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## Symposium sur les représentations sociales

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## From theory to metatheory in social representations: the lines of argument of a theoretical-methodological debate

Approximately 30 years after the notion was first presented in a scientific setting (Moscovici, 1961), what now is the status of social representation (SR)? Is it a heuristic concept, a construct, a paradigm, a theory, or simply a phenomenon? To those who polemically defined SR as simply a "concept in search of a theory" (Potter and Litton, 1985), Moscovici (1985) replied that it is a "phenomenon which needs data and theories".

I believe that three different levels of SR exist:

*Level a:* SR as *phenomenon*, i.e. "ways of knowing" characteristic of social reality, which emerge in everyday life during interpersonal communications and are directed toward comprehension and control of the physical-social environment;

*Level b:* a *theory* of SR, i.e. the collection of conceptual definitions, methodological operations and formulation of constructs which have SRs as their object;

*Level c:* a *metatheory* of SR, i.e. the collection of critical comments, ripostes and comparisons with other theoretical models which emerges from the critical debate on the theory of SR.

To confuse these three levels, for example by attributing to SR theory (level *b*) the transient and dynamic character of SRs as phenomena of the changing social world (level *a*) is to confuse the objects of scientific theorization with the theorization itself.

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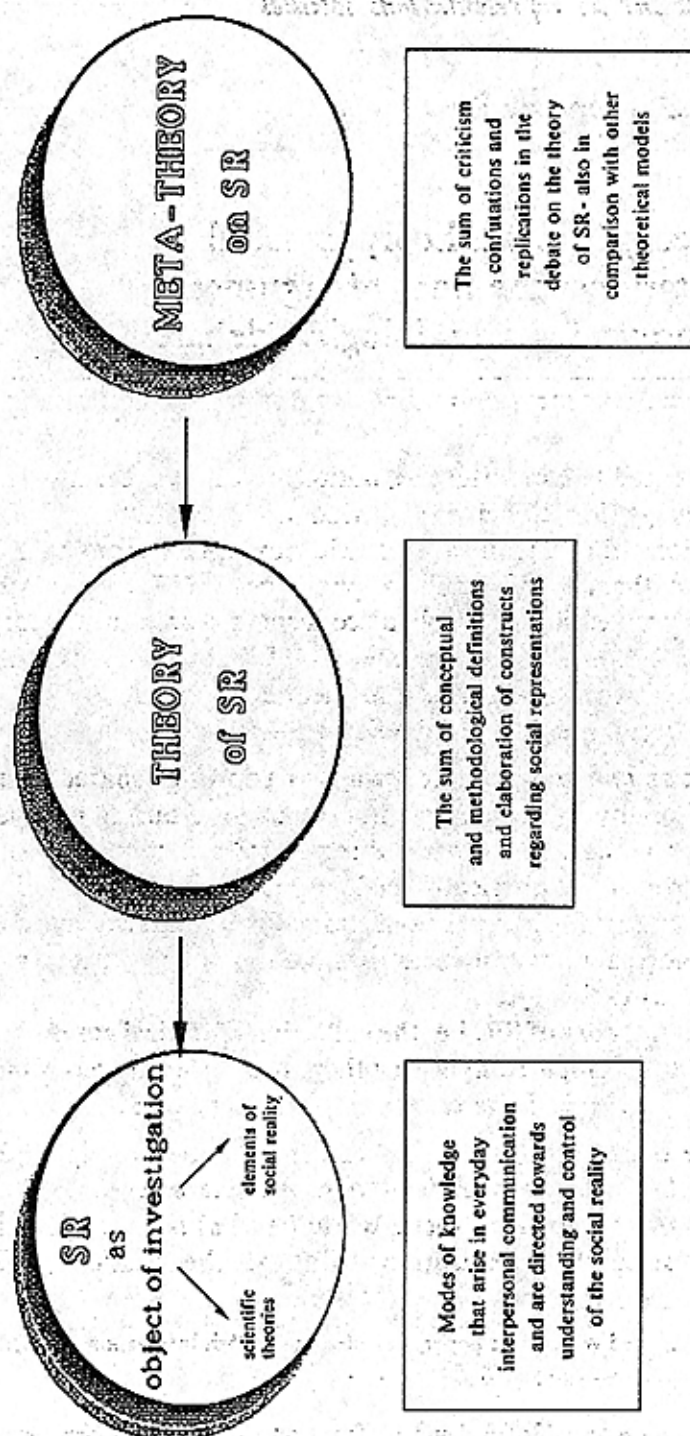


FIGURE 1  
The three levels in the literature on social representations (SR)

Similarly, to confuse the theoretical level *b* with the reflections being articulated about it (*c*) and its relation to other forms of theorization, is to lose sight of the shift in focus in the latter case to a "metalevel" where the objects to be formalized and investigated are no longer SRs as such, but the theory of these SRs.

A vast literature exists concerning level *a*: numerous research projects have explored SRs, but their contents differ widely (see literature review in Jodelet, 1989a; de Rosa, 1992; in the newsletter *SRs Communication Network* edited by Wagner, since 1990; and in *Papers on Social Representations* edited by Elejabarrieta, Flick, Guimelli and Wagner, since 1992).

The literature concerning level *b* is also quite voluminous due to the prolific scientific output of Moscovici (see references) and others of the Paris school (e.g. Jodelet, 1984, 1989a; Herzlich, 1984; Aebischer et al., 1991), as well as a good number from the European scientific community (Abric, 1984, 1987; Di Giacomo, 1981, 1985; Doise, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993; Doise and Palmonari, 1986; Farr, 1984, 1987, 1993; Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Flament, 1989; Palmonari, 1989, 1991; Semin, 1989, *inter alia*) and some from outside Europe, for example Australia (Augoustinos and Innes, 1990), Brazil (Spink, 1993), Canada (Schiele and Boucher, 1989) and the USA (Bhavnani, 1991).

As far as level *c* is concerned, I do not believe that a systematic critical review exists in the literature apart from a recent (but not exhaustive) paper by Rätty and Snellman (1992). Furthermore, where explicit reference is made to a "metatheoretical" level, as by Wells (1987), the definition proposed does not deal with the critical debate raised in the wider scientific community by SR theory, but is limited to the positions expressed by Moscovici in his own work.

In this article, I intend to look more closely at the criticisms made in the wider debate — a debate that I have defined as metatheoretical because it is constituted by arguments for and counter-refutations of the fundamental assumptions of the SR theory per se.

#### Stages in the theoretical-methodological debate on SR

The synoptic table (see Table 1) shows the problematic areas of this debate, in which various authors take a stand, at times against the SR theory and at times in defence of it.

TABLE 1  
Metatheoretical reflections on SR

Problematic elements	Critical authors	Pro authors
<i>Questions of theory</i>		
Theoretical formalization (SR: concept, theory, paradigm, phenomenon?)	Potter and Litton (1985) Jahoda (1988) Ibáñez (1992)	Jodelet (1984) Moscovici (1985, 1988) Semin (1985) Doise (1988, 1993) Wagner (1994)
Social nature of SRs (reduction to the interindividual consensus?)	Harré (1984) Potter and Litton (1985) Rätty and Snellman (1992) McKinlay, Potter and Wetherell (1993)	Moscovici (1984c) Hewstone (1985) Di Giacomo (1985) Doise (1988) Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1992) Bellelli (1992)
Articulation of individual representational and social levels (SR = or ≠ ideology?)	Jahoda (1988) Leyens (1991) Ibáñez (1992)	Di Giacomo (1985) Doise (1987) Moscovici (1989) Palmonari (1989) Aebischer, Deconchy and Lipiansky (1991) von Cranach (1992) Breakwell (1993)
Circularity in the definition between SR and social subjects (groups, categories) which produce them	Potter and Litton (1985) Litton and Potter (1985) Potter and Wetherell (1987)	Moscovici (1985) Hewstone (1985) Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1992)
Normativeness of SRs and social mind: the "group mind resuscitated"? Are we creators or prisoners of SR?	Jahoda (1988) McKinlay and Potter (1987)	Farr (1984) Moscovici (1988) Deconchy (1991)
SR versus scientific knowledge (consensual versus reified universes?)	McKinlay and Potter (1987) Farr (1987) Wells (1987) de Rosa (1991) Rätty and Snellman (1992) Purkhardt (1993)	Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) Moscovici (1984c, 1992)

TABLE 1 (cont.)

Problematic elements	Critical authors	Pro authors
<i>Questions of method</i>		
Operationalization of the construct (methodological vulnerability?)	Potter and Litton (1985) Jahoda (1988) Ibáñez (1992)	Di Giacomo (1981) Le Bouedec (1986)
Sphere of analysis of SRs (linguistic-conversational productions and/or symbolic conduct and sphere of action?)	Trognon and Larrue (1988) Beauvois (1988) Potter and Litton (1985) Potter and Wetherell (1987) Potter and Billig (1992)	Jodelet (1989b) Moscovici (1988) Amerio (1991) Cranach (1992) Wagner (1993)
Analysis of SRs, processing and transformative elements (How do SRs change? Is it possible to study their changes?)	McKinlay and Potter (1987)	Di Giacomo (1985) Chombart de Lauve and Feuerhahn (1989) Nigro, Galli and Poderico (1988) de Rosa (1987a, 1990, 1994b) Duveen and de Rosa (1992) Moliner (1992) Purkhardt (1993)
Relationship between structure and content of representations		Flament (1989) de Rosa and Iaculo (1988)
Experimental approach or empirical-descriptive methods?	Abric, Fauchaux, Moscovici and Plon (1967) Abric (1984, 1989) Flament (1984)	Moscovici (1961, 1988) Herzlich (1973) Betocchi Villone (1986) Jodelet (1989b) Breakwell and Canter (1993)
Multi-methodological approach: lack of methodology?	Flick (1992)	de Rosa (1987b, 1990) Sotirakopoulou and Breakwell (1992)

*The status of SR theory*

The first of the problematic aspects indicated in Table 1 is a global critique regarding the formal scientific status of SR theory, often reduced in the debate, by paraphrasing Moscovici (1984b), to a simple phenomenon.

It has been observed that criticisms of SR theory come primarily from the Anglo-Saxon world, where psycho-social research is more tightly anchored to experimental microparadigms and is less open to the interdisciplinary approaches which, in France, characterize social psychology as a sister of sociology and cultural anthropology. However, these criticisms do not often come from the "aficionados" of the various alternative paradigms which can be traced to the US brand of social cognition. Researchers from these traditions usually take one of two positions: either they completely ignore the theory — despite the availability of English translations of many of the most important theoretical works and empirical research on SR — or they show interest in the SR theory insofar as they glimpse the potential for integration with various paradigms of the cognitivist mould (e.g. with cognitive schemes: see Augoustinos and Innes, 1990).

The most vigorous criticisms of SR theory have until now been made by those researchers in the Anglo-Saxon tradition who are — paradoxically — most open to adopting a wider social horizon, to using methodological approaches not limited to laboratory procedures (what Potter and Billig, 1992, call "methodological individualism") and to the possibility of integrating approaches used in different disciplines — for example with ethogenics (Harré, 1984), anthropology (Jahoda, 1988) and rhetorical discourse and conversational models (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Repeatedly, these authors confess sharing Moscovici's reservations about conventional social psychology, which is anchored to mechanistic and positivistic models, and they seem to accept the challenge of developing an alternative European proposal to the dominant individualistic North American tradition, which has forgotten the contribution of authors such as Mead and Lewin. However, all put forward theoretical solutions and methodologies, which are different from those formulated by the SR theory.

One common element of these criticisms, from the earliest to the most recent formulations (Ibáñez, 1992), is the assessment of the theory as "omnicomprehensive", "conceptually ambiguous" and "methodologically loose". The theory is described as vague, unclear

and too broad by Potter and Litton (1985) in an article in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, which also published the replies of Moscovici, Semin and Hewstone to the critique.

In his reply, Moscovici seems to suggest that his interest is not in determining a "strong" and "closed" theory, but a perspective for "reading" the most varied phenomena and objects of the social world. It is social reality in its complexity that is his centre of interest and around which he organizes the basic assumptions of the theory. He purposely abandons the microscope because what interests him is the human being in the context of social relationships, not human cells and genes. Too often social psychologists, emulating natural scientists, use very strong lenses to focus in on the "cellular" level, completely losing sight of the larger structure to which those cells belong. Undoubtedly both the macro- and the microanalytical perspectives are legitimate and ought to be considered as different viewpoints rather than as antithetical paradigms. However, unless these perspectives are founded on precise and explicit theoretical-methodological choices, the research inspired at both levels becomes a sterile, academic exercise. Rather than aiming to comprehend social phenomena, such research ends up managing power relations within the scientific community, as theories are verified or invalidated according to the degree of identification between researchers and influential leaders.

However, it could be argued that Moscovici's attempt to shift attention from theory itself to the social reality is epistemologically flawed, as this would imply that the theory and the reality to which the theory applies, as a "dynamic reading grid", can be reduced to a single phenomenon. Thus the distinction between the objects of research and the theory is lost.

One of the clearest treatments of the basic propositions of SR theory can be found in Jodelet (1984), a testimony to the fact that a theory of SR really does exist and is articulated around a series of fundamental questions regarding:

(a) definitions of the SR concept (What are the salient elements which differentiate this concept from others in use in social psychology, such as attitude, image, opinion, prototype, schema, habitus, ideology, etc.? — see Moscovici, 1963, 1991; Jodelet, 1984, 1989, 1991; Jaspars and Fraser, 1984; Semin, 1989; Doise, 1989a/b; Palmonari, 1989; Wagner, 1989; Semin, 1989; Augoustinos and Innes, 1990; Aebischer et al., 1991; de Rosa, 1993, 1994a; Farr, 1993 inter alia);

(b) the processes that generate them (Where do SRs come from? Where do they go? Which basic cognitive processes do they presuppose? How are they structured? Can representations explain social behaviour? — see Abric, 1984, 1987, 1989; Flament, 1984, 1986, 1989; Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983; Ayestaran et al., 1987; Semin, 1987; Duveen and Lloyd, 1990; Doise, 1989a, 1992; Beauvois, 1991; Wagner, 1993 inter alia);

(c) functions (What are SRs for? How are they revealed in interaction? — see Markova and Wilkie, 1987; Vergès, 1987; Breakwell, 1993 inter alia);

(d) dynamic principles (How are SRs transformed, as a function of which intergroup relations? Through which channels do they move, reproduce and change? — Di Giacomo, 1985; de Rosa, 1987b, 1994b, 1994c; Nigro et al., 1988; Duveen and de Rosa, 1992; Emler and Ohana, 1993; Purkhardt, 1993 inter alia).

It is true that not all of these aspects are simultaneously taken into consideration at the same level of specificity in the literature referring to SR theory. Lack of homogeneity also stems from the diverse methods used to investigate each of these areas. Undoubtedly the SR theory lends itself to many readings. In particular, when the theory was first proposed, many researchers used its basic formulations in an unproblematic way, integrating them into their own theoretical-methodological background. However in spite of its hazy and polysemic character, the theory challenged existing theoretical and methodological approaches in social psychology and anticipated by a quarter of a century the phase of studies on attitudes which, according to McGuire's (1986) model, is characterized by a concern to bring together the structure and content of social cognitions, and to connect individuals and symbolic relationships with social actors into complex social systems (Doise, 1988: 106).

However, in contrast to Moscovici (1985), who states that SR is "a phenomenon which needs data and theories", I believe an advancement of the SR theory in terms of a *better* definition will not derive simply from the accumulation of new data and new research. Accumulation of data would serve only to increase the area of influence of the paradigm within the scientific community. Often, a piece of research is purely descriptive by nature, its attractiveness lies in its contents and has few or no implications for the theory. Researchers do not automatically reflect on the theory itself. They have often used SR theory uncritically, in the same way that until

a few years ago they would have used the concept of attitude, opinion or image.

Jahoda has been categorical on this point:

My contention is that most, if not all [research on SR] could have been reported without the label of social representations and its absence would have made little, if any difference. What holds this variety of studies together are the covers of the book rather than any common theoretical orientation. (Jahoda, 1988: 204)

And more recently Ibáñez (1992) stated:

What is not compatible with this kind of theoretical formulation is the pretension to establish it as a strong generative device for doing empirical research. The growing number of empirical applications of the theory cannot be alleged to assess its value. Both games cannot be played simultaneously. One cannot gain all at once, the explanatory benefits of imprecise but rich theories and the benefits of rigorous empirical applications of the theory. (Ibáñez, 1992: 22)

Provided that the metatheoretical debate on SR does not become a sterile counterpositioning of opinions with the goal of claiming the superiority of one's own ideas (Räty and Snellman, 1992), I believe it represents the ideal place for confrontation between critical views so as to reach a better definition of the theory. Furthermore, this confrontation will prevent SR theory from becoming one of the many "lonely paradigms", a fate that Moscovici (1984c) himself recognizes as common to the various theoretical models that appear and disappear in ten-year cycles in social psychology:

The usefulness of the confrontation is also recognized by the protagonists of the metatheoretical debate, such as Potter and Billig, who write:

It is precisely a sign of health of this debate that it has revolved around competing theoretical frameworks. It has not remained at the level of many psychological debates, which focus exclusively on empirical adequacy. The intellectual debate of the "thinking society" should neither be characterised by "monologue," nor "dialogue striving after a common goal." Instead, there should be searching and vigorous argument which explores the adequacy of different positions. (Potter and Billig, 1992: 16)

And the more useful the debate, the more circumscribed the problematic elements highlighted by it (see below), thus preventing the "omnicomprehensiveness" of the theory from being echoed in the omnicomprehensiveness of the criticisms.

### *The social nature of SRs: the two sides of the debate*

One of the issues raised during the critical debate on SR theory, which goes right to the heart of the theory and challenges it where it most claims its distinctiveness from other paradigms, is the social nature of SR. On this matter, the developments of the metatheoretical debate move in two directions: one tends to invoke an ever more structural pull towards the social; the other tends to emphasize the importance of individual mediations.

On the side of the "social extremists" are those who, like Harré, assert that

Social representations are not social in the sense of belonging to the group, they are individual representations, each of which is similar to every one of the rest. [...] this use of "the social" is still, in the last analysis, a version of individualism. (Harré, 1984: 930-1)

Harré's critique essentially deals with distinguishing a double concept of social as: (a) "distributive plurality" on the basis of which "a group properly arises by each member having some similar attribute to every other", which according to Harré is an improper concept of the social, and is also at the basis of the concept of social representation of the French school; (b) "collective plurality" on the basis of which "the group, as a supra-individual, has an attribute which is not an attribute of any of the members". To take up another example of Harré's which further clarifies the distinction between the social as distributive or collective: "The strength of an army is a distributive property, while its organization is a property of the collective" (Harré, 1984: 930).

Thomas Ibáñez (1992) places himself on the same side of the debate, seeing an implicit methodological individualism in the concept of SR, from which, in his view, one can only infer a type of individual representation: "I don't see how to gain knowledge about a social representation without having a concrete person speak, to write or debate" (Ibáñez, 1992: 23). However, it is not clear why and how this criticism should also apply to the possible renaming of social representation as collective representation, as Ibáñez suggests. In fact, even if collective representations are understood as metahistorical entities, static and unchanging through time and space (but it is precisely this concept that Moscovici wants to overcome), and as such singled out in the "collective memory deposited in collective productions (narratives, songs, sayings, etc.)", it is not clear how they can be known, reproduced and reinvented if not

through individuals and groups participating in the cultural heritage and reactivating it in their social context through various symbolic mediations.

On the side of those who call for greater subjectivity are those who, like Leyens, do not want to exclude the possibility of approaching the study of social representations from a psychological or cognitivist perspective. In fact, he says:

... it is the single individual who, at a certain point, integrates and modifies the social forms of cultures and groups to which he belongs, and who, independently of the numerous mediations offered by social representations (institutions, powers, laws, mass media, etc.), at the end transmits and expresses social representations. [...] individual conduct can be considered, thus, as consequences of social representations. (Leyens, 1991: 115, my translation)

This assertion, which, taken alone, risks inducing a deterministic and linear-causative reading of relationships between SR and individual behaviour, can be better interpreted in the light of Doise's (1982, 1984, 1987) definition of SRs as "generators of positions assumed" in a more complex articulation of various explanatory levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, positional, ideological) in social psychology.

A theoretical-empirical modelling of the articulations between individual, social and collective levels in SR theory and integrated with action theory is proposed by Cranach (1992) in a "multi-level organization of knowledge and action" which hypothesizes circular processes of co-evolution between social representations and social-individual representations "at the crossing points of knowledge and action".

Thus it can be seen how the same problematic element (the social nature of SR) has been contested by opposing factions, according to the theoretical persuasion of the parties to the debate. This may be proof that the theory per se is neither right nor wrong, but offers a perspective which may or may not be shared, depending on how familiar its basic propositions are to the debater and how easily they can be anchored to his/her system of cognitions and previous theoretical loyalties (to use the terminology of SR theory).

#### *The criterion of consensus*

The question of the social nature of SRs is reflected — at an operational level — in the question of whether it is legitimate to reduce

to the criterion of pure interindividual "consensus" the conditions of production and, therefore, of the analysis of representations.

Of course, one soon learns to read the expression "social representation" to mean "distributed individual representation," but this does not resolve the difficulty that the terminology gives rise to. It obscures the distinction between "social = similar set of individual representations" and "social = social (that is collective) representations". (Harré, 1984: 930-1).

In fact, by confirming the social nature of representations, Moscovici has more than once emphasized the aspect of "sharing": by this he does not mean a static, distributive or statistical conception of sharing (in the sense of what is more frequent, diffuse or common in a particular social group, or what corresponds to the average values), but a dynamic conception of "access to the same symbolic and communicative codes". Taking up Asch's three criteria for characterizing the social nature of attitudes, Jodelet (1984) defines social representations on the basis of three salient areas, which go far beyond the fact that they concern "social objects":

- the conditions and contexts of production;
- the functions carried out within the dynamic of social relations;
- the communicative processes they imply.

Di Giacomo further clarifies the non-extensional nature of the concept of social at the basis of SR:

It is not very important at this point whether the image itself is specific to the individual: one speaks of social representation when individuals produce evaluative judgments on the reality of their environment on the basis of collective criteria, which have a social function in this collectivity, and which have emerged from its dynamic. (Di Giacomo, 1985: 131)

Bellelli (1992) writes along the same lines:

Social representations should not be taken as more or less extended collections of opinions, which may be more or less identical in a more or less large number of individuals who have some social belonging in common. Neither should they be taken as simple external models for the representations of individuals, who can then be typified in relation to their greater or lesser conformity. This may be so in specific conditions, but social representations should be spoken of only in the measure in which they reconstruct the conditions from which they emerged, the means of their circulation and their appropriation in a given collectivity, the functions they carry out in the dynamics of relations between that collectivity and others. (Bellelli, 1992)

### *SR and social subjects: circularity of definitions*

The problem of the criterion of consensus can be seen as a link between the question of the social nature of SR and the circularity between the definitions of SR and the social subjects (groups, categories) which produce them.

In particular, Litton and Potter (1985) polemicize on the fact that in the study of social representations, contrasting elements have been minimized and "consensual universes" created. Next to the ambiguity regarding the extent to which SRs are shared, the authors lament the lack of explicit, external criteria for identifying groups independent of shared SRs, which creates circularity insofar as a group is identified by its SRs and at the same time is assumed to be the generator of those SRs.

In other words, on the level of empirical research, the possibility of identifying the groups on the basis of external criteria (i.e. independently of the SRs they express) is completely lacking. Moscovici, in spite of his sophisticated discussion of the psychological nature of groups in his studies on social influence (1976), treated the notion of group in an aproblematic way (according to some authors), limiting himself, for example in his classical study on psychoanalysis, to identifying groups on the basis of newspaper headlines, making the independent variable (groups of readers of various daily newspapers) coincide in a tautological and circular way with the dependent variable (the various SRs they express).

According to these authors, the acritical assumption of the criteria for group definition in SR research means that an analysis of the various levels of consensus which characterize group members is completely neglected. An example is the effect of contextual variables which are strongly linked to evaluative goals, as in studies on discourse in the scientific community (Gilbert and Latour, 1987; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Mulkay, 1984; Potter, 1983; Yearley, 1984).

### *Methodological vulnerability: questions and answers*

Various authors (Potter and Litton, 1985; Jahoda, 1988; Ibáñez, 1992; McKinlay et al., 1993) have criticized the empirical approach to SRs as methodologically loose. In particular Potter and Litton (1985) criticize the treatment of SR as a descriptive, static

and consensual schema (Herzlich, 1973), or as a product of multidimensional statistical techniques on lists of free associations (Di Giacomo, 1981) or as measures of concepts of open-closed responses (Hewstone et al., 1982). Slippage from the theoretical level to the operational level can be detected here, showing a sort of methodological vulnerability in the literature which should have been used to empirically substantiate the SR theory.

Taking up the example of Di Giacomo's research, quoted by Potter and Litton (1985), Moscovici (1985) replies that the elicited SRs were not those of the researcher, but of the subjects, who had been grouped according to preliminary explorative comparisons and had not been singled out post hoc (which could have led to a charge of circularity). He points out that one proposition of the SR theory picks out characteristics such as sex or social class as a dimension of a group of people. However, he adds that the SRs should be grasped as specifically as possible and he recognizes that the majority of researchers have moved in this direction (Moscovici, 1985).

I believe a rigid identification of "social" with "consensual" runs the risk of invalidating the methodologies utilized not only in research on SRs, but in the majority of psycho-social research. A conception of the social which is based purely on frequencies fails to recognize that a social group can never be assumed a priori to be a homogeneous whole. In fact, individuals belong to a number of social groups and categories simultaneously, and the representations expressed from time to time (either homogeneous or contrasting) are also a function of the saliency with which a particular group membership is activated in a specific context and social situation. To hypostatize social groups means not to consider the psychological dynamics which characterize and underlie them.

With regard to the circularity in the definition of groups and SR, I would add that, in the case of my own empirical research on SRs of mental illness (de Rosa, 1987b, 1988a, 1991, 1994b, 1994c) as in the majority of studies reported in the literature on SRs, the population was selected with a priori criteria of category membership (groups of children of different ages, males/females, upper, middle and lower social class, students from different educational backgrounds, working people with different professional roles, etc.). However, if a criticism can be raised, it should be, on the contrary, that there was an assumption of "categories" rather than "real social groups".



Techniques of statistical analysis make it possible to establish a posteriori groups which differ from the a priori categorical assumptions on the basis of profiles of interindividual similarity; and I see this as a contribution (not a limitation) to the study of the articulations between individuals, groups and social categories (which are rendered more or less salient by the methods utilized and by the context in which a specific representation is elicited and expressed) (see Flament, 1986; Mannetti, 1990; Doise et al., 1992; Fife-Schaw, 1993; Purkhardt and Stockdale, 1993).

With regard to the criticism recently taken up by McKinlay et al. (1993) concerning methods of revealing the consensuality of SRs, I would like to reply that in reality — or at least in the case of research I carried out on SRs of mental illness in naive and expert populations — the statistical treatment of data did not aim at measuring the consensus of the elicited representations. In fact, besides providing evidence of intergroup variability in these elements of the representational field — and without discounting the consistency of these archaic figurative nuclei — a notable part of the results presented also show intragroup (and even intraindividual) variability in relation to the various levels of representation elicited through recourse to different methods (see de Rosa, 1987a, 1990, 1994b).

#### *The relation between language and SRs*

To return to Potter and Litton's (1985) critique, another proposal they make is to turn to *linguistic repertoires* in order to gain access to SRs. They press for a more detailed analysis of language, singling out the explicative schema utilized in relation to certain types of contexts in order to clarify the relations between social representations and the contexts in which they are used. Inspired by this objective, they quote, as an illustration, their analysis of verbal material gathered from diverse sources on a social event (the riots at St Paul's, Bristol): recordings of radio and television programmes, a wide range of articles and newspaper editorials and transcriptions of interviews with six people involved in or present during the riots. Using the entire 80 000-word transcription, they analysed every possible explanation advanced for the riot. In the article in question, they discuss three levels of agreement that distinguished the levels of sharing of proposed causal explanations in relation to two

factors: race and government spending cuts. In the discussion of the results of these linguistic analyses, which emphasize the role of internal disagreement in the various views recorded despite the presence of a shared explicative schema, the authors suggest that researchers of SRs should make the most of available methodologies which are sensitive to the flexibility and contextualization of meaning. These elements generally escape notice in coarse forms of content analysis, tending rather to show shared explicative schemata in general terms, rather than the various interpretations possible in differentiated practical situations.

All the same, the suggestions they make (see also Potter and Wetherell, 1987) once more propose a wider interest in the analysis of the relation between language and SRs, already advanced by Rommetveit (1984) and often taken up in the literature (see also Billig, 1987, 1988, 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Antaki, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992; and empirical works by Antaki, 1985; Semin, 1987; Trognon and Larrue, 1988; van Dijk, 1990; Potter and Edwards, 1990; Antaki and Leudar, 1992).

No doubt, interest in the conversational and rhetorical approach has permitted "a lucid and efficacious rereading, in this specific perspective of many classical themes and problems in social psychology, for example that of attitudes, social categorization, accounts" (De Grada and Mannetti, 1992). However, over and above the undoubted interest of the contextualization of verbal exchanges, which these types of approach permit by largely ignoring intraindividual cognitive processes, the proposals which would confine the study of SRs exclusively to conversational analysis risk being limiting and reductionist. In fact, by favouring the discursive channel, they end up doing away with the study of the important area of connections between symbolic conduct and social cognitions. Furthermore, they risk losing sight of the expressive-symbolic nature of the re-activations of the collective imagination — an essential component of SRs — in the "situational, conversational context" (Jodelet, 1989b; on the link between social cognition, communication and social context, in different critical perspectives, see also: Still and Costall, 1991; Schwartz and Strack, 1991; de Rosa, 1992).

In other words, among those who identify the conversational approach *tout court* with the methodology of analysis of SRs, and even more among those who intend to replace the concept of SR with that of "linguistic repertoires":

... the emphasis remains on the "cognitive", in the sense of a search for models of causal explanation, more than on the "symbolic," even if it deals with cognitive events studied as products of a complex negotiation which develops between the actors-interlocutors of the conversational context and not as "something that already exists completely formed in the head of the person who is responding and is simply communicated to the person who asks the question. (Kidd and Amabile, 1981: 326; quoted in De Grada, 1992)

Whilst acknowledging several interesting implications, Moscovici (1985) does not believe that linguistic repertoires can correspond exactly to the nature of the phenomenon of SR since a discussion is not a representation, even if every representation can be translated into a discussion. Images or concepts do not pass entirely through language.

Ibáñez takes the opposite stand: he is preoccupied with the emphasis placed on figurative-reproductive aspects of representations and the tendency to objectify them within an individualistic methodological reductionism.

If instead of being labelled as a "Theory of Social Representations" the interesting theoretical preoccupations of Moscovici had been labelled as "Theory of Collective Symbolic Productions", no doubt the whole dynamics and the whole structure of this theory would have been quite different. Maybe the emphasis would not have been put so strongly on the figurative aspects of social thinking and more attention would have been paid to constructive activities as well as to the rhetorical aspects of social thinking. (Ibáñez, 1992: 24-5).

However Ibáñez's critical considerations do not seem to take into account many of the clarifications proposed by Moscovici when he attempts to differentiate the paradigm of SRs from those that fit into the area of social cognition:

... the concept of social cognition implies a conscious logical process. This is not true for social representations. These are based on conventions and symbols and include conscious, unconscious, rational and irrational aspects. The result of this is that the term "cognitive" is not precise when it is applied to social phenomena. It would be more appropriate to use the word "symbolic", which is not the same thing. It is thus wrong to say that social representations are cognitive representations. Psychosociologists tend to confuse cognitive and symbolic. If, as is claimed, the cognitive revolution is behind them, the symbolic revolution has still to arrive and this also involves general psychologists. Without this revolution, social representations can only provide a small contribution. (Moscovici, 1986a: 73, my translation)

By recalling that representations are made up of a figurative and an abstract side, and of a combination of images and concepts, Moscovici (1985) reminds us that sometimes images are not

recognized as such and are not thought of as symbols, but as reality.

What surprises me about Ibáñez's position is his preoccupation with the accentuation of the iconic aspect of SRs, which many studies have tended to present as a highly informative element and *synthetic translator* of a set of symbolic meanings. In fact, how can one fail to include among the historical products of the "collective memory" figurative and artistic productions (which have always been a vehicle of symbolic representations, whether in line with or as alternatives to the hegemonic representations of the official culture), linguistic productions (narratives, songs, proverbs, individual discourses, etc.), and symbolic-ritualistic conduct (ways of doing things, celebrations and so on) which he himself indicates (Ibáñez, 1992: 24).

#### *For a multimethod approach to the study of SR*

In my work on SRs of mental illness (de Rosa, 1987b, 1988a,b, 1994b,c; de Rosa and Iaculo, 1988), it was extremely useful to put the verbal methods traditionally used in psycho-social research (semi-directed interviews, questionnaires, scales of social distance, semantic differential, free associations) side by side with both non-verbal instruments, less popular in psycho-social research (figurative drawing trials and textual tests), and the analysis of sources habitually used in research of a historiographic nature and — unfortunately — not used by psycho-social research, such as textual sources (from the official scientific and institutional culture, such as classic texts regarding the history of psychiatry and legislative texts, and sources from popular culture, such as proverbial sayings and expressions, turns of speech, etc.) and iconographic sources (artistic images, popular prints, ethnographic exhibits, *ex voto*, etc.) (de Rosa, 1987b, de Rosa and Schurmans, 1990a, 1990b).

That linguistic productions cannot be the only means of access to SRs is a methodological issue which I have discussed elsewhere (de Rosa, 1987a, 1990, 1994b). I suggested adapting the methodological approach to the polyvalence of levels of dimensional analysis implicit in the definition of SR and making the results obtained during the investigation problematic through an interactive reading of methods used, data and statistical analyses.

Among the various proposals of a primarily technical-statistical nature present in the literature (Degenne and Vergès, 1973; Flament, 1986; Di Giacomo, 1981, 1985; Le Bouedec, 1986; Amaturò, 1987; Mannetti, 1990; Doise et al., 1992; Fife-Schaw, 1993; Purkhardt and Stockdale, 1993), my proposal for the adoption of a multi-methodological approach was intended to go in the direction desired by Moscovici (1986b); he indicated he was in favour of the adoption of a *continuum* of methods and not a spurious *summing up* of various methods. In other words, the multiple use of various investigation techniques on the same population with the goal of studying the interaction between method and results, and with various dimensional levels of the SR construct would, in my opinion, always involve the introduction of a series of hypotheses connected with the specificity of the methods used in the elaboration of research plans as a function of various levels of analysis of the same "object" of representation (images, opinions, behaviours evoked, evaluations, emotional polarizations, symbolic behaviour, etc.).

It should be remembered that – and this is what gives life to so many of the polemics brought up in the course of the theoretical debate on SR – most research inspired by this paradigm has focussed on revealing the components of "information", "opinion", "social judgment" and "stereotypical images" regarding the most diverse objects of representation; that is, on the contents which most explicitly constitute the representational field and, secondly (but to a much lesser degree), on the systems of propagation, diffusion and propaganda of these representations. Even more rare in the literature produced up to now is attention to more latent dimensions, which are not limited to the socio-cognitive mediations operated by language (with the procedural constraints implicit in primarily textual productions, but also conversational productions) on irrational components, on symbolic valencies and unconscious processes which, by the very definition of the construct, are constitutive of social representations involved in processes which generate them and in the functions which regulate social exchanges (see Kaës, 1989; Giust-Desprairies, 1988; Jodelet, 1989b; Šperber, 1989, 1990; Carli, 1990).

Moscovici, with regard to questions of method, has explicitly affirmed that every class of SRs should be susceptible to a particular methodological treatment, respecting the conformation and dynamics peculiar to each of the three classes of SRs so far singled out:

1) the closed social representations whose elements are found in a uniform and similar way in an entire population; 2) *agonal or critical* social representations whose elements are more or less the same in an entire population, but whose significance is determined by different and even contrasting values; 3) open social representations whose elements are distributed among the various categories of the population, such that it is necessary to put them together to find their coherence. (Moscovici, 1986b: 3)

He believes that the study of SRs should ideally lead to a procedure similar to that of an anthropology or a "clinical sociology" aimed at creating "psycho-social archives" of the culture as a stock of basic materials for the "analysis of values, of affect and social thought".

Thus, if SRs are to be gathered – beyond their purely informative elements – in terms of their symbolic dimension and "irrational" components, on a continuum of levels from the individual to the collective, the limits of the methodological approaches based on questionnaires and standard interviews are evident. Furthermore, as the new conversational approaches and the rhetorical analyses of conversation have shown, very often verbal productions are treated in an aproblematic and acritical way by researchers. According to Potter and Billig:

Once the researcher draws on the ontology of cognitivism, which has been refined in the decontextualized, desocialized and uncultured universe of laboratory experiments, there is no unproblematic way to connect these ideas to processing of talk. By contrast, once the pragmatics and rhetoric of talk and texts are theorized and analysed, the traditional ontology of cognitivism itself starts to look fragile (Edwards and Potter, 1991). Indeed discourse analytic work poses important questions for cognitive psychologists concerning what might count as an adequate explanation. (Edwards, 1991; Edwards et al., 1992; Potter and Billig, 1992: 16)

Specific criticisms such as this one are welcome for refining the epistemological choices involved in the adoption of certain methodologies. Research on SRs can only benefit from a similar level of methodological-theoretical problematics. I believe that these contributions (I do not see them as alternatives) integrate and improve the SR paradigm which, precisely due to the complexity of levels of analysis which it claims to encompass, should be able to lean on theories and more specific theory-based techniques which permit making problematic the specific stages in the process of psycho-social research.

The position assumed by Doise (1982, 1987, 1988, 1993) is balanced and open to a multidimensional view of scientific research work in the area of the critical-methodological debate, which for

some years has echoed the success among researchers of Moscovici's proposal of the SR construct as "a broad theory . . . a general theoretical orientation". In underlining the validity of an approach which is not sectorial, but which coherently integrates the various methods in use in psycho-social research with the various levels of analysis of the objects studied, Doise (1989a, 1989b, 1993) also takes into account the specificity and relations of the construct of SRs with respect to other concepts of social psychology.

In line with these considerations is a recent article by Sotirakopoulou and Breakwell (1992). The reasons they put forward for the adoption of various methodological approaches in the study of SRs can be summarized as follows:

1) The very nature of social representations implies that we do not have a simple construct that could be investigated through a single method, successfully. Instead of a simple construct we have one that involves ideas, beliefs, values, practices, feelings, images, attitudes, knowledge, understandings and explanations.

Furthermore, one has to consider the social (shared) nature of social representations as well as their functions (i.e., to enable individuals to orient themselves and master their material social world and facilitate communication by providing a code of naming and classifying (Moscovici, 1973).

2) The fact that social representations acquire meaning, structure and image through verbal expression and communication creates one more complexity that has to be taken into account in the selection of methodology.

3) The nature of the construct leads researchers to ask different research questions both about social representations (i.e., what IS a social representation) and within social representations (i.e., how they function, how they are created, changed and so on). These different research questions need to be tackled by different methods. So, often, it is the specific target of the research that will define the research method(s).

This need for multi-methodological studies has been understood by many researchers who often suggest that although their results provide some answers to the questions they set out to investigate, other methods from the one(s) they employed might give more and better understanding. [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] our aim is not to diminish the value of any single method of gathering data, but to suggest ways of using many different methods, acknowledging each one's advantages and limitations, for a fuller understanding of social representations. (Sotirakopoulou and Breakwell, 1992: 30)

However, beyond their evident affinity for adopting a multimethod approach, they seem to have limited their choice of methodologies of data collection to those instruments which are verbal (questionnaires, in-depth interviews, attribute checklists) or textual (analysis of the press). Neither do they seem to pay sufficient attention to the formulation of specific hypotheses of a methodological nature

which would allow prediction of results as a function of methods used. Instead, they seem more oriented toward a descriptive and summing-up type of approach to the various techniques.

Similar criticisms have been expressed by Uwe Flick (1992), who judged "the combining of methods as lack of methodology", or rather as an absence of a well-connected theory of technique. His comments do not however go in the direction of demolishing the multimethod proposal for the study of SRs, but towards substantiating it by means of an interpretative approach ("reflexive triangulation") which does not reduce it to pure eclecticism or to a summing up of methods presumed to be different:

Questionnaires, interviews and attribute check-lists are operating more or less on the same track, even if the levels are different: all these methods produce verbal or written reports of subjective standpoints (knowledge, feelings, images). Analyses of the press give access to the social contexts and background of such standpoints and so offer a different type of data, but still resting on the level of knowledge. But, the potential of triangulating different methodological approaches lies in combining different perspectives of research and in focusing on aspects of the subject under study which are as different as possible [ . . . ] This goal can be reached, when we combine perspectives and methods aiming for two central and different aspects of social representations: (subjective and social) knowledge they consist of and activities through which they are produced, circulated and applied. (Flick, 1992: 47)

I completely share this orientation, and hope that the increase in investigations based on a meditated multimethodological plan can help research on SRs to leave behind an eminently descriptive view of the objects studied and move towards an interpretative dimension which takes into consideration the articulation among the various individual, social, historical-cultural levels that intervene in the structuring and differentiating of SRs as complex symbolic systems.

#### *The distinction between "consensual" and "reified" universes*

A final point in the metatheoretical debate concerns the distinction between consensual and reified universes. According to Wells (1987), the statements regarding the distinction between "consensual universes" and "reified universes" are, for Moscovici, motivationally antecedent and of primary importance compared to statements regarding the nature of reality. In other terms it is as if these statements constitute for Moscovici the epistemological presup-

positions for his theory; presuppositions that Wells holds to be unfounded. Similar considerations are expressed by Robert Farr, according to whom:

By insisting that scientists live in a "reified universe", that is virtually sanitised of all social representations, Moscovici may be restricting, unwittingly, the application of his own theory so that it does not apply to the activities of scientists [ . . . ] Scientists in their everyday activities have as much need of social representations as lay men and women have. (Farr, 1987: 362)

McKinlay and Potter's argument (1987: 479) is analogous in refuting the distinction between scientific knowledge and knowledge based on social representations, as long as the reason why scientists should be immune from the effects of representations, unlike ordinary people, remains unjustified.

I would emphasize the timeliness of adopting a more dialectic and circular reading which takes into account the overlap between "consensual" and "reified universes", "common sense" and "scientific thought", supporting this argument with results from my research on SRs of mental illness in naive and expert populations (de Rosa, 1988a, 1991). Using a bidirectional understanding of social exchanges (promoted by Moscovici, 1976, in his theory of social influence), I would call attention to the fact that the same scientific community is immersed in a world dominated by common sense and that what we might term the "interferences" between scientific knowledge and common sense sometimes remain inexplicit (a sort of tacit knowledge, anchored to simplified and prejudged views of reality transmitted from the collective memory in which each individual, scientist or not, participates) or acted on only in informal contexts of production and exchange of ideas, due to ideological prescriptions connected to one's professional role, which regulates and limits access to more coded situations.

Among the most recent considerations regarding this point are those expressed by Rätty and Snellman (1992), who take the question of the differentiation between scientific thought and common sense back to the epistemological choices implied by opposing orientations of contemporary social psychology. They suggest critically reviewing the SR theory with respect to the following questions:

- 1) Is the division between the scientific world and the consensual world too categorical, and is research activity completely outside social representations? 2) Is Moscovici's view of science overly generalized, e.g., does all research aim at making the familiar unfamiliar — have not the social sciences in particular been accused of reproducing common knowledge? 3) Do the worlds of bureaucracy

and politics, occupied with their abstract and technical concepts, also create social representations? 4) How is the power structure of society reflected in the creation and establishment of social representations? (Rätty and Snellman, 1992: 11)

More recently Purkhardt (1993) has been very determined about this point:

Rather than providing a coherent framework for social representations theory, it engenders confusion and creates problems for the dynamic, social constructionist thesis of the theory. In conclusion, I would argue that the notion of the "reified universe" is neither an essential nor a useful component of the theory. ( . . . ) The reified and consensual universes do not constitute two distinct realities. Rather, they embody two alternative and contradictory epistemologies. (Purkhardt, 1993: 92)

The metatheoretical debate on SRs must confront these and other questions, challenging the consistency of the "lonely paradigm" over a longer period of time than the decade which usually sees the emergence and decline of a paradigm in social psychology, until its last exit from the scene (Moscovici, 1984c). In the words of Ibáñez:

. . . the complexity of this question requires adopting a non disciplinary perspective. Social Psychology cannot do much by itself and it must integrate, at least, the tools elaborated by Michel Foucault and the knowledge generated by the New Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (Latour, Woolgar, etc.). This integration is indeed the task we should face in the present. (Ibáñez, 1992: 25)

## Conclusions

Over the last 30 years, in European social psychology, numerous research projects have been inspired by the SR construct, differently oriented on the methodological level according to whether they have been concerned with: (a) the area of transmission and popularization of scientific knowledge; (b) the processes underlying the structuring of knowledge (generally investigated with experimental techniques); or (c) the genesis of SRs on various "objects", investigated in "real" environments through a more descriptive ethnographic type of approach.

The criteria utilized for defining SRs have not always been univocal, not only among these different areas of research, but also within them. Therefore, the time is right for a reflection on valid methods in research on SRs, on suitable statistical apparatus for data analysis, and for a possible theoretical reordering of the operative definition of the concept itself.

The scientific debate has become increasingly lively due primarily to the intensification of research output using the theoretical-empirical model of SRs as a reference paradigm. As always happens during the phases in which a theoretical construct, from "concept" to "construct", progressively builds itself up as "paradigm", the debate has until now raised more questions than it has been able to resolve.

The hope for the future is that this metatheoretical debate will advance the status and the level of scientific formalization of SR theory, just as the empirical research output has advanced our knowledge of numerous "objects" and "phenomena" of daily life and understanding and has turned the interest of social psychologists back to the real horizon within which the life of real social beings takes place.

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