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Social Positioning and Social Representations

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<h1>Introduction<h1x>

<fo>The purpose of the social representation approach is to study common sense knowledge about abstract objects or theories. The development of common knowledge starts when these objects or theories become a problem in a given social context. When this happens, more and more people begin to debate around these objects and theories and begin to be involved in the construction of a specific theory.<fox>

Social representations are defined as theories of common sense applied to general topics, for example, intelligence, AIDS, violence, computer, gender, health, psychoanalysis, and work, that are discussed in a society. These theories are constructed and used to deal with abstract and complex questions in everyday life. Such questions are, how intelligent is my child? What is the origin of AIDS? Why are some people more violent than others? In answering such questions, we rely on the way intelligence, the origin of AIDS, or violence are defined and discussed in the public sphere. We also rely on the knowledge exchanged and shared around us, among the groups we are involved with. Yet, we can always take a position of our own, which means that we have to refer it to the common points of reference that constitute the normative content network of the social space we are living in. In order to understand this process, it is important not only to know that our reasoning is based on cognitive functioning such as categorizing or doing inferences, but also to know how and why we give specific signification to a given

information. This chapter is devoted to the approach of social positioning, i.e., the process by which people take up position about a network of significations. First, I shall present some historical as well as theoretical background of the approach. Secondly, I shall focus on methodological considerations illustrated by a case study.

<h1>Historical background: Thinking in everyday life</h1>

<fo> According to Durkheim (1912/1985), individual representation, as opposed to collective representation, is restricted to internal states that cannot be shared with others. In order to be communicated, such states have to be transformed into things like words, images, and symbols, by the collectivity. When Lévy-Bruhl (1922/1976), an anthropologist, examined materials collected from what he called “primitive” cultures, he used the notion of collective representations in order to make a distinction between *two models of thinking*, a rational model, typical of “civilized” cultures, and a “mystic” model, typical of “primitive” cultures. Piaget used this very distinction when he characterized the child operative thinking and the adult formal thinking. For Piaget (1932), rational thinking is gradually replacing primitive thinking during the cognitive development, while for Moscovici, adults continue to reason like children, even if their thoughts are based on formal, rational or logic principles (Moscovici, 1981, 1994). In everyday life, different kinds of constraints lead us to make a decision or to take a stand without actually following logical prescriptions. For a layman, the *content* becomes central in the organization of knowledge, while formal procedures are followed in scientific thinking (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983; Clémence & Doise, 1995; see Purkhardt, 1995, for a critical discussion). When we are engaged in contexts requiring technical procedures, we have to follow systematic and logical

rules in order to perform efficiently. This is usually the case in the professional area, yet we often reason in the same way when we do “ordinary” things like cooking or doing housework.

However, things are very different when we find ourselves in settings in which we are expressing opinions or preferences. Our reasoning often follows a path that appears to be wrong or biased from a cognitive point of view. However, such “mystic” thinking is often well suited to situations in social life such as when we are engaged in convincing or charming people, or interpreting new events or predicting the future. Furthermore, the use of “scientific” reasoning requires too much time and material to be applied in such circumstances.<fox>

Common sense and scientific thinking are interconnected. As Moscovici (1976; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983) has pointed out, common sense theory is currently more based on knowledge than on experience. More and more people have access to a variety of scientific information, and they use it in their discussions and thoughts. But the diffusion of scientific theories does not imply that scientific thinking is replacing common sense, for common sense as typical everyday thinking transforms scientific theory into another kind of theory. Moscovici showed how this happened for psychoanalysis (see also Herzlich, 1973). Common sense has an influence on scientific knowledge too (Kelley, 1992). The idea at stake here is not to differentiate between experts and novices, rather it is to assess how representational thinking modulates informative thinking because both work in different normative frameworks. The contrast between these two ways of thinking can be illustrated by the kind of transformations that occur when a popular newspaper borrows ideas from a scientific journal. What happens with such newspapers also happens in our daily discussions when they bear on various topics, for in this situation our

reasoning is based on images and symbols, and our attention is focused on the content of our topics and our arguments are based on various short cuts and detours. That is the way we try to keep the attention of the person we are speaking to, or to persuade, or seduce him or her.

Alternatively, when we act as experts in an office or a laboratory, we have to be specific and use well-defined concepts and follow pre-established logical arguments which actually leads to our being acknowledged as an expert.

<h1>The Basic Processes Described By The Theory Of Social Representations</h1>

<fo>The cognitive processes are controlled and oriented by the *normative metasytem* as Moscovici (1976) called it. The cognitive system operates by joining, categorizing, etc., different things, but these operations are “reworked” by a metasytem using normative regulations.

According to Doise, the theory of social representations is basically “a general theory about a metasytem of social regulations intervening in the system of cognitive functioning” (Doise, 1993a, p. 157; see also Doise, 1993b). The study of social representations answers the question, “Which social regulations engage which cognitive functions in which contexts?” (ibid., p. 58).

This controlling operates by means of two sociocognitive dynamics, namely objectification and anchoring.</fo>

Objectification refers to the process of transforming abstract information into concrete knowledge through communication (for a detailed discussion of objectification, see Flick, 1995; Jodelet, 1989; Wagner, Elejabarrieta, & Lahnsteiner, 1995). The process ends in figurative, metaphorical, or symbolic meanings, which become *shared, but not consensual, points of reference* during a debating process on a specific topic or issue. Social representation is at this

stage a lexicon of meanings drawing from the objectification of the abstract object. By circulating in a social context, the content of this lexicon is used as a map of common points of reference for people. As shared knowledge, this content is organized around some connections between its elements. The content and the structure of these lay theories are actually debated among social psychologists. The structural approach stresses the idea that the content of a social representation is organized around a central nucleus composed of a few consensual meanings (see Abric, 1984, this volume; Augoustinos & Innes, 1990). The dynamic approach maintains that all social representations are composed of different, contrasted kinds of meanings. Knowledge shared by people is precisely this network of variations (see Doise, Clémence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993).

However, the transformation of information follows different ways depending on the groups in which information is diffused. As Doise quoted, “demands of the metasystem can change according to the social positions in specific networks of relations” (Doise, 1993a, p. 158). Because every social representation is elaborated through debates, different points of view emerge during the transformation of abstract information into concrete meanings. Divergent positions are expressed in public space by individuals belonging to groups who actively attempt to define abstract information from their points of view. Individuals use normative rules (based on ideas, values or beliefs of their groups), for analyzing some ambiguous or unfamiliar aspects of the changing lay theories. To be adopted, figures and meanings have to be anchored in prior knowledge and beliefs. The *anchoring* process results in a specific definition of a theory of common sense by integrating particular figurative meanings of the social representation. A social

representation is then constituted by a network of more or less divergent meanings depending of the strength of the discussions around its object. At the same time, these different meanings have to be shared, more or less, in order for the object to be put in the everyday conversations.

Consider, for instance, the social representation of work. The meaning of this notion has evolved a great deal, and is perpetually enriched by new features. As a concept, work appears to be equivocal, and some scientists have suggested that we abandon it for more precise terms (Offe, 1985; Karlsson, 1995). For the same reasons, the notion is still at the center of passionate discussions in the public sphere. Findings of different studies have shown that work is always objectified, at least in European countries, around the figure of a manual and painful activity providing a financial reward (Salmaso & Pombeni, 1986; Grize, Vergès, & Silem, 1987). However, the figure of an intellectual and autonomous professional, like the lawyer or the architect, has enlarged the meaning of work. Work is defined not only as a concrete activity done for earning one's living, but also as an occupation done for self-achievement (Flament, 1994). Other kinds of figurative meanings begin to emerge in the debate around activities like artistic or sportive occupations long seen as the opposite of work. These different figures shape the network of shared meanings of work in Western societies. The definition people endorse vary according to their working experiences, e.g., self-achievement is more pregnant for intellectual than for manual workers. However, the anchoring process depends also on the diffusion of knowledge and beliefs of different groups in the social world. For instance, the instrumental definition of work has been consolidated these past years by the return of the moral virtues related to labor supported by different political and religious movements (Clémence, 1998).

<h1>Social Positioning And Organizing Social Representations</h1>

<fo>Taking part in a debate around a theory requests of people that they take a stand on common points of reference. Sharing common points of reference does not imply consensual agreement, while a debate implies shared knowledge. *Social positioning* derives from the anchoring of the shared knowledge in different groups. These groups are not only different because they do not have access to the same information, but also because their members share specific beliefs and experiences. Normative principles are developed during a socialization process and they orient positioning on the map of common points of reference. Thus, social positioning is not only the expression of an opinion, it is also a way to process information in order to adapt what we think to what the society thinks. Consequently, it provides the means for articulating the variations between intergroups beliefs and knowledge with the temporary crystallization of a network of meanings in a given public sphere.</fo>

In order to take position in the network of meanings, individuals have to know the terms of the debate and to link them to their point of view about social life. Hence, a position is connected to and regulated by more *general principles* of thinking. Depending of the individual involvement in the communicative relationships between social actors, these principles of thinking will be more or less structured and the corresponding positions more or less obvious (McLeod, Pan, & Rusinski, 1995). Moscovici (1976) presented three modalities of communication depending on three kind of interindividual and intergroup relations. When a new idea is emerging in a social space, a phase of diffusion of information can be observed first. This occurs in a context of relative undifferentiation between social actors and produces a set of

common points of reference (see Doise, 1993a). Media with a large audience contribute to the circulation of various thematic elements and multiple opinions. The second phase begins when specific groups intervene by organizing the network according to their knowledge and beliefs. The message is directed towards the members of various groups who look for what to think about the developing debate. Some experts of the group may propagate a principle for weighting the different elements of the network in order to consolidate the well-established doctrine of the group. Other social actors, in particular minorities, develop a stronger perspective with a propaganda based on conflicting social relations. This form of communication is aimed at selecting true and false knowledge and opinions among common knowledge. If the positions resulting in the propagation are expressed as flexible attitudes, those stemming from propaganda appear to be firm and stereotypical.

The work of Devine is a good illustration of social positioning. Devine (1989) based her perspective on social judgment on the conflict occurring between an automatically activated cognition (a stereotype) and a more controlled expression of personal opinions. One could argue that automatic knowledge is in fact common knowledge (a stereotype is more or less known by everybody in a specific social context), and that controlled thinking is social positioning (people express a position against or in favor of a stereotype). It seems difficult to consider a belief as a personal cognitive construction. A stereotype, as shared knowledge acquired during socialization, could be rejected because it is implicated in ongoing social debate. A personal belief is therefore a position that can be taken because individuals have acquired a different kind of knowledge during their socialization (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990).

A personal belief is not merely the result of an individual cognitive activity, but it is anchored in the experiences and values of social groups. Following on Kinder and Sears (1981), Katz and Hass (1988) showed that the racial positions of whites were integrated in more general principles towards social life. A problack position is regulated by a normative principle directed by egalitarian and social justice values while an antiblack position is organized by the Protestant ethic based on meritocracy and discipline. It must also be underlined that some stereotypes appear to be more automatic than others, which is to say, in my view, that they are more shared and discussed than others (see Stangor & Lange, 1994).

Moreover, Devine seems to assert that the dissociation between stereotype and positioning holds true for all stereotypical knowledge. However, it seems that some stereotypes are more easily activated than others. For instance, American students activate stereotypes more easily on the basis of sex rather than race categories (Smith & Zárate, 1990; Stangor & Lange, 1994). Finally, the dissociation appears to be modulated, at least in the case of negative stereotypes, by the position itself. The people against a stereotype do provide positive information, whereas those in favor of a stereotype give only negative information (see Augoustinos & Walker, 1995, pp. 239--244).

<h1>Exploring Social Representation: A Methodological Strategy</h1>

<fo>Following this theoretical framework, a methodological approach of social representations implies three phases. A systematic methodological approach of these three phases including a discussion of the appropriate statistical procedures can be found in Doise,

Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993). Therefore, I shall give a short description of the core points of this strategy.<fox>

The first point of this strategy is centered on the map of the shared reference points resulting from the objectification process. This implies collecting the elements of the circulating content of a specific object of social representation. One of the most frequently used procedures is the free association between words and objects or closely related terms. It is important to keep in mind that words are treated both as a figurative and a semantic way for defining the object. The results of free association are then analyzed in order to group words together in sets that constitute the network or the map of meanings. In each set some words occupy a central or prototypical place and can therefore be considered as the most prominent figures of the social representation (see Lahlou, this volume). Because only the shared lexicon is of interest at this stage, individuals are momentarily not taken into account. Automatic clustering or multidimensional scaling are statistical techniques well-suited for this kind of analysis.

The second phase deals with social positioning and is centered on the principles that organize the variations between the positions of individuals or groups on the map. Data have to be collected for interindividual or intergroup comparisons. One procedure used to collect these data is standardized questionnaire build on the basis of the sets of meanings detected in the first stage. Responses are examined in two directions: covariations permit one to define the principles of association between meanings held by participants, and levels indicate the stands they take on the shared map. Statistical procedures like factor analysis or multidimensional scaling of individual differences are useful at this stage.

The third phase is centered on the characteristics of individuals and groups. Data on individuals are generally obtained from the same questionnaires used during the second phase. Data on groups can also be collected independently of the research participants (see for instance, Doise, this volume). The analysis links positions and principles to the characteristics of respondents. This can be done in different ways. One way is to base the exploration on specific group membership by evaluating the discriminating power of positions and principles. Another way is based on classical regression models which account for the variance of positions and principles by multiple group memberships.

The study of social positioning is central in this approach of social representations, for it offers a better understanding of the articulation between the shared and debated points of reference and a population of individuals divided into groups supporting different positions in the debate (Elejabarrieta, 1994). In order to illustrate an empirical approach of social positioning, partial results of a study on social representations of solidarity and social welfare are presented.

<h1>A Study Of Social Positioning: Social Representations Of Solidarity And Social Welfare<h1x>

A currently debated question in Switzerland is the future of social welfare. The terms of the debate are organized around a concrete question of solidarity: who will pay for whom? Everybody agrees that solidarity is a fundamental value of the (Swiss) social welfare system. However, it seems obvious that this value is understood in very different ways. A clear illustration of these divergent positions can be found in the multiple and complicated forms of the welfare institutions. The more important one (AVS) was introduced after World War II and

was meant to provide financial support for retired people, and is clearly based on an extensive solidarity.

Everybody has to contribute to this system depending of his or her income, and these contributions are directly distributed to all women (starting at age 62) and men (starting at age 65). The money allocated to each individual is almost the same. In the 1970s, a system of pension funds was installed for wage earners. It is based on a classical principle of individual capitalization. Another important national institution is constituted by a network of private healthcare insurances. Everybody has to contract such an insurance. The insurance companies provide a wide range of benefits, but within a company similar insurances must offer the same benefits. Other institutions partly based on collective solidarity (in areas such as unemployment or political asylum) or on individual insurance (in areas such as unemployment or retirement for craftsmen) are also part of the welfare system.

Two studies were conducted on the topic of solidarity in the context of a national research program on social security (Clémence, Egloff, Gardiol, & Gobet, 1994). A standardized questionnaire was administered to 600 individuals, aged 18 to 20, in 1991, in two French-speaking areas (Geneva and Jura) as well as in two German-speaking areas (Luzern and St Gallen) in Switzerland. One year later, a sample of parents of the research participants were invited to answer a similar questionnaire to which an experimental study was added. In this chapter, only data about the parents whose age was between 45 and 55 years (129 women and 95 men) are examined.

The questionnaire bore upon the representation and evaluation of different aspects of social welfare such as knowledge about social security, estimation of needs and risks of different social groups, explanations of social problems, personal involvement in social areas, and appraisal of institutional aid.

<h2>Common points of reference<h2x>

<fo>Data of a preliminary survey (free word association with the terms solidarity and social welfare and semi-directed interviews) showed that the objectification of solidarity was organized around two meanings. The first one was about *helping behaviors* between persons in close relationships (family, friends); the second one was about the *social welfare* as characterized by mutual aid between unequal groups in different areas (work, health, etc.). Positioning towards social welfare is discussed below.<fox>

<h2>Social positioning and anchoring<h2x>

<fo>Studies on intergroup relations and on social justice have well documented the fact that individuals are guided by at least two normative principles: a norm of favoritism of oneself and the members of one's own groups, and a norm of fairness based on the respective contributions or needs of every person or every group. This normative metasystem can be affected by different normative principles endorsed by groups. For instance, some of them consider that any kind of resources should be distributed in order to improve social relations, while some others emphasized economic efficiency of goods distribution. Those who were more concerned with the management of social relations than with the efficiency of economic distribution, were also more ready to accept egalitarian strategies in the distribution of resources (Deutsch, 1985; Rasinski,

1987). Individuals who hold a more negative view on social relations could be those who are more in favor of helping deprived groups of people. In other words, positioning towards social welfare could be organized by the principle used to judge social relations. This process does not rule out that attitudes towards aid could also be based on a self-serving principle. If this line of reasoning is correct, positioning towards social welfare (institutional aid) must be more in favor among individuals who evaluate social relations more negatively. <fox>

In order to verify this assumption, participants in the “parents study” answered two questions. The first one was about the evaluation of social relations in the Swiss context: participants expressed their perception of *social relations* by means of evaluations of the quality of 12 relationships between dyads of groups using a 5-point scale (from very bad to very good). Examples of such relationships were “employers and employees,” “old and young people,” “disabled and able-bodied,” “unemployed and employed,” or “Swiss and foreigners” relationships. The second one was about the position towards the institutional solidarity as applied to different groups: participants indicated their *appraisal of institutional aid* by means of evaluations of the amount of aid in favor of 10 social categories using a 3-point scale (from too high to too low). For instance, they had to judge “aid to elderly,” “aid to applicants for asylum,” “aid to youths in training,” or “aid to drug addicts.” For assessing the impact of the self-serving principle, participants also estimated the degree of *social health-related risks* of their children in 9 different areas using a 4-point scale (from weak to high). Among other things, participants had to estimate the likelihood of the following risks: “to be victim of a road accident,” “to be assaulted on the street,” “to have psychiatric problems,” or “to have difficulties finding a job.”

Separate reliability analyses were performed on the items of each domain, and they showed that the interindividual differences can be considered as unidimensional (Cronbach Alphas > 0.79).

A multiple regression analysis was carried out on the appraisal of institutional aid by entering the evaluation of relationships and the estimation of risks as independent variables. Two contextual factors were also entered because they could be considered as possible anchored variables of the positioning towards social welfare. The *linguistic group* (Swiss German versus Swiss French) is obviously articulated with economic and cultural differences. The economic context is more favorable in the German than in the French part of Switzerland. Cultural differences are regularly expressed on referendums about social security topics. When most Swiss French voters support collective aid and social institutions, a majority of Swiss German voters support individual self-helping. The *religious observances* (low versus high) was also selected because religious affiliation is historically linked with concrete charity rather than social solidarity. Moreover, religious observances offer a good measure of the degree of integration not only in a specific community but also in the social and cultural context (Isambert, 1982). In order to complete the model, a regression analysis was carried out on each organizing principle separately using both contextual factors as independent variables. Results are presented in Figure 6.1.

[Figure 6.1 near here]

The results show that positioning towards social welfare is organized by a self-serving principle (estimation of risks for children) and the evaluation of social harmony. These positionings are directly anchored in the linguistic division: Swiss French exhibited a more

favorable position than Swiss German. However, the position of Swiss German appeared to be more positive than the position of Swiss French if we consider indirect effects: Swiss German evaluated more negatively the social relations and estimated that the risks are higher than the Swiss French did. Taken together, the results showed that the adhesion of Swiss German, but not of Swiss French, to social welfare depended of the evaluations of insecurity and social harmony. An indirect effect of the religiosity is also observed: high religious observances imply a more harmonious perception of the social relations and a more negative position towards social welfare.

<h2>Organizing principles and positioning in an experimental context<h2x>

<fo>An experimental investigation was added to the parents' study in order to test the effect of the perception of social relations, as organizing principle, on positions towards the contributions to social institutions. A design was drawn in order to manipulate the degree of perceived tensions between the privileged and the underprivileged. Harmony in these relations was presented as needing either to be improved or to be kept identical. At the beginning of this section, we saw that the evaluation of social relations is an organizing principle of the positions towards the institutional aid. By the same token, this principle should organize the positions towards the contributions to social welfare institutions. It was predicted that participants would accept a proposal of contributions more readily if social relations were to be improved rather than kept identical. The design of the experiment was based on the discourses held by different political movements, some of them claiming that solidarity in social welfare has to be developed

in order to restore social harmony, while other movements claiming that solidarity, in order to be preserved, had to be maintained at the current level. <fox>

The experimental part of the study was presented in the form of "*a proposal submitted by experts for solving problems in financing social welfare.*" Participants were invited to state their degree of agreement with the proposal and to evaluate its consequences in different areas of society: financing of two social security systems, solidarity in society, struggle against poverty, economic growth, and personal freedom.

Two independent variables were introduced. The first one was about the type of argumentation produced by the experts. In one condition, arguments aimed at producing a perception of *harmonious* relations in society stressed the fact that the "*solution of social problems depended on the maintenance of good relations among all.*" In the other condition, arguments aimed at illustrating the existence of *inequality* stated that "*the solution of social problems depended on the increase of support by the richest in favor of the poorest.*" The second independent variable was about the content of the proposal submitted to the participants that either respected the *status quo* or argued in favor of an *increase* of contributions to two social institutions.

Preliminary analyses showed that gender, social status, and linguistic group membership did not affect the answers of the participants. Analysis of variance of the degree of agreement with the proposal submitted to the participants revealed a main effect for Type of argumentation ($F(1,174) = 7.07; p < 0.01$). Agreement with the proposal was on the average higher when the basis

of the arguments was *inequality* ($M = 2.73$) rather than *harmony* in social relations ($M = 2.39$).

The model explains 5% of the variance ($F(3,174) = 2.97; p < 0.04$).

Evaluation of social relations was then entered as an independent variable with scores reduced to three degrees (*negative*, *neutral*, and *positive*). It was therefore possible to control whether the effects of perception of social relations were comparable in allocations and contributions in the realm of social welfare. Agreement with the increase proposal should be higher when participants had previously evaluated social relations negatively rather than positively.

The analysis of the results revealed a significant interaction between Content of proposal and Evaluation of social relationships ($F(2,174) = 4.35; p < 0.02$). Participants who considered that the social relations were *negative* were less in favor of the *status quo* than in favor of the *increase* proposal ($M_s = 2.41$ versus 2.85) ($F(1,174) = 4.48; p < 0.05$). On the contrary, participants who considered social relations *positively* were more in favor of the *status quo* than in favor of the *increase* proposal ($M_s = 2.67$ versus 2.24 ; $F(1,174) = 3.84; p = 0.052$). For the middle of the scale participants, the difference was not statistically significant ($M_s = 2.46$ versus 2.69). The main effect of Type of argumentation remains stable ($F(1,174) = 5.87; p < 0.02$). The model explains more than 15% of the variance ($F(11,174) = 2.67; p < 0.005$).

Conclusion

Social positioning towards social welfare is oriented by the principle that individuals use when they evaluate the social relations. When they consider that the social relations are harmonious, they adopt a restrictive point of view in the domain of institutional aid. When they consider that the social relations are damaged, they are in favor of more mutual aid.

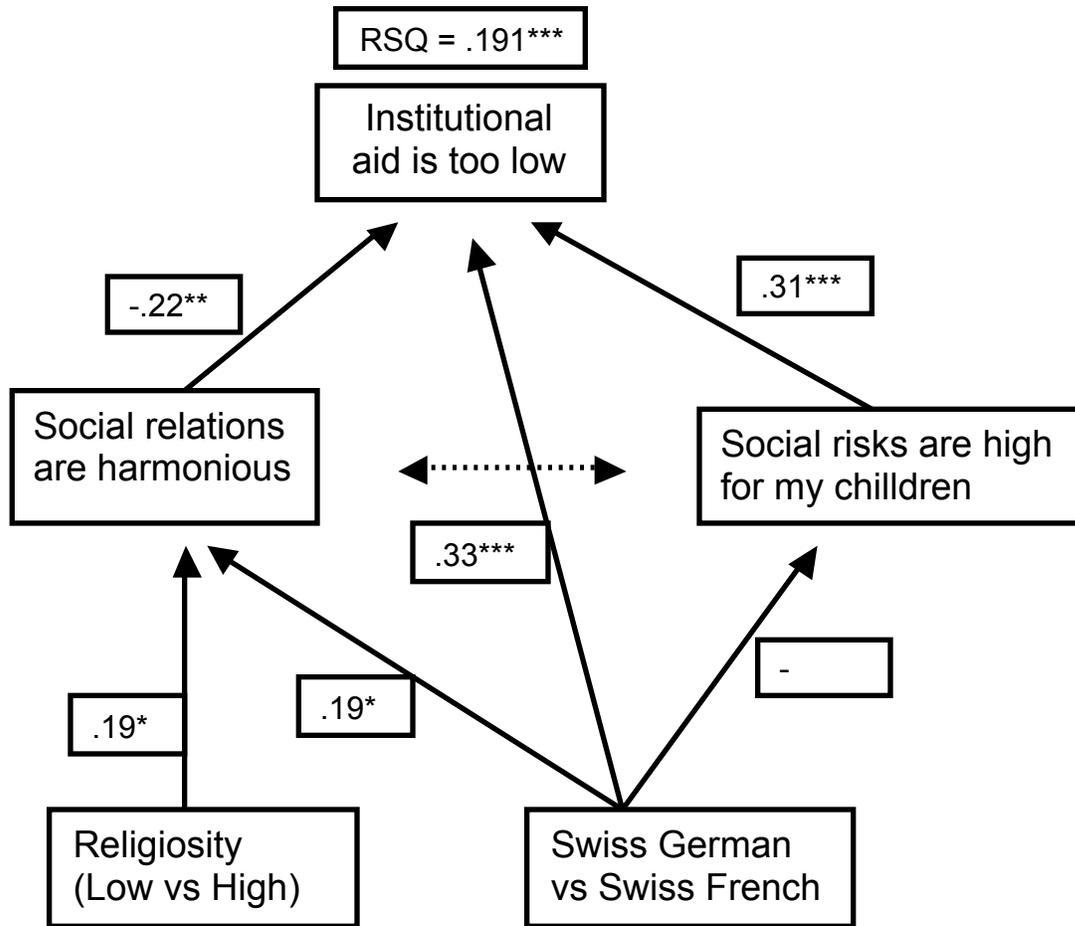
Experimental results showed that this principle plays an important role at a general normative level: participants expressed a higher agreement with a proposal of experts when the experts' arguments were centered on damaged rather than on harmonious relations. Furthermore, the results showed that their own evaluation of social relations oriented their positioning towards the type of proposal. Therefore, evaluation of social relations appears to be one of the principles organizing the social representation of solidarity and social welfare.<fox>

The theory of social representations still appears for some social psychologists as too abstract and vague. In a sense, they typically encounter the problem of objectifying and anchoring the network of concepts. It could be that the normative metasystem of the field of social psychology implies theoretical and methodological principles that explain such a social positioning. Nevertheless, the strength of the theory resides in the innovative proposals for analyzing and understanding how we ordinarily think in the context of social life. The difficulty of such a program is that results have to be perpetually updated, for theories of common sense keep evolving.

<hx> Note<hxx>

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<fc>Figure 6.1. A path diagram of the anchoring of social positioning towards institutional aid.<fcx>



Note $N = 144$; Standardized Beta (Filled lines) and RSQ : * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Correlation between *Social relations* and *Social risks* (Dotted line) : $R = -.24, p > .01$.