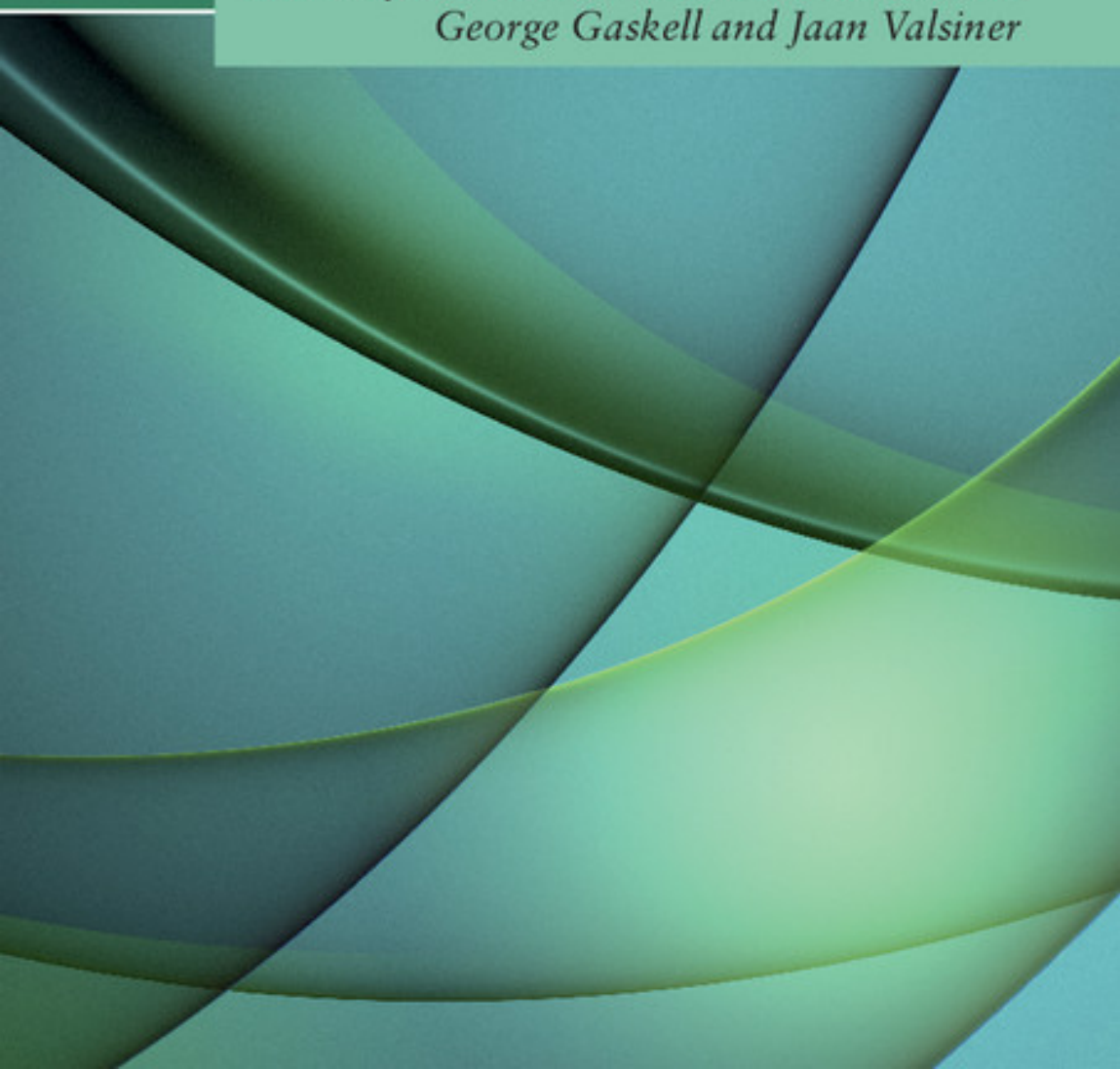


THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

*Edited by Gordon Sammut, Eleni Andreouli,
George Gaskell and Jaan Valsiner*



The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations

A social representations approach offers an empirical utility for addressing myriad social concerns such as social order, ecological sustainability, national identity, racism, religious communities, the public understanding of science, health and social marketing. The core aspects of social representations theory have been debated over many years and some still remain widely misunderstood. This handbook provides an overview of these core aspects and brings together theoretical strands and developments in the theory, some of which have become pillars in the social sciences in their own right. Academics and students in the social sciences working with concepts and methods such as social identity, discursive psychology, positioning theory, semiotics, attitudes, risk perception and social values will find this an invaluable resource.

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Preface

This handbook aims to take stock and to look forward at key theoretical, methodological and applied desiderata of the theory of social representations. It is designed to appeal to psychologists and social theorists, as well as scholars and students working in cognate disciplines including cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, philosophy, communication studies and linguistics whose interests focus on the ordinary knowledge in the life-world.

In 1968 Gordon Allport wrote:

the modern social psychologist is haunted by the question: How can the individual be both a cause and a consequence of society. How can his nature depend indisputably upon the prior existence of cultural designs and upon his role in a pre-determined social structure, while at the same time he is clearly a unique person, both selecting and rejecting influences from his cultural surroundings, and in turn creating new cultural forms for the guidance of future generations? (Allport, 1968, p. 8)

Towards the end of ‘The historical background of modern social psychology’, Allport sets out the challenge for social psychology: the burning issues of war and peace, education, population control and effective democracy, are all in need of assistance. But he suggests that such assistance is unlikely to come from ‘small gem-like researches, however exquisite their perfection’. Will, he asks, the current preoccupation with methods and miniature models lead to theory and application? He goes on: ‘integrative theories are not easy to come by: like all behavioural science social psychology rests ultimately upon broad meta-theories concerning the nature of man and the nature of society’. Allport contrasts the ‘high level conceptualisations’ of the likes of Machiavelli, Bentham and Comte with the contemporary non-theoretical orientation of the empiricists. He hoped that the tide might turn (Allport, 1968, p. 69).

The turning of the tide is evidenced in this handbook, which brings together forty authors whose research is inspired by the theory of social representations. This theory traces its origins back to Durkheim’s notion of collective representations. Since its inception in Moscovici’s (1961/1976) writings, it has adopted a societal level of explanation to account for the fact that human behaviour, however assessed from the outside, is sensible within a cultural context that validates and legitimates such behaviour. The theory of social representations has thus served to advance the sociocultural agenda by highlighting how human behaviour is sensible within the

context of its production. Consequently, it has provided sociocultural theorists with a framework for studying and understanding sense-making processes in different sociocultural contexts.

The theory of social representations has come to stand as the foremost psychological theory for the study of common sense. Over the past fifty years it has stimulated much research that has addressed these concerns and charted its implications on varied psychological behaviour such as communication (Moscovici, 1961/1976), social cohesion (Duveen, 2008), social cognition (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue, 2005), identity (Moloney and Walker, 2007), dialogicality (Marková, 2003), discourse (Wagner and Hayes, 2005), and others. And while much sociocultural research draws inspiration from the theory of social representations, publications in the field remain dispersed in innumerable journals and volumes that have researched these concerns and advanced our understanding of psychological phenomena in their context of production.

The theory of social representations takes a societal or sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural characteristics have featured in the psychology agenda since the beginnings of the discipline. Indeed, Wundt's (1916) concern with 'folk psychology' balanced the remit of study for the discipline by including concerns with mental events that originate in community life alongside concerns with physiology and the biological basis of human behaviour. Wundt thus included within psychology's remit concerns with language and cognate phenomena such as customs, religion, myth and magic (Farr, 1996). The quest for understanding human behaviour in its situational and cultural contingencies is, therefore, not new. However, in recent years the discipline has witnessed a concerted effort on the part of sociocultural psychologists who have sought to emphasize the fact that environmental, social and cultural conditions constitute an invariable condition for the very existence of psychological phenomena (Valsiner and Rosa, 2007; Valsiner, 2012).

In essence, human behaviour differs widely across behavioural conditions. The fact of individual differences in behavioural outcomes is well known and has received considerable scholarly attention. In response to a similar stimulus, an individual may respond in a certain way while another individual may respond in a totally different manner due to their personal inclinations. Human behaviour, however, differs even more widely than this. It differs due to social and cultural conditions that determine how a thing is perceived (Moscovici, 1984b), what construal of that thing is brought to bear in describing and understanding that behaviour (Ross and Nisbett, 1991), and what repertoire of behavioural outcomes is plausible and legitimate as a course of action for that individual in a given society (Wagner and Hayes, 2005). In this complex determination of behaviour, social and cultural conditions characterize psychological phenomena. Sociocultural psychology has drawn our attention to the fact that social and cultural conditions give rise to particular psychological phenomena that manifest within contexts which shape their emergence as well as ontogenetic progression. Understanding human behaviour in its manifold complexity, therefore, requires more than an appreciation of individual differences. It further requires sensitivity to those

extra-individual conditions that also determine behavioural outcomes. A consequence of this added focus is that assumptions of universality and standardization across cultural conditions are challenged. Sociocultural differences require a particular and specific focus on cultural elements that give rise to intercultural differences in the manifestation of psychological phenomena.

This handbook brings together various theoretical strands and developments that have emerged from the theory of social representations, some of which have become pillars in social psychology in their own right and have stimulated further inquiry in their turn. It also extends the social scientific agenda beyond that of the theory of social representations and into equally relevant concepts and domains of inquiry such as social identity, discursive psychology, positioning theory, semiotics and others.

The chapters provide an overview of the core aspects of the theory that have been debated over the years, some of which remain widely misunderstood, and provide an up-to-date account of developments such that further productive inquiry can be stimulated. Finally, the handbook will serve as an invaluable tool in the teaching of the theory of social representations. The theory has gained popularity over the years and routinely features in both undergraduate and postgraduate social psychology curricula in many countries. This handbook matches theoretical aspirations with real-world empirical concerns of interest to those of a sociocultural persuasion.

The handbook is divided into four parts. The first part, 'Foundations', deals with foundational issues and with the core concepts and debates within social representations theory. The second part, 'Conceptual developments', elaborates further notions and concepts that have become part of the social representations approach to sociocultural psychology. The third part, 'New directions', reviews some of the major social psychological theories that have furthered the theory of social representations and advanced the sociocultural agenda. The final part, 'Applications', presents empirical studies that have been undertaken in diverse fields and which demonstrate the breadth of application and the utility of a social representations approach.

GORDON SAMMUT, ELENI ANDREOULI,
GEORGE GASKELL AND JAAN VALSINER

PART I

Foundations

The first part of this handbook addresses a number of foundational concerns that can be traced back to the origins of social representations theory in Moscovici's (1961/1976) study *La Psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Since its inception, social representations theory has contended with a number of conceptual and empirical issues that have drawn the interest and criticism of scholars in equal measure. The lack of conceptual clarity has enabled both a theoretical and an empirical eclecticism to arise over the years, and arguably this has enabled the theory to thrive and to address myriad social and psychological issues in its later developments. Fifty years later, this handbook revisits these foundational concerns in order to take stock of the contributions that have shaped the theory's development and to elucidate the characteristic contribution that social representations theory has made to social and cultural psychology in the understanding and explanation of social and psychological phenomena.

The five chapters of this opening part of the book disambiguate certain notions that have proven thorny over the years, such as the scope of action in social representations and the theory's relevance in the study and explanation of human behaviour. They also address the merits and concerns of theorizing and conceptualizing 'representations' and the 'social'. In doing so, they are intended to help the reader to understand what analytical and explanatory levels the theory is suited to address, and to identify the sort of phenomena that the theory has served to investigate. Finally, this part of the book aims to provide the reader with a blueprint for further developments and applications. It presents a wide-ranging discussion of empirical methods in order to provide social representations scholars and researchers with the required toolkit for an enquiry into social affairs and human conduct.

2 Representation in action

Wolfgang Wagner

Behaviour and action

Of ducks and men

My office window opens on to a large pond where ducks, swans, coots and the occasional bird-loving person with an interest in feeding them can be observed. As soon as a bird lover approaches the rim of the pond and opens a paper bag, a lot of birds start eagerly moving in the direction of the rustling sound produced by the bag. Once there, both the birds and the man or woman providing dry bread appear to be happily united in a pattern of animal and human behaviour. I find this pattern of human behaviour and the complementary waterfowl behaviour quite instructive: first, it illustrates the conceptual difference between behaviour and action; second, it highlights a widely distributed – but in my opinion wrong – belief of attitude and intention ‘causing’ behaviour; and third, it is a nice example of how behaviours happen in concert. Each of these points will be discussed in the sections that follow.

The term ‘behaviour’ is obviously an observer term applied to an organism’s activity that we do not or cannot deeply empathize with. On the other hand, if a person describes what he or she is doing or has done, the person will say that he or she ‘acted’. Hence, ‘action’ is an actor’s term or a term used in talk about another person one can empathize with. This concurs with a host of experimental findings in attribution theory where the perspective of actors makes them explain their behaviour by external, situational factors in contrast to internal, personality-related causes, as observers tend to do. The actor has a more intimate knowledge of the reasons relating to his or her behaviour, while observers are deprived of this knowledge.

Consequently, in the case of our university pond, we would talk about the ducks as behaving. The persons’ feeding of the waterfowl will be imagined as an action. The crucial difference is the justification an actor – if asked for – can provide for his or her actions that, even with a considerable stretch of imagination, birds cannot provide. Birds cannot account for their behaviour in symbolic terms; people can.

In the rest of this chapter I will discuss behaviour and action and their articulation with beliefs and social representations. I will reject the common-sensical idea of behaviour being caused by beliefs that is so often invoked in theory and implemented in empirical studies. Instead of the idea of a contingent causation of

behaviour, I suggest a view where action is part and parcel of a social representation as can be seen in their microgenesis, the fact that actions attain meaning only in the long run, and that representations come to bear on patterns of cooperating individuals and interacting collectives. Finally, overt action takes primacy as the only psychological event that links directly to material reality.

The paradox of overt behaviour in psychology

There are two types of behaviour that play a conceptual role in psychology: verbal behaviour as in talking and writing; and bodily or overt behaviour that involves posture, change in body position, arm and leg movements, locomotion, and so on. In what follows I will call the latter kind of behaviour ‘overt’, although language use or verbal behaviour are also overt since they do require mouth movements and the production of acoustic stimuli.

Given the centrality of overt behaviour in everyday life and considering the label of a field such as behavioural science, it is rather paradoxical that the vast majority of research in social and behavioural sciences is almost exclusively done with verbal data. Virtually all studies about behaviours and activities employ questionnaires, probing respondents’ memory or attitudes for past or imagined behaviours. These studies take verbal responses as a proxy of the overt behaviour being addressed in the questionnaire item. Rarely do researchers verify whether their assumption is justified, that is, if verbal recall corresponds with the respondents’ real overt behaviour as manifested in the past. Be it as it may, the dominant methodology of social, behavioural and psychological sciences creates the impression that verbal behaviour is all you need to research overt behaviour.

I can think of two reasons for omitting overt behaviour from research designs: first, it is far more economical to restrict data collection to questionnaires and interviews than it is designing an observational study for a lengthy time period. This ‘economy argument’ may well hold a kernel of truth if there were no serious consequences of this deficit in data collection; but then it is hard to understand how we can maintain a ‘behavioural science’.

The second reason is the ‘irrelevance argument’: couldn’t it be that overt behaviour per se is rather irrelevant for the symbolic ‘truths’ of our local worlds being addressed by social sciences? The irrelevance argument could be invoked if the principal conveyer of meanings were only words, either spoken or written, and not, for example, the hand gesture used to usher a person to a seat. According to this argument, language should be able to represent and carry everything that overt action can convey in a reliable and veridical way. If this were the case one could safely judge persons by their words instead of by their deeds; but is this assumption warranted?

The ‘irrelevance argument’ does indeed receive some support from studies that have engaged in time-consuming observation of overt behaviours, albeit not a support that the researchers intended. For example, Barker (1968) and colleagues

worked on their theory of ‘behaviour settings’ by observing the behaviour of people at different locations in a small town for almost twenty years. They did this in order to identify the stable behaviour patterns typical of certain locations such as at shops, markets, the church, pubs and so on. Now, if I tell you, the reader, the results, don’t hold your breath: indeed, what was found, was not far from what one could have inferred from talking to a local informant. The researcher took the position of an observer similar to the one watching the ducks on our pond instead of recognizing the competence of the inhabitants in mastering their environment and everyday life, that is, the actors’ representation of the environment and the associated behaviours. In everyday life people’s behaviour in different situations, locations and times has an unstrained and smooth oneness that resists easy conceptual decomposition. Any culturally competent informant can recognize how people’s engagement with their environment is reflected in the social and cultural world; and vice versa, the particular forms of the human environment would not exist without the collective activity of the protagonists, a point that Barker and colleagues dismissed. Thus, there could be some truth in the argument that overt behaviour is not a privileged data source when it comes to exploring social worlds. This is in spite of a daily life where people constantly have to take action in the service of their social standing; that is, where they are under the rule of what I call the everyday ‘pragmatic imperative’ (Wagner and Hayes, 2005, p. 78).

Behaviour as a consequence of belief and attitude

Attitudes causing behaviour

It is part of common sense that our everyday behaviour is guided by what we know about the world and by how we think we can achieve a goal. This common sense has been ‘scientifically’ framed in the Theory of Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The most basic assumption of this theory is that what people achieve by doing is better predicted by what they believe they are able to achieve than by objective factors because the individual already anticipates these factors in his or her planning: people who regard themselves as highly efficacious produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it (Bandura, 1986). In more mundane words, people will reach any goal that they strongly desire, if they possess – and know they possess – the required capabilities and where no objective obstacle prevents them from homing in on this goal.

More explicitly this view of the mind–behaviour link is formulated in the so-called ‘Theory of Planned Behaviour’ (Ajzen, 1991). This theory holds that first there is a deliberate cognitive process where humans plan an action by following their attitudes, their beliefs about whether they may be able to control future behaviour or not, and their subjective norms regarding proper behaviour in the given situation. These factors result in a behavioural intention, which in turn causes

the planned behaviour to be executed. The successful action then consumes the intention.

There is mixed empirical support for this theory, particularly for the role subjective norms, that is social beliefs, play in determining behaviour. In particular, studies have shown that social norms only have a significant impact on intention formation if the source of the norms, the referent others, pertain to the same group as the actor. In other words, the influence of norms on behaviour is conditioned by group identification and occurs primarily with in-group norms (Terry and Hogg, 1996). This finding fits with the tenets of Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory, which state that persons will assimilate into their in-group's behavioural tendencies (Hogg, 2006).

Irrespective of these details, the Theory of Planned Behaviour postulates a causal chain from mental states, attitudes, norms and behavioural beliefs to behavioural intentions, which determine subsequent behaviours. In the language of psychological experimentation, the mental elements preceding behaviour are independent variables and the observable behaviour is the dependent variable. Let's keep this in mind for when we come back to this assumption and a concomitant form of theorizing later in this chapter.

Representations 'informing' behaviour

As with other psychological approaches, social representations theory has a say over how behaviour comes about and is being shaped. In an experiment designed as a zero-sum game, Faucheux and Moscovici (1968) manipulated the expectations of experimental subjects about their alleged game opponents. One half of the participants was told that they were going to play against a 'random' programme, while the second half was supposedly playing against 'nature'. The terms were not explained any further, with the effect that the test participants had to rely on their representations of 'random' and 'nature'. In actual fact the gaming behaviour of the opponents in both cases was the same and controlled by a computer program. The dependent variable in this experiment was the cooperative or exploitative moves during the game.

The results revealed a marked influence of the representation that the initial manipulation had evoked. Subjects who believed that they were playing against 'nature' had the idea of a relatively good-natured and predictable opponent. The 'random' participants felt they were not able to predict the opposing moves which would have allowed them to estimate the chance of winning. Consequently, the participants in the 'nature' condition reported that they understood the logic of the payment table much better than subjects in the 'random' condition and hence they successfully maximized their gains. The authors concluded that either activating the representation of a predictable and thus controllable opponent, nature, or the opposite, chance, obviously determined the participants' gaming behaviour. Hence, the idea that representations are separate from, and guide, behaviour is at the cradle

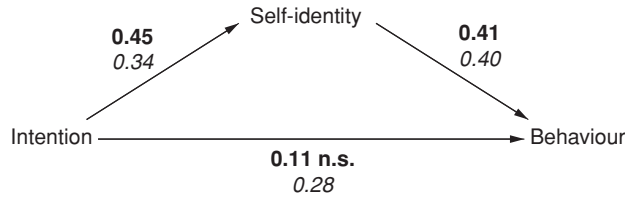


Figure 2.1 Mediation effect of self-identity for low ambivalence (bold beta coefficients, adj. $R^2 = 0.21$) and for high ambivalence respondents (italic, adj. $R^2 = 0.29$) (after Castro et al., 2009).

of social representations theory: this is necessarily implied if social representations enter as independent and behaviours as dependent variables in ANOVA-style experiments.

One of the contemporary societal problems that receives growing attention is ecological behaviour. In such studies the social psychologist's interest usually is to find links between normative stimuli and the corresponding pro-ecological behaviour.

A study by Castro and colleagues (2009) is framed in terms of an attitude–intention–behaviour model but it may also serve as an example of the social representation–behaviour link. The authors' relevant results comprise three variables that were collected as responses to questionnaire items: the intention to collect and separate metal cans, the respondent's self-identity subscribing to an ecological ideology or not, and self-reported recycling behaviour. The sample was divided in two groups: high and low ambivalent respondents in the sense of simultaneously maintaining, or not, contradictory attitudes about metal can recycling. In the present context, the authors' concept of 'self-identity' can be likened to a representation: if self-identity is high, then the respondent subscribes to a pro-ecological representation; with a low self-identity, the respondent does not maintain a positive ecological orientation. An analysis of how self-identity moderates the regression of behaviour on intention for low and high ambivalent respondents reveals an interesting finding (Figure 2.1). It shows that low ambivalent respondents stand by their self-identity exhibiting a high relationship between self-identity and action, while immediate intentions have no significant influence on behaviour. In other words, with low ambivalence, behaviour corresponds strongly with the degree of self-identified pro-ecological behaviour if there are no interfering 'second thoughts' about the costs of recycling.

The issue of metal can recycling is particularly suited to illustrating a significant positive representation–behaviour relationship. First, recycling metal cans is a complex behaviour that involves collecting empty cans in one's house, compacting them to save space, keeping them separate from the usual waste, and finally transporting them to a collection point. Such behaviour involves costs and is not a one-off affair. Additionally, at the time of the study recycling behaviour was a highly contentious issue that involved law-making and public deliberation. These latter factors are important ingredients of social representations that primarily come into being with conflict and debate.

An elaborate study on littering is a bit different. In fact, this is one of the few studies where actual overt behaviour in real-world settings played a role: the researchers observed littering behaviour in a central public space at their university and they were interested in interventions to reduce littering by students. The authors conclude ‘that a representational account was inadequate for explaining the pattern of attitudes and behaviour regarding littering’ (Liu and Sibley, 2004, p. 381). More predictive of cleanliness behaviour were situational changes such as mounted ashtrays. Measures of the representation–action link were general and specific items that assessed locally relevant attitudes and behaviour on one hand and the observed active dropping of litter on the other.

As admirable as the design of this study is, in my opinion it provides a less than ideal example for illustrating representations and associated behaviours. First, in contrast to the ‘metal can study’, it involved a behaviour that could have been ‘just so’, meaning that littering means just dropping a piece of wrapping paper or a cigarette butt and certainly not a reasoned action like recycling metal cans. Second, dropping litter at a site that is part of an architectural ensemble of buildings where cleaning staff is part of maintenance, is not the same as throwing litter away in open nature. Third, it can be assumed that littering probably was neither a contentious issue at the authors’ institution nor a societal problem at the time of the study. Consequently, we might not expect too strong a relationship between representations of cleanliness and actual littering.

Irrespective of the particular results of the afore-reported studies in the field of social representations theory, the common theorizing is that behaviours somehow follow from pre-existing representations. While somewhat different in their argument from Bandura, Ajzen and followers, the present authors leave the exact theoretical status of the relationship between representations and behaviour unclear. The design of the studies appears to imply some kind of temporal sequence between mental representation and overt behaviour, but whether this temporal sequence is to be interpreted as causal is not clarified.

Critique of the conventional belief–behaviour articulation

This supposed causal ‘belief–(intention–)behaviour’ mechanism has been criticized as oversimplifying the structure of rational systems. Smedslund (1985), for example, likens the belief–behaviour relationship to a cultural logic that has nothing to do with a contingent causal relationship. Even though we can and do design experimental studies where beliefs are the independent and behaviours the dependent variables, a significant effect of belief on behaviour does not indicate causality but just illustrates a culturally implied relationship between belief and behaviour. That is, in contrast to textbooks of psychological methods maintaining that strictly designed experiments allow causal inferences (e.g. Bröder, 2011), whether a causal conclusion can be drawn depends on the character of the stimulus material and the psychological system under investigation. Smedslund (1978) showed that experiments ‘confirming’ Bandura’s ‘self-efficacy theory’ do

just reveal ‘necessarily true cultural psychologies’ akin to common sense. Others, using variants of this argumentation, have critically discussed causality assumptions in rational systems in a similar vein (Brandtstädter, 1982; Greve, 2001; Holzkamp, 1986).

Following this lead I expanded Smedslund’s (1978) argument to the field of social representations theory where, rhetorically, behaviour is tightly linked to representations but is not a causal effect of mental states (Wagner, 1994a). Himmelweit (1990, p. 30) roughly makes this point when she states: ‘a social representation worth studying is one that makes a noticeable difference to the reactions of those accepting the representation compared with their beliefs and conduct before such acceptance’.

Despite this rhetoric, though, some experimental studies inspired by social representations theory speak of representations as ‘steering’, ‘controlling’, ‘influencing’ and ‘guiding’ behaviour and action (e.g. Echebarria Echabe, Guede and Castro, 1994; Faucheux and Moscovici, 1968; Thommen, Amann and von Cranach, 1988). These and other empirical studies subscribe to an ‘intentional causality’ either explicitly or implicitly by designing studies according to the idea of causal research: they first assess a belief as part of a representation, give it the status of an independent variable X, and subsequently ‘observe’ a verbal proxy of behaviour as the dependent variable Y. The rationale for this design is that the dependent behaviour is a causal consequence of the belief or representation. Hence, the underlying assumption is that ‘Thinking X makes or causes the subject to do Y.’ The rhetoric of social representations ‘guiding’ behaviour appears just as a thin semantic disguise of thinking in ‘causalities’.

The non-contingent, quasi-logical relationship between belief and action can be indirectly illustrated by research on the validity of self-reports and volitional behaviour: in a word-list learning experiment on the validity of subjects’ self-reports, Eagle (1967) asked one group of subjects to use a rote learning technique and the other group to use associative techniques. The associative technique was known to be superior to rote learning for the given task. After the learning phase the subjects reported which learning technique they actually had used. The results showed that performance depended only on what the subjects had reported. If they had reported using the rote technique, they had learned fewer words than when they reported having used the association technique. This effect was independent of the instructions given by the experimenter. Apart from the author’s intention to show that people report correctly about what they think and do, this experiment also makes the point that subjects in fact did what they thought or believed to be the best thing to do. Believing that the associative technique was the best thing to do immediately obliged the subjects to do exactly this. It was logical to do what they considered best; their doing was not contingently caused by their belief but necessary and rational under the precondition of their beliefs.

Other research on volitional behaviour or self-determination consistently shows that what people actually do depends significantly more upon what they believe and intend to do than upon objective situational determinants. Experiments on eating,

heterosexual affiliation behaviour and others revealed that effect sizes of volitional control factors are unusually high to a degree that virtually never can be observed in experiments with situational independent variables (Howard and Conway, 1986). This provides evidence to the point that representations, beliefs, volition and action are integrated with each other beyond contingency. In a nutshell, *any behaviour in an event where the actor possesses an a priori representation of the situation, is culturally necessary and not causally contingent on the representation.*

Let me give a quick example just in case any readers ask for an illustration of causality at this point. A contingent causal relationship would be, if a toddler's distressful crying triggered an adult to respond with protective behaviour (e.g. Boukydis and Burgess, 1982), notwithstanding any cultural variation of the extent and form of the adult's response. Given the adult possessed a representation of 'babies-needing-help', the causal link in this example is between the 'crying' stimulus and the adult's behaviour and not between the representation and the protective action; rather, the protective action is part and parcel of the representation.

None of the aforementioned arguments about cultural logics and excessive effect sizes provide empirical evidence for our position that behaviours are an integral part of representations; neither is this an empirical problem. The arguments are brought forward to justify a conceptual frame that is better suited to depict the position of behaviour in representations than the loose language used in some contemporary research.

The place of behaviour in social representations theory

Primacy of action in the genesis of representations

In the foregoing section I criticized the view of assigning social representations the status of 'independent' mental structures influencing 'dependent' behaviours. In fact, the 'independent–dependent' dichotomy is misleading and distracts from the fact that in social representations research the sequence of the two concepts does not denote temporal order. Whether overt or verbal behaviours – responding to questionnaire items – is first in a study is entirely up to the research design and not to some intrinsic temporal or logical necessity. Indeed, in the case of representations being formed by individuals in small groups – their microgenesis – overt behaviour may frequently precede the 'mental movement'.

In an ethnographic study of primary school classes, Kasanen, Rätty and Snellman (2001) provide evidence for the role of action in microgenesis. They observed teachers modifying the seating order in a class based on their conception of 'educability'. A new seating order required the pupils to obey and to reconstruct the representation of their position in the class's pecking and educability order. Their coping with these changes consisted in overt actions, in conversations among themselves and in disputes with the teacher. The result of this activity had a bearing on a new representation contingent on the changed situation. Obviously, the teacher's

modifications not only influenced seating order but also changed the behavioural space available to the pupils, which in turn changed their representations.

Similar observations of the development of children's gender representations, their interaction with toys and conversations with others of the same or opposite sex confirm the deep integration of overt behaviour and thinking in the microgenesis of gender-role beliefs (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992), as does research on forced behavioural compliance and subsequent changes in the mental part of representations (Renard *et al.*, 2007). Because the social world exists before and initially independent of an individual, he or she inadvertently has to interact with the existing objects and issues in order to get a 'feeling' for the world's constitution and repetitive collaborative patterns. This is just like the pupils in a rearranged classroom. The imposed pattern, finally, will be called a new social representation.

These studies provide an illustration of group members coming to terms with challenges to the received way of seeing the world. This requires pupils, for example, to negotiate a new class structure by way of a trial that first is anchored in established ways. As the pupils change their actions and reflect the forced situational changes in conversation and deliberation, it can be assumed that they have developed a social representation that renders the novel as part of their common sense. The change, however, does not come about by contemplation but by collective deliberation and activity. This places action at the root of a new representation and makes it its integral part; in other words, 'belief is part of the action' (Douglas, 1982, p. 200).

Dynamic patterns in behaviour and discourse

To illustrate my critique of the dominant way of thinking about the belief-behaviour relationship a bit further, let us look at an investigation of vernacular beliefs about home heat control (Kempton, 1986). In this research, conducted within the tenets of cognitive anthropology, the author identifies two cultural models for the functioning of thermostat-regulated heating systems: the valve model and the cybernetic model. The former models furnaces as continuously adjustable to temperature demands. This implies that a room will heat fast with the lever turned high. The latter model pictures the lever technically correctly as a thermostat by means of which the desired temperature is preset and a control circuit does all further regulation. The two models imply crucially different behaviours: Kempton investigated these behaviours by recording switch settings, room temperature and furnace activity in different homes for several weeks. The result confirmed – not surprisingly – that the type of heat-control belief corresponds to subjects' control action: believers in the cybernetic model preset the temperature and believers in the valve model used the thermostat as a lever according to their belief that heating can be accelerated by high lever settings (Figure 2.2).

It seems that Kempton's research is striking evidence for the common-sense idea that beliefs determine behaviour or that representations guide action: beliefs and behaviours were assessed independently and their relationship observed. However,

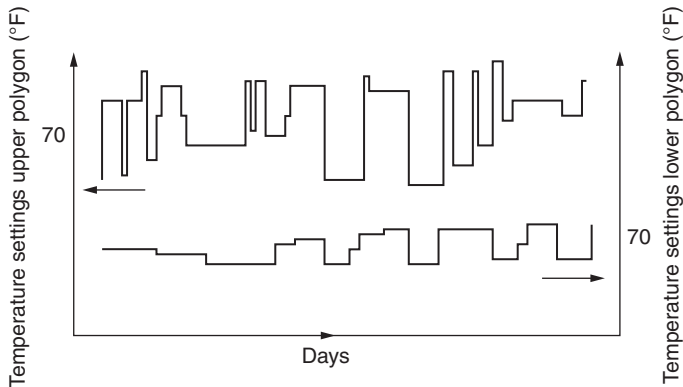


Figure 2.2 *Eight days' thermostat settings for 'valve' theory (upper) and 'control' theory (lower) subjects (schematic redrawing according to Kempton, 1986).*

even a cursory inspection of the patterns in [Figure 2.2](#) makes it clear that no single up or down movement of the lever can sensibly be predicted by the underlying folk model. Rather, the relationship between representations and action only becomes visible in the long run of extended activity. Also in Faucheux and Moscovici's (1968) study of 'gaming against chance and nature', it was not the gamers' single moves that reflected the two different representations, but the entire series of moves. Only when seen 'from afar' does a series of events and social actions exhibit a structure and form that is not shown by a 'snapshot' (Wagner, 1994a).

According to this understanding, social representations can be conceptualized as 'dynamic units' within volatile talk and other activity. Traditional units of analysis, such as a belief or an attitude, are conceived of as rigid, locally integrated mental entities with clear boundaries and whose definition is based on properties inherent to the unit itself. Dynamic units may be fuzzy and they are based on observing a stable pattern of correlation across the elements composing the unit. Their meaning cannot be separated from the context of observation: units are not defined unless within a specific context and thereby impart sense to the environment (Mandelblit and Zachar, 1998; Wagner, Mecha, and do Rosário Carvalho, 2008).

The entirety of interactions and formal and informal talk shows a pattern of correlation across actors and across time. This pattern acquires its meaning from the context within which it is performed. The emergent meaning creates the social objects such as the particular phenomenology of psychotherapeutic clients, their afflictions and the therapists' actions (Thommen *et al.*, 1988), 'heated homes' (Kempton, 1986) or the meaning of genetic engineering for their daily life (e.g. Gaskell *et al.*, 2001). These 'objects' exist at particular points in time, at particular places, and are the outcome of actions and interactions over time.

Social objects emerge as a dynamic unit in the visible pattern of correlated behaviours across actors and situations because 'individuals or collectives to some

extent see [them] as an extension of their behaviour and because, for them, it exists only because of the means and methods that allow them to understand the object' (Moscovici, 2008, p. 8). Equally, just as the objects are a result and part of behaviours, so the behaviours are an extension, and indeed part of the representation. The representation endows the behaviour with meaning, as 'there is no definite break between the outside world and the world of the individual' (ibid.). Actors with their reasons and agenda do what they do not because they want to realize some implicit representation but because they want to achieve something concrete; *people represent social objects in and through action*.

The foster-parents of mentally handicapped people in Jodelet's (1989/1991) seminal study took pains to keep their crockery and clothing separate from that of their guests when washing. This behaviour corresponded to a deep-seated belief in contagion and sympathetic magic that things in contact will spread impurity and transmit mental illness. These people represented mental illness in a comprehensive way where their verbal responses to the researcher's enquiry and their everyday behaviours were just two expressions of the same thing: the 'madness' of their guests.

Cooperational meaning in interaction

The diversity of activities that unfold in a group's daily life can be overwhelming for the uninitiated observer. There are behaviours related to agriculture and gardening, building and construction, production and commerce, and a lot of others in all walks of daily life that serve a reproductive purpose. Any occasional observer easily understands these behaviours if he or she has some idea of the activity's aim and perhaps the technology involved. On the other hand there are behaviours the purpose and details of which are puzzling to an uninitiated observer. Most often these are related to ritual and religion, be it birth, coming of age, marriage, death or worship. Although comprised of overt behaviours, these activities do not easily disclose their aims and details except as a gross hunch. Observers may guess the reasons and occasions for them, but their concrete enactment escapes superficial observation. In contrast to the former group of activities, the latter carry a significant symbolic burden.

Imagine Gosh, an Indian tourist uninitiated into local Austrian culture, seeing a carpenter in his workshop struggling to move a plank to a work bench. As Gosh is a helpful person, he will consider helping the carpenter to move the plank and prevent it from falling. In virtually no culture would Gosh have to overcome any symbolic obstacle, as the aim and mechanics of the activity are evident to everybody. Besides the eventual rules of proximity or of spontaneous versus requested helping, Gosh and the carpenter are free to cooperate on this particular problem.

Now imagine Gosh observing a Catholic mass in a small French village. He will see the attendees put their fingers in a small bowl with water and wetting their forehead and coat in a crosslike fashion. Being a helpful person, as we already know, he might consider helping a worshipper to wipe off the water from her clothing, but

being also a bright person, he will hesitate, and rightly so. Our traveller is observing a foreign ritual, and he will be far from initiated enough to cooperate correctly with the other attendees on this occasion.

Gosh's position in the two situations is completely different. In his interaction with the Austrian carpenter he shares an understanding of effort, body strength and the mechanics of balance and gravitation due to the fact that he is a human being. The meaning of the joint action is crystal clear and the symbolic burden minimal; both interactants easily share the meaning of their cooperation. Cooperational meaning in the case of a church ritual carries a high symbolic burden. Thus, cultural strangers cannot cooperate with locals on these things, besides the fact that they also lack the requisite group membership.

A study accompanying an arts project in an ethnically mixed community in London shows how participants enact representations in confrontation with outsiders. The lay artists appeared as active producers of their identity and the representation others were supposed to form of them: 'Cultural identities are always inherently oppositional as they rest on our simultaneous psychological needs to belong, to develop common understanding *and* to develop a sense of difference, of agency and of having a unique identity' (Howarth *et al.*, 2013). The participants' art actively reconstructed the representation of their ethnic group in the context of, and inspired by, the dominant 'white' British culture. By ironically including bits and pieces of the majority's stereotypes in their art, the artists established 'cooperational meaning' with their audience.

The cooperational meaning of potential interactions between people has two important consequences. First, representations must be conceived as overarching structures across interacting people, and second, representations must be comprised of one's own behavioural meaning as well as that of others. This is a characteristic of all situations where people interact with objects, other people and with institutions. The success of mundane interactions is guaranteed either by the similar or complementary actions of those involved, depending on whether they are facing each other as equals or are acting from different hierarchical positions. For example, interaction within a hierarchy conditions complementary behaviour patterns in both the superior and the subordinate actor. Although different, the patterns of action of those involved in the hierarchy complement each other in such a way that they create, or rather confirm, the social reality of dominance and subordination.

An inevitable consequence of the aforesaid is that actors must not only be aware of their own available courses of action, but also have some general representation of perception, judgements and the courses of action open to potential co-actors, even though they will never take on their counterpart's role. Hence, cooperational meaning is comprised of a person's own action rules as well as the rules underlying the actions of potential co-actors. We refer to this quality as the 'holomorphic' – that is, encompassing – character of representations (Wagner and Hayes, 2005).

The meaning of representational action, thus, lies in the fact that others will accept the actor's justification of an action if pressed to do so. In analogy to Habermas' (1985) criterion of discursive truth, we may want to call 'cooperational truth' an

event where an *interaction* by one or more persons is not questioned among the interactants. Its execution is warranted in the meaning system that is being implied by the entirety of the interaction.

Mutual representational behaviour

It is a well-established fact that there is a mutual relationship between people's membership in groups and their tendency to broadly subscribe to their in-group's norms, beliefs, ideology and representational system (Abrams, 1992; Duveen, 2008; Terry and Hogg, 1996). People prefer to talk to similar others and consequently tend to affiliate with groups whose members share representations which are similar to their own, a tendency that has been referred to as homogeneity (Griffitt and Veitch, 1974; Wagner and Hayes, 2005, p. 256). Likewise, individuals adapt their own norms and beliefs to the norms and beliefs of significant others who are often members of the same groups. It is clear that such commonalities among people in groups bolster individuals' self-esteem, tighten social relationships and increase group efficiency (Gonzales *et al.*, 1983).

Research on crowd behaviour has shown participants in demonstrations and riots to adapt ever so quickly to the norms of an active minority. This happens even if the majority of participants is only loosely organised at the beginning. They quickly unite when the initial majority encounters 'unjustified' resistance or is assaulted by outsiders, in many cases the police. In situations of perceived unjustified resistance, feelings of solidarity and belongingness go hand in hand with violent actions against the assailants (Reicher, 1984; Reicher, 1996). This illustrates the tight integration of identity and belonging, the situated sharing of norms, beliefs and representations in communal and coordinated activity.

In such situations, the two antagonistic groups, the protesters and the police in the so-called 'Battle of Westminster' for example (Reicher, 1996), are jointly responsible for the development of the confrontation: the police by impeding perceived rights of the protesters and by staging aggressive moves by mounted police units, and the protesters by merging into a compact block and by resisting the police's orders. Processes where the behaviours of one group's members are antagonistically related to the behaviours of an opposite group are called 'hetero-referential' relationships (Sen, 2012).

Antagonism of this kind is usually fuelled by simultaneous claims for a geographic area, for resources, and for political and religious supremacy as in many long-lasting conflicts around the world. There, the representational and ideological system of both groups develops in the long history of the conflict where, on and off, ideologues take up the other group's past 'wrong-doings' to justify estrangement and dehumanization of the Other in the service of securing their power and their group's dominance. Besides buttressing one's own identity, hetero-reference 'ensures' that the other group feels the need to respond (Sen and Wagner, 2005).

Social structures characterized by hetero-reference are not only determined by the group members' representations and ideologies but also simultaneously by

their inadvertently antagonistic and mutually hurting behaviours. Hence, intergroup relationships are characterized first, by the group members being aware of themselves forming a group with an identity and repertoire of norms and behaviours, and second, by their being *grosso modo* also aware of the others' representations, even though this stereotype may sometimes be exaggerated (Wagner, Holtz, and Kashima, 2009): *one's social identity is reflected in the others' stereotype*.

Tajfel (1978) already acknowledged that in-groups are defined in relation to out-groups (also Turner *et al.*, 1987). Since this insight can be found at the cradle of group formation, it connects us to the mundane and above all more peaceful interpersonal encounters mentioned in the last section. That is, people act towards relevant objects, persons and institutions in a way that considers the kind of behaviour to be expected by their fellows. Co-actors comprehend and derive meaning from actions and interactions, if the representation being enacted follows a shared framework, which, in turn, brings us to the processes of objectification and social construction.

The production of social facts in the collective 'concert of interaction' implicitly endows the facts and 'representations in interaction' with validity since they are the circular evidence for the 'truth' of the social representations. Representations in action 'remodel . . . and reconstitute . . . the elements of the environment in which the behaviour takes place'. Representations must be seen as the meaning in concerted behaviours by integrating them into a network of relations in which it is bound up with its object (Moscovici, 1961/2008, p. 9). Hence, representations are objectified when the actors recognize the objects as evident and true. That is, when 'justifying the evidence comes to an end; but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game' (Wittgenstein, 1994, paragraph 204). Our acting, being the very way we do things, co-constructs our world and simultaneously is the evidence for its 'truth' (Wagner, 1996).

Representations that count as action

It is standard in less democratic states to prosecute people if they openly confess to an ideology different from the official doctrine. There are abundant examples of this tendency that at times can also be found in democratically governed countries. Why do regimes persecute so-called dissidents? Usually dissidents are people who publicly voice opinions that deviate from what the regime considers tolerable. The emphasis here is on 'voicing' – that is, verbal and not overt behaviour such as throwing tomatoes at power holders or placing bombs. One could expect that rulers are interested in stifling actions and overt behaviours that are directed against their rule and that could potentially endanger the regime's supremacy. However, in the majority of cases dissidents do little more than utter their opinion without any hostile overt action being implied.

Now it could be that power holders are afraid of dissidents finding enough followers and initiating a revolt that might eventually topple them. Imprisonment or other oppressive means would then be meant to discourage potential followers before a movement reaches a critical mass. While such an interest is comprehensible from the point of view of power holders, including democratic ones, there may also be a symbolic aspect involved in stifling ‘deviating’ opinions, particularly in democratic societies.

The historical case of an author expressing ‘clandestine joy’ in the wake of a killing by the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany is an interesting example. On 7 April 1977 members of the RAF shot the German general Federal Prosecutor Siegfried Buback. About two weeks later a critical ‘obituary’ appeared in a student periodical that had been written by an anonymous member of a militant students’ organization at the University of Goettingen. The text of the obituary expressed understanding for the deed as well as a critique and rejection of RAF’s use of violent action.

State and law representatives reacted severely to one paragraph in the obituary reading:

My immediate reaction, my ‘stupefaction’ after the shooting of Buback is quickly described: I could not, and didn’t want to (and still don’t want to) conceal my secret joy. I’ve frequently heard this guy agitate. I know he played a prominent role in the persecution, criminalization, torturing of leftists.¹

The signatories, distributors, editors, of this obituary and magazine faced criminal prosecution on the grounds of being sympathizers, of supporting the RAF and of being hidden terrorists themselves (Bahn, 2003). Later, some of the initially harsh sentences were reduced or rescinded. Only the anonymous author, calling himself Mescalero, managed to escape unscathed.²

What is it that makes the above paragraph in the ‘obituary’ so dangerous that German authorities reacted with such conspicuous force? Certainly it was not that the author could be considered being on the brink of joining RAF, because he rejected their methods in the remainder of the text. Given his rejection of violence, the authorities were most likely not trying to stifle an expected violent action by the author, but rather to silence a person who symbolically violated their ‘prescribed’ anti-terrorist lament; his symbolism counted as overt aggression. More recently, in cases of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism, for example, the authorities in the United States and Europe have condemned with comparable rigour voices that do not clearly denounce the attacks and who do not share in the nationally ‘prescribed’ lament.

This and abundant similar examples illustrate the fact that ideology, representation and belief may have the same significance as overt behaviour. It is not necessary for a person to enact his or her beliefs overtly; holding ‘wrong’ beliefs or not joining

1 Buback – ein Nachruf, retrieved 03.10.2012, www.staff.uni-mainz.de/franz/vda/proj1968/ueberreg/doku/mescale.htm

2 Göttinger Mescalero, retrieved 01.10.2012 from http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Göttinger_Mescalero

in the chorus of ‘national lament’ is action enough to be considered conspicuous and defiant.

The case of dissidents and their persecution should ring a bell with social representations theorists. One of the central tenets of social representations theory is ‘that the subject and the object are not basically heterogeneous in their common field’ (Moscovici, 1961/2008). In the same way as the message of the mock-obituary in the aforementioned example is perceived as implying a (subjective) ‘terrorist representation in action’ on the part of the author and the simultaneous (objective) terrorist behaviour from an outside perspective, so social representations cannot be thought of as mere mental constructs. Rather, they require an appreciation of the entangled action.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have rejected a basic assumptions of common sense and some psychological research: behaviour and belief are integral to representations and not something that can be conceptualized separately. Representations exist in action as well as in belief and discourse. They are holomorphic in order to allow for concerted interaction, anticipation of others’ actions, and the constitution of meaning in cooperation. While a representation’s different aspects are not contingently articulated but rather are linked by their overarching meaning, they always have a contingent causal impact on their surroundings: a cry for help is contingent on others’ effective help and representing waterfowl in winter as needing fodder is contingent on the birds’ survival. Hence, what can be treated as separate entities and contingent issues are not beliefs and behaviours but rather representational action and its material and social consequences.

The precise nature and theoretical significance of social representations’ articulation with what is usually called the outside reality has been the topic of a lively debate between the ‘Enactivists’ (Verheggen and Baerveldt, 2007) and ‘Social Representationists’ (Chryssides *et al.*, 2009). This cannot be outlined here, suffice it to say that in my opinion the theoretical construct of representations being ‘shared’ and the driving force in actors’ jointly effectuating an outcome is a more useful account for social psychological research than the Radical Constructivists’ neurological individualism. ‘If one considers social representations to be at the intersection of the individual and the collectivity, they are neither wholly idiosyncratic phenomena, nor marked by some form of agreement within a social group . . . they are shared’ (Chryssides *et al.*, 2009, p. 90).

The integral nature of representations observed at the individual level and assessed through interviews, and the meaning of interactions of people in groups, assessed by observing behaviour patterns over time, are the most important achievements of social representations theory. Due to its overarching character, the concept of social representations allows for an effortless transition from the

individual level to the collective level: on the one hand we have individuals with their motivations, beliefs, knowledge and affiliation preferences that entail a person's actions; on the other hand, individuals in concert enact social representations, the pattern of which constitutes what we call social reality. Thus, the two conceptual levels are linked by action because bodily action is the only instance where representations are in 'full contact' with hard facts. That is why *representation is in action*.

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