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CENTRAL SYSTEM, PERIPHERAL SYSTEM: THEIR FUNCTIONS AND ROLES IN THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS¹

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In this brief communication, I shall endeavour to summarize theoretical thoughts on the structure and dynamics of social representations that have been reached at our Laboratory in Aix en Provence, C. Flament having a large share in the ideas brought forward in the present communication.

Two social representations characteristics which would seem to be contradictory have been interesting us and are the starting point of our work.

First characteristic: Social representations are both stable and moving, rigid and flexible.

Second characteristic: Social representations are both consensual but marked by strong interindividual differences.

We think that these apparent contradictions originate from the structural characteristics of social representations and from their mode of functioning.

1. Internal organization of social representations

Social representations and their two components: the central core and peripheral elements do function as an entity, each part having a specific but complementary role towards the other. Their organization, as well as their functioning, is governed by a double system:

The central system - composed of the central core of the representation - presents the following characteristics:

It is directly linked and determined by historical, sociological, and ideological conditions. As such, it is strongly marked by the collective memory of the group and the system of norms to which it refers.

It then constitutes the common collectively shared basis of social representations. Its function is consensual. The homogeneity of a social group is achieved and defined through it.

It is stable, coherent, it resists to change and assumes as such a second function, one of continuity and consistency of the representation.

Finally, one could say that it is relatively independent from the immediate social and material context in which the representation stands out.

¹ Communication to the first international conference on social representation., Ravello, 3-5 October 1992.

The central system is therefore stable, coherent, consensual and historically marked.

As regards the peripheral system, it constitutes the indispensable complement of the central system which it depends on. If the central system is essentially normative, the peripheral system itself is functional. This is to say that without it, the representation could not be rooted in the reality of the moment.

Its first function is then the concretisation of the central system in terms of taking a position or course of action.

Contrasting with the central system, the peripheral system is then far more sensitive and determined by the immediate context characteristics. It constitutes the interface between concrete reality and the central system.

It is much more supple, more flexible than the central elements and so fulfils a second function: the regulation and adaptation to constraints and characteristics of the central system to the concrete situation which the group is facing. It is an essential element within defence mechanisms aiming to protect the central significance of the representation. It is the peripheral system which first absorbs new information or events capable of challenging the central core. As Flament would put it, this system functions like a car "bumper." With the

Table 1:

Characteristics of the central system and the peripheral system of a representation

Central System	Peripheral System
Linked to collective memory and the history of the group	Permits the integration of individual experiences and past histories
Consensual — defines the homogeneity of the group	Supporting the heterogeneity of the group
Stable Coherent Rigid	Flexible Bears contradictions
Not very sensitive to the immediate context	Sensitive to the immediate context
Functions: — generates the signification of the representation — determines its organization	Functions: — Allows adaptation to concrete reality — Allows content differentiation — Protects the central system

transformation of some peripheral elements, central elements - at least for a given time - remain steady.

Furthermore, it constitutes a third function. The peripheral system permits a given individual modulation of the representation. Its flexibility allows for integration in the representation of individual variations linked to the subjects' own history, personal and factual experiences. It allows the elaboration of individualised social representations which are nevertheless organized around a common central core. If social representations are consensual by their central system, they can tolerate strong interindividual differences in the peripheral system.

In its content, the peripheral system is then flexible, adaptative and relatively heterogeneous.

Because the representation is made up of this double system (a stable system, a flexible system), it can respond to one of its essential functions: the socio-cognitive adaptation (Table 1).

2. Relationship between the organization of the representation and their processes of transformation

In a work soon to be published, we have tried to show how the understanding of evolution processes and representation transformations could be clarified with the help of our conception of its inner organization. What was for us the main question - and which furthermore is the central question for the study of representations - concerns the relationship between social practices and representations, and it could be formulated as follows: what happens when social actors end up to develop social practices which contradict their system of representation?

Answering this question, Claude Flament introduces a notion which appears essential to us: the notion of the reversibility of the situation. Actors, committed to a situation and developing a practice within it, could consider - rightly or wrongly, this being irrelevant - that this situation is irreversible, that is to say that a return to past practices is impossible, or contrary, that it is reversible, that is to say that a return to past practices is seen as possible, the present situation being only temporary and exceptional. The transformation processes which will then be taking place are by themselves radically different, depending on the situation being reversible or not.

If the situation is reversible, the new contradictory practices will of course generate modifications in the representation. The new and discordant elements will be integrated in the representation, but exclusively through a transformation of the peripheral system, the central core of the representation remaining stable and insensitive to those modifications. What is happening here is a real transformation of the representation, albeit superficial.

By contrast, if the situation is perceived as irreversible, the new and contradictory practices will lead to very serious consequences concerning the transformation of the representation.

Three major types of transformation are then possible:

1. "Resisting" transformation: This is the case where new contradictory practices can still be managed by the peripheral system and the classical defense mechanisms: ad hoc

interpretation and justifications, rationalisation, reference to norms which are external to the representation, etc.

What then characterizes the representation is the apparition of "strange schemes" in the peripheral system that Flament found and defined , and which are composed as follows:

1. Recalling of the normal
2. Designation of the foreign element
3. Affirmation of a contradiction between the two terms
4. Proposition of a rationalization helping to bear the contradiction.

These strange schemes protect the central core from being challenged and a transformation of the representation concerning only the peripheral system can take place, at least for a given time, because the multiplication of strange schemes can only finally lead to the transformation of the central core, that is to say of the representation as a whole.

2. Progressive transformation of the representation occurs when new practices are not entirely contradictory with the central core of the representation. The transformation of the representation occurs without rupture, that is to say without the splitting of the central core. The schemes activated by the new practices will progressively be integrated to the ones from the central core and merge with them to constitute a new core, then a new representation. The most well known example of this kind of transformation is the one that Guimelli (1989) brought to the fore in his work on the evolution of the representation of hunting.

3. Brutal transformation occurs when the new practices directly challenge the central signification of the representation without any possible help from defense mechanisms at work in the peripheral system. From this point onwards, the importance of these new practices, their permanence and their irreversible features lead to a direct and total transformation of the central core and therefore of all the representation.

This brief analysis of the process at work in the transformation of the representations underline the necessity to take into account the inner organisation of the representation if we want to understand the dynamics of social representations. The interaction between the central system and peripheral system appear, as we see it, as a fundamental element in the actualisation, evolution and transformation of representations.

References

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