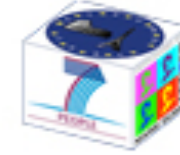**European/International Joint PhD in Social Representations and Communication International Summer School 2016**

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The concept of themata 'at the heart of social representations': implications for single case studies

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Aims of this lecture

- To introduce the concept of themata in science and in the theory of social representations

- To explain
  - different uses of themata
  - the epistemological value of methodological themata

- To provide examples of the Self-Other thema as a basis of single case studies in the research on social representations

From thinking in oppositions to themata

- the omnipresence of thinking in polarities, dyadic oppositions and antinomies throughout the history of humankind, in and through different cultures and in diverse languages

- This idea – appears in the concept of themata. It was introduced into the domain of scientific explanation in 1973 by Gerald Holton: themata as the basic elements that underlie the structure of physical theories and their development

- These elements often appear in antithetical modes like 'evolution and devolution, constancy and change, complexity and simplicity, reductionism and holism, hierarchy and unity, the efficacy of mathematics (for example, geometry) versus the efficacy of mechanistic models as explanatory tools'. These basic constituents motivate as well as constrain the creation of ideas and the development of concepts
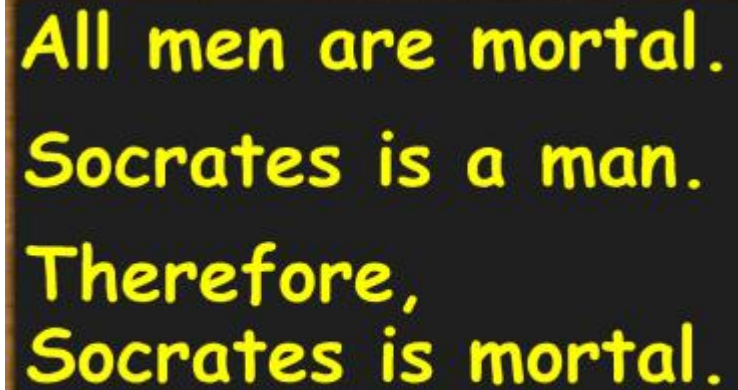
Themata and dialectical thinking

- The concept of themata is underlain by dialectical thinking
- Dialectics was a feature of Moscovici's thought. Due to this, forerunners of dyadic themata already in the first edition of *Psychoanalysis* in 1961 (Jesuino, 2008).
- Social psychology as a discipline in movement: doubly orientated with respect to several kinds of *dyadic micro-social* versus *macro-social oppositions in tension* (e.g. oppositions like individuals versus groups, personality versus culture, psychology versus sociology). As a hybrid discipline in continuous movement it should focus on different ways of coping with tensions produced by these dyadic relations.
- Later on, still other dyadic oppositions in tension dominated Moscovici's thought, such as majority versus minority, common sense versus science, and knowledge versus belief. He considered that the study of tensions between such dyadic oppositions constituted the challenge to, and specificity of, social psychology

Themata in common sense

- Serge Moscovici **explicitly** brought the notion of themata into the theory of social representations and placed themata 'at the heart of social representations'. He likened them to 'concept images', 'primary conceptions' or 'primitive notions'. Despite that, themata rarely mentioned in Moscovici's subsequent work (e.g. in Moscovici, 2001; 2011)

- In contrast to scientific explanation (Holton) the theory of social representations is based on common sense and on forms of socially shared knowledge. **By extending the concept of themata from scientific to daily thinking, and by placing themata 'at the heart of social representations', Moscovici linked scientific and common-sense forms of thought.**

- If Moscovici's work had been based on the idea of dyadic oppositions in tension, what did he find in Holton's concept that inspired him to place themata 'at the heart of social representations'? Before answering this question let us consider oppositions as continuous and as separated from one another

Separated and continuous oppositions

- Some dyadic oppositions and antinomies have been conceived as strictly separated from one another, and mutually exclusive - e.g. the Aristotelian laws of thought guiding the logic of syllogisms, but the perspective that views dyadic oppositions as strictly separate, runs throughout the whole history of science in European scholarship.
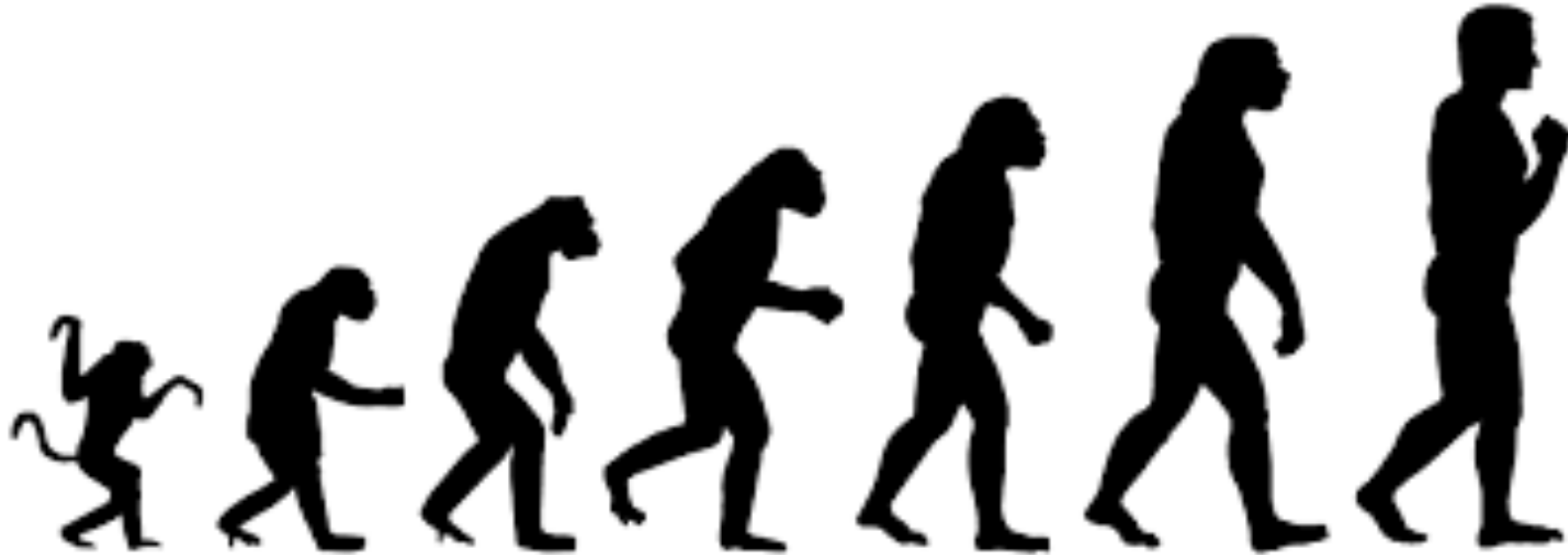
Separated and continuous oppositions

- Components of dyadic oppositions are treated not only as separate from one another, but the concepts that are used to explain their natures, appear to be incompatible.

- In order to clarify this point, let us consider **the dyadic opposition of continuity versus discontinuity** that is often debated in sciences and humanities. In humanities, the questions are of the kind: Is the development of humans during their evolution, as well as during their individual lives continuous, showing gradual increments that are quantifiable? Or is the development discontinuous, and does it proceed in discrete stages?

Continuous oppositions

From thinking in oppositions to themata: separated and continuous oppositions

- Charles Darwin- an upward continuum; human species differ from animals in degree, but not in kind: the difference is quantitative and the gap 'is filled up by numberless gradations … Differences of this kind between the highest men of the highest races and the lowest savages, are connected by the finest gradations'. Evolution of the species as a continuous progression toward perfection

- Emile Durkheim - hypothesis of continuity: primitive religious representations gradually transform into modern and scientific representations (Moscovici, 1998, p. 423). Piaget, following the Durkheimian line of thought, too, viewed child development as a continuous line from pre-logical to logical thinking (Inhelder and Piaget, 1955/1958).

- Lucien Lévy-Bruhl viewed the historical development of knowledge as discontinuous involving different kinds of logic in specific socio-cultural domains. Luria and Vygotsky in their studies in Uzbekistan in the 1930s testing the dependence of cognitive development and abstract thinking on the socio-cultural conditions – complementarity

- The dyadic opposition between continuity and discontinuity follows different paths: gradual quantifiable increments follow the line of a continuous development, while the concept of discontinuity singles out the dependence of development on socio-cultural conditions.

Figure/ground image

The origin of themata

- Human thought is heterogeneous; different forms, e.g. problem-solving, the formation of concepts, the search for similarities and differences between events, objects and people, the creation of images, thinking in dyadic oppositions, and many others. Thinking in dyadic oppositions associated with themata, e.g. 'evolution and devolution', etc.

- What is the origin of themata? Holton - the need to answer this question: one should look for connections between the individual and his/her community. Themata have both a psychological and a collective component these are interdependent ; themata can be understood as having a life-cycle; they arise, are maintained and fade away. These processes await a much deeper exploration. Holton's (1978) analysis of scientific imagination, which is based on single case studies of physicists, draws attention to the unique nature of the individual creativity within the scientific community.

- Not all dyadic oppositions do become themata: only those dyadic oppositions, which function as conceptual elements underlying the structure and development of physical theories, rise to themata. The attachment to a thema: may facilitate creative imagination, or may lead to blind alleys because of immovable convictions that possess the researcher's mind. Themata are often implicit rather than explicitly stated: they are hardly ever observable; they are held unconsciously rather than reflectively deliberated.

Themata arise from human imagination

- Themata are not only elements of scientific theories, but Holton argues that they underlie a broad spectrum of human thought, whether scientific or non-scientific. They arise from humans' general imaginative capacity (Holton, 1973, p. 214)

- Holton: science is a cultural and historical product: 'Science is in a dynamic interaction with the total intellectual activity of an age … it may underlie the work of the artist just as it penetrates into the explanation a mother gives to her child to help him understand the way things move' (Holton, 1974, p. 202)

- Holton: the traditional division between sciences and humanities is grounded in an oversimplified assumption that science is no more than a purely empirical and logically analytic process. This, Holton argues, is a wrong presupposition and therefore, **the separation between sciences and non-sciences should be abolished**. But such a claim is very provocative. Have not scholars since the eighteenth century vehemently argued that the humanities and natural sciences are of different kinds, and that humanities must be treated, conceptually and empirically, differently from the natural sciences?

Themata integrate natural sciences and humanities

- Giambatttista Vico – 18th century - natural and human sciences are fundamentally distinct from one another. Concepts and methods that are applicable to the former cannot be extended to the latter: natural sciences explore objects as related by the laws of causality; human sciences study human agency, creativity and imagination. Humans create their social reality in and through reflection and self-reflection

- Vico's perspective was adopted and extended by the 19th century Wilhelm Dilthey who coined the terms *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences)

- Gerald Holton's argument concerned with a very different problem. Science is a cultural and historical process and product: it is 'in a dynamic interaction with the total intellectual activity of an age'. This perspective contrasts with the reductionism existing *within* natural sciences. As a cultural product, science is based on human intelligence and imagination. Themata, both in science and non-science, have in common these marks of human intelligence and its general imaginative capacity. Themata are shared by members of a community, but each individual develops a thema according to his/her experience and inventive capacities. **Themata, which are elements of the development of scientific theories, are also features of non-scientific thinking. Therefore, thematic thinking integrates, rather than separates, natural sciences and humanities.**

Themata in the theory of social representations

- Holton – no more than a 100 themata in physical sciences.

- In the theory of social representations, dyadic oppositions are part of common sense thinking; physical, biological or social antinomies embedded in history and culture - no limits

- Themata established over generations: they operate implicitly at a non-conscious level; they underlie common sense (e.g. morality, internalization of norms, no need for them to be explicitly raised unless they are violated –brought into language, thematised and generate representations

- A thematic analysis in social representations takes place in the public discourse - public disputes - the content of themata responds to current social, political, cultural and historical contexts; the content of themata transforms and innovates itself in and through language and communication: expressed in narratives, explanations, hypotheses, arguments and justifications

- Holton's thematic analysis showing how the researcher goes beyond dyadic oppositions the transformation of themata in and through interdependence between individual agency and collective activities led Moscovici to place themata 'at the heart of social representations'.

Different uses of themata

- Holton: three ways in which themata are used in physical sciences
- 1. *a thematic concept:* emphasis on the development and transformation of the content of the thema
- 2. *a methodological thema:* **A methodological thema has an epistemological role: it guides the direction of the pursuit of science**
- 3. *a thematic proposition or a hypothetical thema* lies between the former two uses, and it can be considered as a potential for the further development of a particular physical theory
- One and the same thema can be used in different ways and can serve different purposes, e.g. as a thematic concept or as a methodological thema. **What matters, is whether the researcher focuses on a particular thema in terms of the transformation of thematic content or whether he/she uses that thema as an epistemological guide to the development of a theory.**

Themata as thematic concepts

- When Moscovici referred to themata, he conceived of them as thematic concepts and he placed emphasis on the content of thematisation in and through communication. For example, he analysed the dyadic opposition *man/woman* (Moscovici and Vignaux, 1994/2000) or he referred to dyadic pairs like *nomadic/sedentary, right/left* or *clean/dirty* (Moscovici, 2011) in the history of 'Roma'. The thema *man/woman* has had a very long career in the history of humankind and has undergone tremendous variations with respect to thematisation of its content across cultures and in history. For example, it could be thematised as 'feminism' *versus* 'male chauvinism', or as 'female ethics of care' *versus* 'male concern with rights and rules' (Gilligan, 1982).

- Themata related to Gypsies or 'Roma' have been constructed around *nomadic/sedentary, pure/impure* and thematised either negatively (beggars and delinquents living outside the law) or positively (musicians and travelling entertainers) (Moscovici, 2011, p. 457). Having been established and maintained for centuries, themata justify the actions of societal majorities, for example, on the one hand, the taboo of contact that perpetuates the discrimination of 'Roma'. On the other hand, in order to accord with the human rights, the legal protection of 'Roma' families and groups has been established in European countries (Moscovici, 2011, p. 459).

Themata as methodological themata

- What is the meaning of 'methodological'?

- Holton's adjective 'methodological' refers to 'methodology' as a domain of scholarship concerned with theoretical analysis of the corpus of methods, i.e. with the direction in which the search for knowledge takes place

- In psychology the term 'methodology' is often confused with that of a 'method' (e.g. the question 'which methodology do you use?'). Holton's 'methodological' does not refer to single methods as the tools of analysis or techniques.

- Methodology is a branch of knowledge and therefore, **its meaning is epistemological**. For example, Holton examines analysis and synthesis as a methodological thema that guides the researcher or a professional either towards the detailed analysis of the phenomenon in question or towards holism and the broadly based concept of knowledge. Analysis and synthesis are cultural products, some of which are comprehended as mainly analytical and others as mainly synthetic. Commitments of intellectuals and professionals either to analysis or synthesis is reflected in other opposing thematic concepts such as reductionism versus holism, dichotomisation versus unification, fragmentation versus wholeness, and differentiation versus integration.

- Holton's example of analysis and synthesis as a methodological thema draws attention its epistemological role in various branches of sciences and scholarship

Methodological or epistemological themata: The Self/Other

- Recapitulation: Thematic concepts develop and structure the content of scientific theories, methodological (epistemological) themata express rules or laws of science and guide the direction of science

- The Self/Other is the point of departure for dialogicality. The dialogical mind is the mind in interaction with others, i.e. with individuals, groups, institutions, cultures, and with the past, present and future.

- The Self/Other interdependence - an example of an epistemological thema in social representations. It underlies daily thinking, common sense and communication. From this epistemological thema numerous thematic concepts or content themata, can be derived.

- Our research on HIVAIDS in Scottish prisons and in studies of haemophilia showed that the Self- and Other-awareness and the Self/Other distinction were the basic oppositional dichotomies On the basis of the Self/Other distinction we derived other dichotomies, such as perception of risk to the Self and Others

- In the case of haemophilia: the knowledge of the disease and its spread was found as less important than fear of being rejected by Others. At the time of this research we had not been aware of the notion of themata, we found later on that the Self/Other distinction was compatible with the concept of themata. This is why the Self/Other served as an epistemological thema from which other thematic concepts wer e derived.

The Self/Other as an epistemological thema of the dialogical approach to social representations

- The centrality of the thema Self/Other has been most systematically explored in two research teams

- Hélène Joffe's team: social representations of risks of the emerging infectious diseases, climate changes and earthquakes; the interdependence of the Self/Other - the Self associates danger with the Other; the Self/Other thema plays a major role in common sense thinking and underlies other content themata related to coping with risk and dangers such as identity-protection/identity-spoiling, clean/dirty, moral/immoral, among others. The Self/Other thema is thematised in unique ways to fit different cultural and socio-historical conditions: 'Research on *social representations of risks has revealed that a single thema, self/other,* shapes public engagement with a diverse range of threats... The current paper leverages this case to develop theorization of the role played by themata in the construction of common sense, and to advance understanding of the underlying drivers of social responses to contemporary risk issues'.

The Self/Other as an epistemological thema of the dialogical approach to social representations

- Gail Moloney,'s team: the centrality of the Self/Other in studying organ and blood donation; specificity of contexts, time and place; contradictory understandings of issues in which manifest themselves as cognitive polyphasia within single representations. Cognitive polyphasia expresses tensions created by fear of pain and danger to the Self, and at the same time by willingness to help Others. The thema Self/Other as having 'the generative potential' as 'the basic thema'. It underpins the public understanding of blood donation and that it affects the individual's engagement or disengagement with blood donation

- Adopting the idea of the figurative kernel in social representations, the authors argue that it is constructed through the thema Self/Other. This basic thema activates the occurrence of other themata and generates representations that are either salient for the Self, like anxiety, fear of needles, or for the Other, like helping Others and saving their lives.

- In both teams - the Self/Other is conceived as an epistemological thema. It guides the direction in which thematic concepts (content themata) develop and form meaningful networks of meanings, for example, needles/help, blame/blameless, dirty/clean, among others.

Does thema generate a representation or representations?

- Moloney's team: Does each of the antimonies in a thema gives rise to separate representations or does a pair that antimonies generate a single representation?

- Recall independent and interdependent dyadic oppositions ('elements' *versus* 'waves'. Allegiance of the researcher to either of these elements precludes the possibility of one joint theory or representation.

- The Self/Other thema treated as independent, two separate social representations could be produced. In one case, the Self could present him-/herself as being totally self-centred, paying absolutely no attention to the Other - dominated only by self-interest. In another case, the Self could ignore one's own interest and comfort, such as one's own illness or fear of needles, in order to safe life of the Other. Two possibilities:

- A) blood donation could be a spontaneous response to a tragedy, whether a natural disaster or a terrorist attack (e.g. Paris terrorist attacks).This unlikely to count as a representation: rather, one could say that it is an impulsive spur-of-the moment action reflecting the dialogical nature of human beings.

- B) blood donation could be a social representation in which the act to donate blood would be based on a reflective decision of the individual as a member of community to help Others in need.

- Between these two extreme cases mixtures of spontaneous and of reflective decisions; in these situations it would not be clear what counts and what does not count as a representation.

Asymmetric relations within the thema Self/Other

- Moloney et al., the Self/Other are reflectively interdependent components, although each has different priorities: 'When blood donation is considered in relation to Self, those aspects salient to the Self are elicited. Conversely when blood donation is considered in relation to Others, aspects salient to Others are elicited'. These forms of salience are in tension and the direction in which a social representation is actualised, depends on the relation between the individual and social context in which the struggle for priority takes place, and consequently, which themata are deduced from the Self/Other. **They generate one representation.**

- In order to identify the themata deduced from the Self/Other, Moloney et al proceed in two steps. First, they identify categories that pertain either to the Self or to Others and from these they construct the common figurative kernel of the social representation. Second, they deduce themata pertaining either to the Self (pain, anxiety, needles) or to the Other (help, saving lives). To my mind, this could be pursued further in and through ematisation in narratives, arguments and justifications. The analyses of these could then be employed in instituting the changes in education practices related to providing information to citizens about blood donation.

- Privileging the Self, (his/her family, clan or group) over the Other is a common sense assumption in the history of humankind - Ruth Benedict - the belief in superiority of one's own group over another group has a very long history; the preference for one's own group is very deeply and unconsciously rooted and therefore, hard to eradicate or even to reflect on it; Gustav Ichheiser - rather than admitting to ourselves our moral, intellectual and other kinds of shortcomings, we attribute them to Others, rationalize our thoughts and conduct, and invent fictitious notions and reasons to justify our behaviour.

Asymmetric relations within the thema Self/Other

- Moscovici (2012) - a related idea in a 'paradox in intergroup or intercultural communication'. Three features:

- 1. incompatibility of implicit and explicit ethnocentric beliefs - based on imbedded assumptions of superiority of one's own group, and at the same time, groups explicitly propagated multiculturalism.

- 2. the Selves (groups, cultures) in general believe that Others understand their point of view; the Self not always capable of understanding Others. Groups are often closed to the perspective of other groups, and communication between these is absent even if they occupy the same public space.

- 3. Incommunicability is not just about language but it affirms mutual incompatibility between different social representations and diverse forms of communication. There could be incommunicability between social representations expressed in daily language which is characterized by creativity, imagination and invention, and social representations that are expressed in a specialist language of ideology, religion or science. Each of these languages uses their specific linguistic strategies that may not be mutually comprehensible.

Asymmetric relations within the thema Self/Other

- Joffe's team: ample forms of asymmetric relations between the Self and Others

- Theoretically, the creation of social distances - the Self represents oneself as having a positive valence in contrast to the Other, who has a negative valence. Social distances pertain to individuals, groups, institutions and even cultures. Empirically, research of Joffe's team shows that blame, guilt and accusations for spreading the disease and other misfortunes are all attributed to Others, that is, to individuals, governments, marginalised groups or the minorities

- The Self-promotion and Other-denigration, form vicious circles: in strengthening one's own position, the Self perpetuates discrimination of marginalised groups and increases a social distance from them. As the authors note, the social distancing is accompanied by other forms of distancing (e.g. spatial or temporary) and by constructing the Self as being immune from the threats of Others. These analyses of content themata arising from the Self/Other interdependencies are very effective in bringing together the past, present and future imaginations of risks in different spheres of life and their management.

- Common sense involved in the Self/Other relations in risk situations plays an identity-protective function - adaptation to diverse contexts in which the Self and the Other are embedded in different socio-cultural traditions (the contemporary forms of present terrorism and the migrant crisis) - unprecedented forms of asymmetries in networks of thematised justice, blame, responsibility for the victim etc.

Using themata to understand socially important problems

- Interactions are not neutral exchanges of information: the Self and the Other are intimately bound together by ethical relations: they evaluate one another, they trust and distrust each other, they take responsibility for one another and they attempt to avoid it. Paul Ricoeur: '*Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms'.

- Dialogical relations involved in language and communication are vital means of the Self/Other interdependence; meanings of words in daily life are often used unconsciously, without awareness of the effect they may have on Others. Therefore, while the improvement of reflective perspectives on Selves and Others are important for improvement social practices, these perspectives need to be based not just on cognitive capacities, but on ethical considerations

Using themata to understand socially important problems

- Moloney et al: communications seeking to encourage the public to donate blood should be re-thematised; communicative strategies should not ignore issues related to the Self; antinomies in a thema are interdependent, and tension between antinomies drives how blood donation is socially understood. Re-thematisation should emphasize the ethical features of the Self-Other interdependence. Both kinds of factors, those related to the Self and to the Other play role.

- Joffe et al. - the use of categories is never neutral, but is imbued with emotions: 'The strong emotional impulse to protect the self and denigrate the other drives the way themata manifest in thought and behaviour'. The authors note that when themata are brought to conscious attention that the change in behavioural patterns and in social representations can take place.

- This perspective, focusing on the interdependence of the Self and Other is often forgotten in the contemporary overload of information, bureaucratisation and overtechnisation of human practices

Are all social representations underpinned by themata?

- If 'themata are at the heart of social representations', are all representations underpinned by themata? Could be 'yes' because dyadic oppositions, which are the source ideas of themata, are part of common sense thinking. However, thinking takes on different forms, and thinking in oppositions, which underlies themata, is only one of these forms.

- Structural approaches too, refer to themata. Moscovici commented that in these, 'initial themata usually generate several core notions …one thema can sometimes lead to another thema and they both become specified in the nucleus of the emerging social representation' (Moscovici, 2001, p. 31). Structural studies of the bank do not explain at all in what ways these cores and peripheries apply to historical, political and sociological conditions.

- The need to explain: do the static central core and themata refer to the same elements? in what ways does the static central core reflect the dynamic nature and transformations of themata? what role does the central core play in thematisation in and through communication?