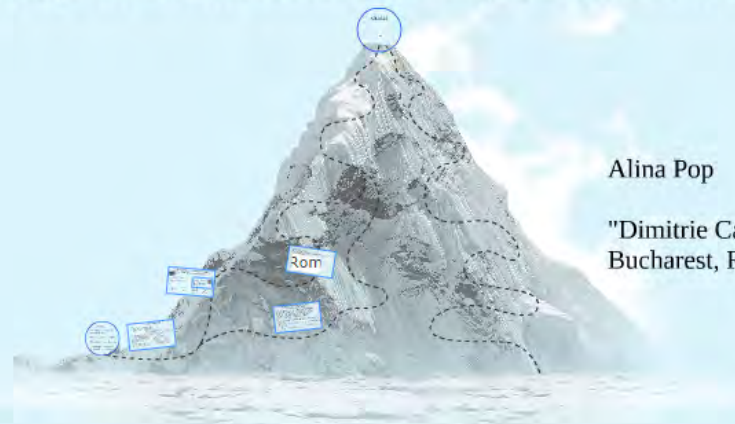
at the European/International Joint PhD in Social Representations & Communication
Research Center and Multimedia LAB

26th - 29th April 2015



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

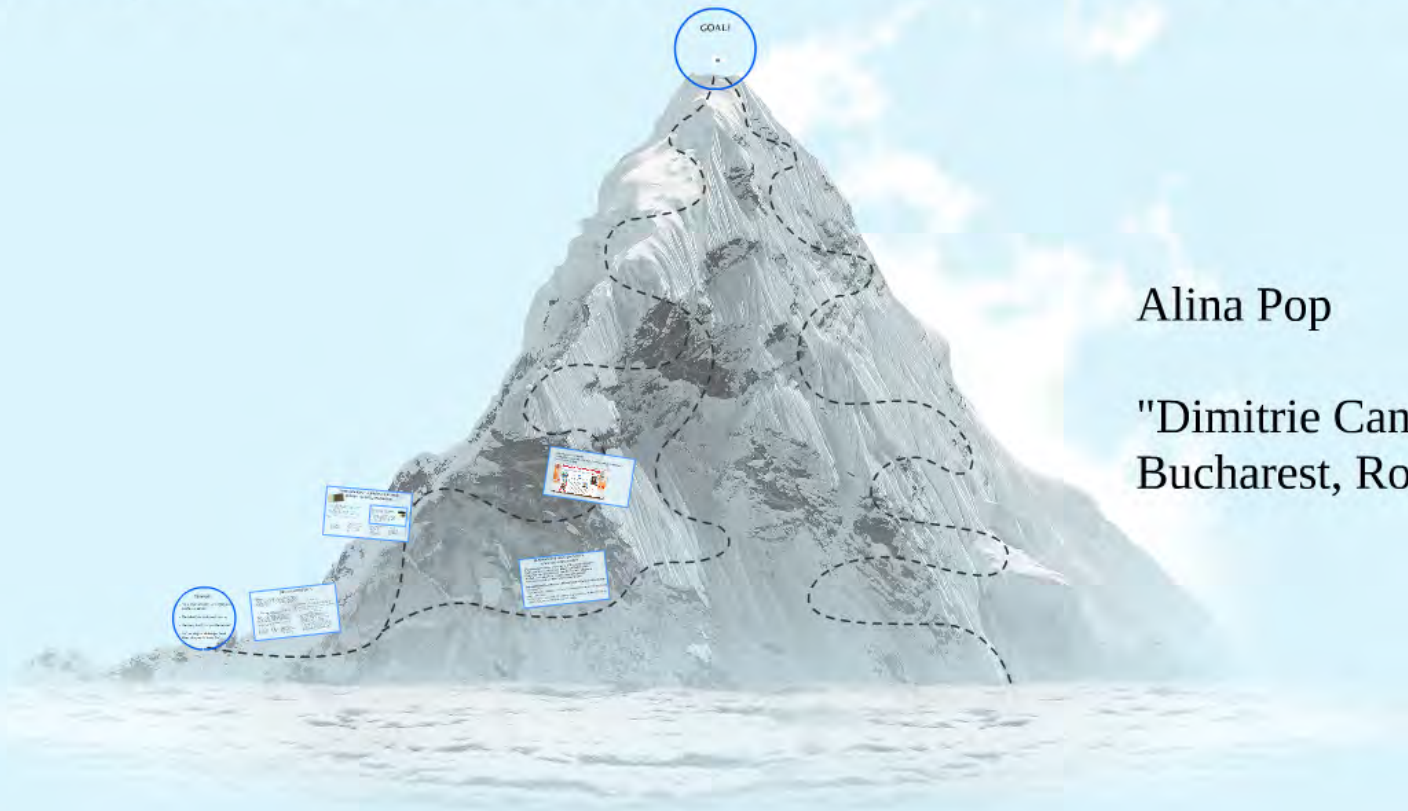
An ethnographic approach to polemic social representations
about environmental issues in the field and digital communities:
the uneasy role of the researcher exposed to controversies



Alina Pop

"Dimitrie Cantemir" University
Bucharest, Romania

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Summary:

- Social representations emerging in a conflictual context
- The (short) story of a controversy
- The (very short) story of the research
- Methodological challenges faced when studying SR in conflict

SRs and CONFLICT

SR definition:

Jodelet (1989, 39): "a form of knowledge, socially produced and shared, having practical ends and competing for the construction of a common reality for a social ensemble".
A social representation is always the representation of something (object) belonging to someone (subject), and that it is social not only in the sense of the tautological definition referring to the social nature of the object itself, but becomes social in the very aspect of being shared.

??? Pre-research ???

What about the limits of sharing? Are SRs always shared in society and by everybody?
What happens if they are not? Are we still in the presence of SRs in that situations?

Social representations emerged in situations determined by conflict = Polemic social representations

Moscovici (1988) - responding to Jahoda's (1988) criticism about the insufficient clarification of the difference between "collective" and "social" representations - stated that the ways in which representations can become social are directly related to the relations between groups and between group members.

Different degrees of sharing relate to different types of SRs: Hegemonic, Emancipated, Polemic

S. Moscovici (1984): Social psychology = the study of the conflict between the individual and society;
Then, how come is **conflict** so absent in the research on SRs?

Justification of the research interest

Polemic SR - a somehow overlooked concept in SR literature:

- few references to Moscovici's 1988 classification in scholarly work;
- the concept of Polemic SR ignored even in studies dealing explicitly with SR emerged in conflict (eg. chapters included in Markova and Gillespie, 2012);
- Contesting the classification by some scholars:

Rouquette (1994): every SR has a polemic value underlining inter-group differences and intra-group dynamic

Breakwell (2007): questions whether there are actually different types of SRs and not just different stages in the lifespan of a SR

Li Liu (2004): explicit rejection of the classification, precisely because SRs emerge from themata:

"different layers and different aspects of a representation entail different ways of sharing. A representation is generated through hegemonic, widely shared themata, but it also involves more emancipated and polemic dimensions. The emancipated and polemic dimensions of a representation express the particular societal conditions of social actors who activate them in their specific contexts and in relation to diverse life spheres. At the same time, they reflect broadly social, economic, political and ideological changes and conflicts. Thus, a social representation may be hegemonic, emancipated and/or polemic at the same time." (p. 261)."

Hegemonic representations were defined as:
"Representations shared by all members of a highly structured group - a party, city or nation - without having been produced by the group. (They) prevail implicitly in all symbolic or affective practices. They seem to be uniform and exercise. They reflect the homogeneity and stability that the French sociologists had in mind when they called these representations collective." (p. 221).

Emancipated representations were described as:
"... the acquisition of the creation of knowledge and ideas belonging to individuals that are in some or less alienation. Each individual creates its own version of the ideas. For this reason, these are emancipated representations only to a certain degree of autonomy with regard to the dominating representation of society. They have a complementary function in social reality: while being challenging, and during a period of change or crisis, they are used by individuals to bring together and coordinate their views." (p. 221).

Lastly, polemic representations were described as:
"They are representations generated in the course of social conflict, social controversy, and society as a whole does not share them. They are determined by the antagonistic relations between its members and intended to be mutually exclusive. These polemic representations must be viewed in the context of an opposition or struggle between groups and are often expressed in terms of a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor." (p. 221-222).

The example used to illustrate this last type of social representation was the representation of Marxism in France, where different versions of Marxism could be identified, each shaped by the polemic relations between believers and non-believers, or communists and liberals.

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Hegemonic representations were defined as: "Representations shared by all members of a highly structured group – a party, city or a nation – without having been produced by the group. [They] prevail implicitly in all symbolic or affective practices. They seem to be uniform and coercive. They reflect the homogeneity and stability that the French sociologists had in mind when they called these representations collective." (p. 221).

Emancipated representations were considered: "(...) the outgrowth of the circulation of knowledge and ideas belonging to subgroups that are in more or less close contact. Each subgroup creates its own version and shares it with others. These are emancipated representations with a certain degree of autonomy with regard to the interacting segments of society. They have a complementary function in so far as they result from exchanging and sharing a set of interpretations or symbols. They are social by virtue of the divisions of functions and the information brought together and coordinated by their means." (p. 221).

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Roșia Montană - a gold mine to study polemic social representations



Long lasting controversy over the plans of a Canadian based company to construct at RM Europe's biggest open mine, implying the relocation of the most part of the ancient Roman mining town RM, open-pit mining and cyanide use in order to extract the 300 tons of gold and 1600 tons of silver existing in the area of RM.

Conflict irrupted locally in 2000 and extended since 2002 at national level; now the RM case is internationally renowned (Hu: Verespatak!; international NGOs and activists involved in the conflict; European and International institutions and media interested in the case)

Unprecedented social movement in Romania: "Save Rosia Montană" which opposes the company

1. The 'battle of ideas' over Roșia Montană.
Focus: 'biography' of the social representations created and transmitted through media by the main stakeholders involved in the conflict over Roșia Montană (sources - makers for the representations emerged in society due to this conflict: 'Save Roșia Montană' movement vs. the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation.

2. Pictorial social representations of Roșia Montană:
Is it red or green?

Focus: Iconic dimension in the representation of the place Roșia Montană

3. The Roșia Montană affair in Romanian printed media

Focus: content and dynamics in the media representation of the RM issue

General objective of the research: to study the social representations emerged in Romanian society due to the conflict over RM, both in the media and in people's minds' (Farr, 1995)

Multi-dimensional and multi-method research design (de Rosa, 1990, Moscovici & Buschini, eds, 2003), comprising two types of investigation (Media analysis; Field study) and focusing on both verbal and iconic code of expression of social representations (de Rosa & Farr, 2001)
Online and offline fields



Pop, 2014

4. General opinions and attitudes towards the gold mine project in Roșia Montană (secondary analysis of data from an opinion poll)

Focus: preliminary examination of common sense knowledge about the Roșia Montană issue (idiosyncratic 'information' and 'attitude' in the social representations expressed by a representative sample of the Romanian population)

5. Representational systems related to the Roșia Montană affair in people's minds

Focus: comparative analysis of the social representations (verbal and iconic dimensions) held by three different groups of subjects, divided according to their position toward the gold mine project in Roșia Montană (Opponents, Supporters, Unclear)

Still, there is need ...

to deepen the analysis, to explore more the conflict at local level, to re-start the analysis of SRs in the community of Roșia Montană, to overcome the challenges encountered when "entering the minefield", to rethink research strategies and methods when approaching SR at the level of the local community...



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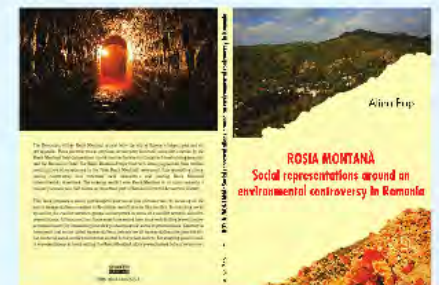
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Methodological challenges faced in offline and online research

Methodological choices in the course of the empirical inquiry:

Disinterested research attitude (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999)

Neutrality, emotional distance from the conflict and groups studied; abstaining from assuming ones own position

Overt (covert) and outsider (insider) investigation

The minefield of Rosia Montană: different "dangers" to face and to manage

Data collection:

Suspicion; Distrust; Caution and Silence; Boredom (over-investigated population)

Fear, Anger, Shame

Pressures for the researcher to become an in-group member, to take sides in the conflict, expectations toward the research results

Dissemination of results: Subjective evaluation of research results and of researcher's person and activity



Thank you!

