

Corina Voelklein and [Caroline Howarth](#)

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**A REVIEW OF CONTROVERSIES ABOUT SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY: A BRITISH
DEBATE**

Corina Voelklein & Caroline Howarth

(London School of Economics, Great Britain)

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Abstract

Since its inception more than forty years ago, social representations theory has been subjected to several criticisms, particularly within British discursive psychology. This paper reviews four major controversies that lie in the areas of a) theoretical ambiguities, b) social determinism, c) cognitive reductionism and d) lack of a critical agenda. A detailed discussion and evaluation of these criticisms reveals that while some can be regarded as misinterpretations, others need to be treated as serious and constructive suggestions for extending and refining the current theoretical framework. The main argument underlying this review is that many of the criticisms are based on the difficulty to understand and integrate the complex, dynamic and dialectical relationship between individual agency and social structure that forms the core of social representations theory. Engaging with the critics is thus thought to provide clarification and to initiate critical dialogue, which is seen as crucial for theoretical development.

Key Words:

social representations, social determinism, cognitive reductionism, critical power

Social representations theory, originally developed by Serge Moscovici (1961), is certainly one of the more controversial concepts in contemporary social psychology. Despite its continuing attraction to many researchers and theorists around the world, it has received extensive criticism, particularly within the British context. While these critiques demonstrate that the theory of social representations is taken seriously enough to debate (Billig, 1987), we consider a thorough discussion of these objections essential for the conceptual development of the theory. It will be shown that whereas some of the criticisms can be regarded as misunderstandings, others need to be treated as serious and constructive points for improving or extending the current theoretical framework. Furthermore, engaging with these criticisms may promote a more critical version of social representations theory that invites a social psychology of conflict, resistance and social change relevant to today's world.

On the whole, most critics recognise the importance of social representations theory within social psychology and are sympathetic to its aims and general propositions. In particular, many regard it as a necessary challenge to dominant US-American social psychology which they characterise as individualistic, behaviourist and experimentally driven (e.g. Jahoda, 1988; Parker, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1998). However, it is both in the details of its conceptual elaboration as in its practical application that critics find weaknesses. Since problems in the theoretical formulation of social representations are seen as responsible for alleged difficulties in its application (Potter & Litton, 1985; Litton & Potter, 1985), it is these theoretical controversies that we will focus on. We point to four central issues that need to be clarified or developed: a) ambiguities in defining social representations, b) social determinism, c) cognitive reductionism and d) the apparent lack of a critical agenda.

What we argue in this paper is that many of the criticisms relate to the complex and dynamic relationship between social structure and individual agency put forth in the theory. It is this dialectical concept of social life and social cognition that is so much in contrast to the

Cartesian dualism still haunting social psychology today (Marková, 1982; Farr, 1996). This makes social representations theory difficult to integrate into both US-American and British social psychology. In many social psychological theories, the relationship between the psychological and the social is depicted as a *separation* of individual perception and cognition on the one hand and culture and social context on the other. The unusual position of social representations as *simultaneously* between individuals and the societies they live in (Howarth, 2001) has led to the contradictory criticisms of social determinism *and* cognitive reductionism. These conflicting critiques call for a detailed review of the theory and its propositions, going back to Moscovici's seminal work *La psychanalyse: Son image et son public* from 1961. This is where we start.

A brief introduction to the theory of social representations

Moscovici developed the theory of social representations from his study of the diffusion of the scientific concept of psychoanalysis among the French public in the 1960s. In the preface of the accompanying book Lagache (1976) asserts that Moscovici's ideas should stimulate and invite social psychological dialogue. Clearly this purpose has been achieved given the critical discussions and defensive replies the theory has since provoked. In this research, Moscovici used a combination of questionnaires, interviews and content analysis of the French press and complex sampling procedures with different subgroups of French society in order to capture a comprehensive overview of diverse bodies of opinion. He did not attempt to construct a unified picture but to hold central the heterogeneity and tension he found in the data.

Moscovici takes Durkheim's (1898) notion of collective representations as the starting point for his theoretical development. For Durkheim (1898), collective representations are a very general category that includes broad elements such as science, ideology, worldview and myth. However, he does not distinguish between these different forms of organised thought, which

is why, for Moscovici (1961), the concept of representation loses its distinction and clarity. Moreover, the concept of collective representation does not reflect the mobile and heterogeneous nature of contemporary societies (Howarth, 2001). As Jovchelovitch (2001) outlines, the Durkheimian notion refers to a form of knowledge that is produced by a single source of authority, that is strongly resistant to change and that functions to bind societies together. Yet, Moscovici (1988) makes clear that:

It seems to be an aberration, in any case, to consider representations as homogeneous and shared as such by a whole society. What we wished to emphasize by giving up the word collective was this plurality of representations and their diversity within a group. (p. 219)

Moscovici (1961) is interested in the relationship between the socio-cultural inter-subjectivity and the psychological organisation of knowledge and so emphasises that we need to move towards an active understanding of representations. A representation is not a mere reflection or reproduction of some external reality. There is symbolic space in the development and negotiation of representations, which is why all human beings hold creative power and agency in their formation and use. By transforming the Durkheimian notion into the concept of social representations, Moscovici deliberately allows for the co-existence of competing and sometimes contradictory versions of reality in one and the same community, culture and individual (Howarth, Foster & Dorrer, 2004).

This emphasis on the plural or hybrid nature of social knowledge is also found in the concept of cognitive polyphasia (Moscovici, 1961) that currently receives renewed interest from social representations theorists (e.g. Jovchelovitch, 2002; Wagner, Duveen, Verma & Themel, 2000). This concept implies that different and incompatible cognitive styles and forms of knowledge can co-exist within one social group and can be employed by one and the same individual. Depending on the tasks and social settings prevalent at a particular time,

human beings can draw on conflicting representations. “Cognitive polyphasia thus refers to a state in which different kinds of knowledge, possessing different rationalities, live side by side in the same individual or collective” (Jovchelovitch, 2002, p. 124). In this way, so-called traditional and modern representations, which appear contradictory may actually confront rather than replace each other (cf. Wagner et al., 2000).

The concept of cognitive polyphasia already indicates that the nature of a social representation closely relates to its social and psychological functions. But what is the main function of representation? To put it simply, social representations are “ways of world making” (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231). A more detailed definition that is commonly referred to describes social representations as:

A system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii)

This definition highlights that social representations help us to make sense of our world and to interact within it with other societal members. They have the main function of familiarising the unfamiliar since it is the unknown or incomprehensible that may constitute a threat to our socially constructed realities (Moscovici, 1984a). In other words, social representations are triggered by the realisation of a gap between what one knows and what one does not understand or cannot explain (Moscovici, 1961).¹ Every representation can thereby be understood of being situated inside a dynamic semiotic triangle, as proposed by Moscovici (1984b). This triadic relation specifies the three important dimensions of social

psychology generally and of every representation in particular: the object that is represented, the subject that undertakes the representation and the social group whom the subject is positioning him- or herself towards in undertaking this representation. The subject-object opposition is not enough to fully understand the fundamentally *social* nature of representation. We need to be in relationship with others to give meaning to the object and to be able to develop an inter-subjective reality that serves as a common code for communication and social interaction (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

The creation of such an inter-subjective reality through social representation implies both human agency and social influence. On the one hand, social representations are created by human beings in order to conventionalise objects, persons and events by placing them in a familiar social context (Moscovici, 1984a). On the other hand, once established, these representations influence human behaviour and social interaction by often subtly imposing themselves upon us and so limiting our socio-cognitive activities. Social representations are therefore not only a *product* of human agents acting upon their society but are equally prescriptive and coercive in nature. They become part of the collective consciousness, especially once they are “fossilised” in tradition and taken for granted in social practice (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 13).

Yet, this does not mean that social representations cannot be challenged or changed. In the same way that they are created by human beings they can be modified by them. Jovchelovitch (1996) highlights that since they act as reference points in every social encounter, “social representations are inseparable from the dynamics of everyday life, where the mobile interactions of the present can potentially challenge the taken-for-granted, imposing pockets of novelty on traditions coming from the past’ (1996, p. 124). It is these dialectics between agency and structure, tradition and change that have led to different criticisms of social representations theory. Let us now turn to these.

CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

A) THEORETICAL AMBIGUITIES?

Certainly the most frequent criticism of the theory of social representations is that it is too broad and too vague. Moscovici's writings have been severely criticised as being "fragmented and sometimes contradictory" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 139), as demonstrating a "polemical style of argument by anecdote" (McGuire, 1986, p. 103) or as "a pot-pourri of contradictory ideas, seasoned with some pieces of speculative cognitive psychology" (McKinlay & Potter, 1987, p. 484). Potter and Litton (1985) do not even give it the status of a theory but rather refer to social representations as "a concept in search of theory" (p. 82). More recently, Valsiner (1998) has reiterated this point in stating that their "actual theoretical elaboration has yet to take place" (p. 149). Without greater conceptual precision, critics warn, the concept of social representations is doomed to become a "background concept" (Billig, 1988, p. 8), a "catch-all term" (Litton & Potter, 1985, p. 385) or "a kind of pseudo-explanation" (Jahoda, 1988, p. 206).

Despite claims to the contrary (Potter & Litton, 1985), definitions of social representations are available in the literature. For instance, Billig (1988) highlights that as early as 1963 Moscovici states that "social representation is defined as the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating" (Moscovici, 1963, p. 251). Another often cited definition has been given in the brief introduction above. However, Moscovici is keen not to apply a definition that is too restrictive as complex social phenomena cannot be reduced to simple propositions (in discussion with Marková, 2001). Rather than using a hypothetico-deductive model that formulates clear guidelines for testing and operationalising a theory, he follows a more inductive and descriptive approach in the study of social representations.

Another reason why it makes more sense to characterise rather than define social representations is their inherent dynamics. Given their position inside the triadic asymmetry of self, other and object, social representations can be very volatile and will transform over time. “Thus, attempts to provide an exhaustive definition of such phenomena are based on a misconception of their nature” (Marková, 2000, p. 430). Such misconceptions could stem, in part at least from language differences and translation.

In its early years, the theory was predominately elaborated in French starting with the work of its founding father Moscovici (1961) followed by studies by Herzlich (1969) and Jodelet (1989). Moscovici’s original work, which lays down the basic concepts and theoretical foundation of social representations, is still not available in English and so remains largely inaccessible to Anglo-Saxon social psychologists. Rätty and Snellman (1992) explain that this has resulted in the theory not entering Anglo-Saxon literature before the early 1980s – twenty years after its inception. Marková (in discussion with Moscovici, 2001) particularly regrets the lack of an English translation of the second and lesser known part of *La psychanalyse* which explores the relationship between social representations, language and communication. Also more recent work within the area of social representations has remained in French, German or Spanish (e.g. Aebischer, Deconchy & Lipiansky, 1991; Banchs, 1996; Flick, 1991; Wagner, 1994), adding to the language barrier for many English speaking academics. Moreover, every translation into English inevitably involves a loss or change in meaning, due to the connection between language and culture. For example, one possible reason for misunderstandings in the Anglo-Saxon world lies in a different understanding of the word ‘representation’. Representation in English is approximate to ‘reflection’ or ‘reproduction’, whereas in French the word carries a more active and purposeful component (Wagner, 1998).²

Linguistic differences may explain some of the contentions; however we still need to address the specific criticisms of over-generalisation and contradiction. Jahoda (1988), for example, criticises the overlap between the concept of social representation and other categories such as common sense, ideology or culture. Eiser (1986) goes further in accusing Moscovici of caricaturing other cognitive theories in order to preserve the distinctiveness of his own theory, thus implying that the theory has little substance or originality. Billig (1988) highlights a specific inconsistency in the use of social representations, in terms of being described as both a universal *and* a particular concept. While a universal sense derives from treating social representations as a concept that exists in every society, a particular sense is evident in seeing social representations as peculiar to modern societies.

It is very true that the broader a concept becomes the less it can help us to focus on very specific phenomena. In the context of social representations theory, this means that in order to reduce its vagueness and overlap with similar concepts we need to clarify what is distinctive about social representations. This is precisely what Moscovici (1961) does in his seminal work: he develops the notion of social representation by comparing and contrasting it to existing sociological and psychological concepts. He discusses how the notions of ideology, science and worldview are too general and global to account for the socio-cultural specificity of a representation as a form of knowledge particular to a certain group. This discussion helps resolve the seemingly inconsistent use of social representations Billig (1988) has noted. Our reading of Moscovici points towards a universal understanding of social representations as indispensable features of social life *in all cultures*. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that both traditional and contemporary societies have the capacity to represent different forms of social knowledge (de-Graft Aikins, 2003). The point is, of course, that conditions of late modernity profoundly impact on the pace at which social representations develop, merge and oscillate. Moscovici never argued that social

representations could not exist in traditional societies, but that in late modern times they take on a more diverse and fragmented form. This is due to the emergence of multiple sources of power, authority and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). What has changed today is the structure of society and thus the lifespan, diversity and fragmentation of social representations, not their existence, creation or influence on social interactions.³ Thus, the social world has a fundamental impact on not only what we think but, *crucially*, how we think.

Another reason for Moscovici's (1961) rejection of the sociological notions of ideology, science or worldview is that they cannot capture the psychological organisation of that socially produced knowledge. He wants to move beyond a sociological understanding of social representations "as explanatory devices irreducible by any further analysis" (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 15). However, turning to existing psychological notions is equally problematic. Moscovici (1961) points out that within psychology as a whole the term representation is mostly equated with the internal seemingly 'biased' reflection of an external reality. For Moscovici an object is not simply reproduced in the mind of an individual but given life through the *socio-cognitive* activity of its user that embeds it in a cultural and historical context. It is not a cognitive process *or* a social process: it is simultaneously both.

Looking at the field of social psychology, Moscovici (1961) finds that existing notions do not achieve such an integration of the sociological and the psychological. He concludes that it is necessary to develop a concept that is distinct from notions such as opinion, attitude or stereotype, which he describes as short-term responses towards objects independent of the social actors and their intentions. Hence the aim of developing a distinct social psychological concept marks the beginning of social representation and, indeed, has been followed by social representations theorists in their elaboration of its relation to other concepts such as social identity (Breakwell, 1993; Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002a), attributions (Hewstone, 1983; Hewstone & Augoustinos, 1998) or attitudes (Gaskell, 2001;

Jaspars & Fraser, 1984).⁴ Clearly the theoretical ambiguities discussed here do not seem to have caused a rejection of social representations within the discipline but rather provoked interest in refining and developing it, as its rich history of more than forty years of stimulating research and debate demonstrates.

b) Social determinism?

A more specific criticism of social representations theory relates to an alleged overemphasis of social influence (e.g. Parker, 1987) that is said to neglect the human capacity of reflexivity (e.g. Jahoda, 1988). Jahoda asserts that people are not described as active agents but as passive entities unable to break free from the existing framework of social representations. As such he claims that the theory indicates a revival of the notion of 'group mind' whereby the ideas of an elite dominate lay thinking. It is this prescriptive influence on human activity which Moscovici stresses in saying that social representations "impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force" (1984a, p. 9) that McKinlay and Potter (1987) find equally unjustified. They argue that as representations are guided by history and tradition, there is not adequate room for social change within the theory of social representations:

The reality of yesterday controls the reality of today, says Moscovici, such that intellectual activity constitutes a mere rehearsal or representation of what has already gone before, in that our minds are conditioned by representations which are forced upon us. (McKinlay & Potter, 1987, p. 475)

The demand for more consideration of change and dynamics has recently been taken up by Hermans (2003). He questions how far social representations theory is able to capture individual responses to the common stock of knowledge and the dynamic multiplicity of independently organising self-positions.

The argument that social representations theory paints an overly deterministic picture of human relations is closely linked to the criticism of the notion of consensus. It is claimed

that the theory presents social representation as a process where every mind is infiltrated with the same images and explanations and thus individuals come to develop a consensual view of reality. This depiction is unsurprisingly criticised for being an unrealistic version of psychology (Parker, 1987; Potter & Litton, 1985). Billig's (1988, 1993) objection relates to the marginalisation of the psychological and social importance of argumentation. His main point is that an (over) emphasis on the common character of cognition runs the risk of dismissing the dialogic or conflicting character of our psychology. To put it simply, without contradiction and conflict there is no 'food for thought' since there is nothing to argue about both with others and with oneself. For Billig (1987), thought is necessarily dialectic and involves dilemmas and dispute to remain alive.

What is problematic about these criticisms is that they reduce social representations theory to one of its major elements, which is the influence of society on the individual – the impact of culture on cognition. However, as a consequence of its dialectical epistemology, one element of the theory cannot make sense without its interrelated counterpart. Culture and cognition exist in a symbiotic relationship to one another. A representation is not simply a repetition or replication of some idea presented by a dominant social group; it involves the deliberate action of those involved. This is something described in depth in discussions on the interrelation between social representations and social identity. In their examination of representations of gender in young children, Duveen and Lloyd (1990) for example, specifically describe how human beings evolve in relation to a net of already established social representations. Duveen (2001) explains that these representations underlie the child's interactions with parents, teachers and the community. Once confronted with the representations that circulate in the community in which the child grows up, however, he or she does not simply absorb and internalise them as they are, but "comes to re-interpret, to re-construct, and so to re-present" them to him- or herself (Howarth, 2002a, p. 156). Thus, in the

process of ‘taking on’ social representations, there is always the possibility of re-negotiation and so transformation and change.

Voelklein (2003) emphasises that it is exactly through the contact with conflicting social representations that human beings begin to reflect on their own views and realise what is distinctive about the representations they hold. It is through such dialogue and conflict that existing representations are revisited and adjusted. Hence, the theory cannot be seen as overly deterministic, but rather, as Marková (2000) has argued, “conceives of the dynamics of thought, language and social practices as interdependent socio-cultural and individual phenomena which are co-constructed by means of tension and polarization of antinomies” (p. 419). Such a dialogic understanding of social representations also helps us to address the criticism of consensus. Rose, Efraim, Gervais, Joffe, Jovchelovitch and Morant (1995) make clear that the idea of consensus as agreement at the level of specific conversations would contradict social representations theory by rendering the concept of social representation entirely static and by making communication *de facto* obsolete. While there must be a certain degree of consensus based upon a common language, tradition and rituals for cognition, recognition and communication to take place, there is also the argumentative level of immediate social interaction that is characterised by fragmentation, contradiction and thus social change.

One possible explanation for this misinterpretation is the equation of the adjective ‘social’ in social representations with their consensually shared nature. However, the social nature of these representations is based upon a number of points outlined by Moscovici (1961). Firstly, representations make up the common culture and so construct the symbolic boundaries and thereby identities of social groups and communities (cf. Howarth, 2002a). Secondly, representations are social in the sense that are always collectively created and validated through processes of communication and social interaction and thus cannot to seen to belong to

one individual alone (cf. Rose et al., 1995). Thirdly, representations are social since their content and specific form is influenced by the historic or economic climate as well as the social practices and general cultural context (cf. Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999). A certain degree of consensus then is not the sole defining feature of social representations but rather the product of the collaborative creation, negotiation and use of social representations.

Indeed, Moscovici (1985) has made clear that he holds a dynamic and holistic understanding of consensus that is not synonymous with uniformity. Echoing Billig's (1987) rhetorical approach to social psychology, he argues that social representations always presuppose a mixture of diversity and agreement. However, what we can concede is that conflict and argumentation are still under-theorised within social representation theory, as argued by Potter and Billig (1992). It is therefore time to address social representation as dispute and ideological conflict (Howarth, 2005), as without such development, the theory could be seen weak in terms of its power in social critique.

c) Cognitive reductionism?

A third major criticism maintains that the theory characterises representation as a overly cognitive phenomenon that can chiefly be explained by psychological processes with scant reference to social influence (Jahoda, 1988; Parker, 1987; Semin, 1985). McGuire (1986), for example, describes social representation as a process of abstracting small units of information received and assimilating them into pre-existing cognitive (rather than socially constructed) categories. He claims that while social representations introduce "serious errors" in cognition through the oversimplification they produce, they are nonetheless "cost effective" (McGuire, 1986, p. 102) since they enable coping with an otherwise unmanageable complexity due to the (assumed) limited nature of human information-processing.

For Semin (1985), the problem lies in introducing psychological processes into a theory of social knowledge and societal change. According to him, the main problem derives

from the conflict between Moscovici's aim to shift the level of social psychological analysis from the individual to the collective while proposing anchoring and objectifying as the two key psychological processes which, for Semin, can be readily subsumed under cognitive psychology and again used as an information-processing metaphor. Billig (1993) explains that the reason for this (mis) understanding is that the processes of anchoring and objectification are similar to cognitive psychologists' descriptions of categorisation and schemata. The real mistake is depicting anchoring and objectifying as purely *cognitive* processes, or even assuming that there *can* be 'purely cognitive' processes. Rigorous social representations research has highlighted that anchoring and objectification are indeed social, cultural and ideological as much as cognitive (e.g. Jodelet, 1991; Voelklein, 2004; Wagner, Elejabarrieta & Lahnsteiner, 1995).

Rather constructively, Billig (1988, 1993) warns social representations theorists not to become trapped in the one-sidedness of cognitive psychology, which has neglected particularisation by exclusively focussing on categorisation. The same could happen to social representations theory, he argues, if the theorisation of anchoring does not take into account the human abilities to negate and particularise. Moreover, he remarks, anchoring is not an automatic process but might lead to arguments and debate in groups. More critically, Potter and Billig (1992) assert that the processes of anchoring and objectification channel social representations theory into cognitive reductionism and subsume it under the "decontextualised, desocialised and uncultured universe of laboratory experiments" (p. 16). Instead of concentrating on thoughts and beliefs, they argue, social psychology should focus on the pragmatics of discourse and how social representations are achieved through talk in practice. More recently, Potter and Edwards (1999) have related this criticism to an opposition between cognition and action. They claim that while discourse theories are oriented towards accomplishing particular tasks in relation to others, social representation

remains on a perceptual-cognitive and therefore individual level. Similarly, Potter (1996) states that “social representations are ways of understanding the world which influence action, but are not themselves parts of action” (p. 168).

To remedy this alleged overemphasis on cognition, Potter and Litton (1985) would like to re-establish social representations as linguistic repertoires, which they define as “recurrently used systems of terms for characterizing actions, events and other phenomena” consisting of “a limited range of lexical items and particular stylistic and grammatical constructions, combined with specific metaphors and tropes” (p. 89). They suggest that this reinterpretation would emphasise that representations are linguistically constituted and constructed in specific contexts, and it would have the advantage of not assuming any direct link to identity and social categories.

Despite these criticisms, social representations theorists would be wrong to hastily reject the cognitive dimension of social representations. On the contrary, as one of the central aims of social representations theory, it is important to reconstitute the essentially socio-historical nature of cognition. This would release the term ‘cognitive’ from its rather unhelpfully negative connotations. Marková (2000) takes up this issue in detail: she explains that cognition, from a social representational perspective, is based upon a dialogical understanding of the mind that is rooted within a Hegelian paradigm and the tradition of dialogism. Social representations theorists regard cognition as socio-cultural, as dynamic and, hence, as something that cannot be simply reduced to the level of the individual (Marková, 2000). Moscovici clearly rejects individualistic versions of cognition. He argues against treating minds as “black boxes” (1984a, p. 15) and so rather looks at the content of thoughts and how these are historically and socially constituted and communicated.

What is often overlooked by critics of this approach is that social representations theory clearly goes further in integrating culture and cognition than approaches of ‘shared’ or

‘distributed’ cognition that have been proposed in other areas of social psychology (cf. e.g. Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991). Different to these approaches that retain the separation of individual cognition and social interaction and only consider possible relations between them, social representations theory describes cognition as *inherently* and *inevitably* social and cultural. Consequently, social representations theory moves beyond the narrow definition of social cognition as individual cognition about others or influenced by others (Verheggen & Baerveldt, 2001).

A possible reason for the charge of cognitive reductionism from the perspective of British discursive psychology could lie in their characterisation of cognition and action as oppositional. It appears here that cognition is equated with something that happens ‘inside individual minds’ without due attention to its social and ideological production. It is precisely such a dichotomy of mind and society that social representations theorists seek to challenge.

Having challenged the depiction of social representations as mere mental templates, it needs to be made clear that many social representations theorists also object the interpretation of social representations as purely linguistic resources. As Moscovici (1985) has clearly stated “a discourse is not a representation, even if every representation is translated into a discourse. All that is image or concept does not entirely pass into language” (p. 92). While representations may manifest themselves in language, they do not necessarily have to. We may find social representations objectified in photographs, drawings, films, newspaper articles and the media generally – in any social practice (e.g. de Rosa, 1987; Jodelet, 1991; Livingstone, 1998; Moscovici, 1961; Voelklein, 2004; Wagner, Kronberger & Seifert, 2002). Howarth (2005) emphasises that “social representations are often *only* apparent in action” (p. 7, original emphasis). She gives examples from her research into black British pupils’ experiences in schools, which illustrate how the representation of ‘black youth’ is not so much expressed in actual dialogue but permeates the institutional cultures of schools,

informing the actions of teachers, particularly in their social practices of gaze in looking and not looking at black pupils (Howarth, 2004). A linguistic re-interpretation of social representations is less likely, we would assume, to capture the institutionalised and historical nature of these representations. By concentrating exclusively on ‘what talk does’, that is by taking a functional stance, British discursive psychology also risks of letting individualism ‘in through the backdoor’ (Jovchelovitch, 1995). The concept of linguistic repertoires underemphasises the social origins of talk and text and overemphasises the content and immediate context of the conversation or document under study. Therefore, it does not only marginalise the wider relational and socio-cultural factors but also the actual *social* production and contestation of representation. This would in turn limit the critical potential of

d) An acritical agenda?

social representations theory.

Social representations theory has also been charged with being acritical, in failing to seriously address issues of power and ideology (Ibañez, 1992; Jahoda, 1988). Parker (1987), for example, asserts that the way Moscovici treats the term ideology “blunts any critical cutting edge” (p. 458) as it is turned into “a harmless label for a system of beliefs” (p. 465). Moscovici’s (1984a) conceptualisation of ideology relates to his distinction between the consensual and the reified universe, which has been equally criticised. The consensual universe is the world of common sense. This is often seen as the space in which social representations are created, negotiated and transformed. The reified universe, by contrast, is inhabited by ‘experts’, often seen as scientists, who base their judgements of reality on experimentation, logic and rational choice. Moscovici (1984a) has described ideology as a mediator between these two universes:

We see more clearly the true nature of ideologies which is to facilitate the transition from the one world to the other, that is to cast consensual into reified categories and to subordinate the former to the latter. Hence they have no specific structures and can be perceived either as representations, or as sciences. (p.23)

For the case of psychoanalysis, Moscovici (1984a) discusses how common sense can be turned into an ideology by being “appropriated by a party, a school of thought or an organ of state so that a product, created by the society as a whole, can be enforced in the name of science” (p. 58). This distinction between the consensual and reified universe has been fiercely debated by both critics (e.g. Jahoda, 1988; McKinlay & Potter, 1987; Potter & Billig, 1992; Wells, 1987), as well as advocates of social representations theory (e.g. Flick, 1998; Foster, 2003; Howarth, 2005; Purkhardt, 1993). As echoed in a recent article by van Bavel and Gaskell (2004), McKinlay and Potter (1987) point out that there is a conceptual contradiction between, on the one hand, stating that all individuals use social representations to make sense of their worlds and on the other hand separating the world of science from the world of common sense. Given the fact that Moscovici (1984a) has acknowledged himself that science is equally subject to historical and social influence, he obviously must recognise that scientists like the rest of us rely on social representations in their daily interactions and activities. “It would, therefore, be a profound mistake to think of science as an unproblematically asocial realm of activities in which knowledge of ‘pure fact’ is generated; the scientist is as much trapped in his social world as is the layman” (McKinlay & Potter, 1987, p. 479).

Potter and Edwards (1999) claim that one negative implication of this dichotomy is that it has prevented social representations theorists from considering the impact of their own representations in the production of research itself. This last point at least does not appear to

be justified. Social representations theorists have been critically aware of the possible influences of their own representations and have discussed the impact of these and of their own identities on both the process and products of research (e.g. Farr, 1993; Howarth, 2002b; Voelklein, 2004).

Another criticism of the relationship between the two universes is that it is often described as a one-way process of influence from the reified to the consensual. We can see this in research into the public understanding of science and biotechnology, for example, that explores how scientific or technical concepts become familiarised in common sense (e.g. Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Wagner et al., 2002). However, social representations theorists rarely investigate this relation in the opposite direction – that is how common sense influences the content and structure of science (Howarth et al., 2004). This clearly deserves attention as both Howarth (2005) and Purkhardt (1993) discuss. If all knowledge is socially constructed so is scientific knowledge.

Yet, the formation of scientific and everyday concepts can be quite distinct due to the different conditions and structures of authority and power in both universes. One way of understanding how these two universes can co-exist within one and the same social world is in terms of different modes of thought. Bruner (1985) distinguishes between the narrative and the paradigmatic cognitive functioning or mode of thought that can each be performed by the same person at different times. Whereas the paradigmatic mode of thought is a systematic, abstract way of thinking that is based on logic, rigorous analyses, consistency and the establishment of facts, the narrative mode of thought is very concrete, particular and concentrated on human intentions and actions. Myths, well-formed stories, images and rich meanings play an important part in this narrative way of sensemaking.

Treating the reified and the consensual has two co-existing and interacting forms of knowledge has also been proposed by Duveen and Lloyd (1990) and Flick (1998). As Foster

(2003) outlines, there is evidence in Moscovici's work that he did not want to treat the two universes as strictly separate from one another. She comes to the conclusion that the distinction between the reified and the consensual is less central to the theory of social representations than has been generally assumed and supports this claim by pointing to his concept of cognitive polyphasia.

A second way out of this overemphasised dichotomy has been proposed by Howarth (2005). She argues that the difference between the consensual and the reified universe points us to the *process* of reification that positions certain social representations as 'expert knowledge'. Reification infuses social representations with ideological power by legitimising their dominant and dominating position over alternative representations. She argues that in order to fully develop the theory's critical potential, social representations theorists need to analyse the ways in which different knowledge systems become reified in different situations. Developing Jovchelovitch's (1997) assertion that some groups have more access to resources and thus a better chance of imposing their versions of reality and truth, Howarth (2005) invites us to study the role of power and conflict within the process of social re-presentation. By examining the politics that influence the hegemonic construction of social representations we can gain a better understanding of the interests that are at stake and the alternative representations that may be marginalised. This perspective also deconstructs the problematical unidirectional depiction of the relationship between common sense and science.⁵

A critical approach to social representations obviously needs a clearer grasp of ideology. We need to analyse how representations may be infused with ideological power to justify the status quo and so maintain systems of inequality and exclusion (Howarth, 2004) as well as investigate how the public takes on, appropriates and contests existing ideologies in their representational work (Voelklein, 2003). An ideological perspective emphasises that in the

practice of social life, representations are never neutral but constantly permeated by power relations. Such a critical approach to social representations theory would provide us with the tools of evaluating representations in terms of their ability to legitimise and sustain unequal and oppressive power relations and marginalising practices.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, we have tried to demonstrate that the complexity and dynamics between society and self-inherent in social representations theory are at the root of many of its criticisms and misunderstandings. We have elaborated this peculiar position of social representations theory with reference to four major areas of criticism: a) the claim of theoretical ambiguities; b) its portrayal as socially deterministic; c) its contrasting critique of cognitive reductionism as well as d) its charge of following an acritical agenda. Through a detailed evaluation of these criticisms, certain points could be revealed to be misinterpretations of social representations theory such as the lack of distinction from other conceptualisations, the notion of consensus or the nature of language and cognition. However, other points of critique were shown to be important and constructive ideas for theoretical refinement and extension, for example criticisms with regards to the problematic distinction between the consensual and the reified universe and the underdevelopment of the influence of argumentation, conflict, ideology and power on social representations.

A starting point for investigating the void in treating ideology and power issues in social representations theory could be to examine whether there is some intrinsic characteristic of social representations theory that prevents researchers from approaching these issues. One property of the theory as it is currently applied that could be made responsible for this situation is its primary concentration on the content and structure of a social representation as opposed to its function and broader societal implications. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) assert that “social representations research has generally emphasised structure

over function” (p.173) and they “take it for granted that research on social representations will continue to foreground the comparative analysis of common sense, the contents of representations” (p.175). While we appreciate that an understanding of the nature and content of a representation is a pre-requisite for discussing its political or ideological consequences, it is this extra step in the analysis that is often omitted and that we regard as crucial for strengthening the theory’s critical power. In order to follow a critical agenda we need to move beyond a mere description of the status quo to a consideration of the historical roots, the immediate social function and the future implications of particular representations. That is, we need to examine what social representations *do* in social and political relations.

Besides recognising areas for future development, theorists and researchers in this tradition may also want to consider how far they contribute themselves to the misunderstandings and criticisms voiced towards social representations theory. Employing concepts and terms that are predominantly associated with a highly individualised psychology such as ‘cognition’ or ‘representation’ without elaborating how they are to be understood within the context of their use may easily mislead the casual reader of writings on social representations. In addition to a lack of definition and elaboration, social representations theorists and researchers have also been criticised for incorporating these individual psychological terms uncritically and for hiding behind the cognitive label of unfamiliarity reduction that frees them from sufficiently engaging with the social and historical contexts (Guerin, 2001). Marková (2000) for example asserts that many social representations researchers give key social psychological concepts an individualistic and static instead of a socio-cultural and dynamic meaning. In this way, they do not do justice to the theory’s dialectical and dynamic features and foster stagnation and misconception rather than theoretical development.

Focussing on the dynamic and dialectical aspects of social representations theory is also desirable in terms of widening participation in this theoretical approach. If social representations theory comes to be perceived as static and descriptive it is less likely to appear suitable for explaining the heterogeneity, tension and change of modern social life Moscovici (1961) set out to explore. It is then no surprise that discourse theory becomes an attractive alternative. As Potter and Edwards (1999) make clear, what they consider an advantage of a discursive approach over social representations theory is its action orientation and its focus on the immediate dynamics of the communicative situation. While a discursive approach has its own limitations that we briefly alluded to, a stronger involvement with and reflection on the dynamic conceptual features of social representations and their methodological exploration as a socio-cultural practice could open further possibilities for theoretical development.

As we have stressed throughout this paper, social representations theorists need to challenge both our critics and peers who marginalise the role of power, dialogue and resistance in the development and circulation of representations. We would suggest that empirical work in the field should build up a more explicitly critical agenda that promotes a social psychology of conflict, resistance and social participation in our understanding of the interconnections between social structures and subjectivities, culture and cognition, the social and the psychological. It is in this spirit of theoretical advancement and critical engagement in social representations theorising and research that this review should be understood.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Studies into the development of social knowledge about previously unknown or threatening social objects demonstrate the representational processes involved in taming the unknown. These include extensive research into representations of science and new technologies (e.g. Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Wagner et al., 2002), of HIV-AIDS (e.g. Campbell, 2003; Joffe 1996) and of mental illness (Jodelet, 1991; Schmitz, Filippone, & Edelman, 2003).
- ¹ The Oxford Dictionary (1995) defines a representation primarily as ‘an image, likeness, or reproduction of a thing e.g. a painting or drawing’, thus clearly referring to the mirroring function of representation.
- ¹ Conversely, an emphasis on diversity and fragmentation does not mean that there cannot be widely shared or hegemonic representations within contemporary societies (Howarth, 2005; Moscovici, 1988). Representations of gender, for example, are remarkably resistant to historical change (Voelklein, 2003) and contextual factors (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992).
- ¹ However, as we discuss below, with Moscovici’s use of the notion of ideology, Jahoda’s (1988) criticism of an unnecessary overlap of certain categories seems to be at least partly justified.
- ¹ Such an approach resonates with recent work within the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g. Latour, 1991) that is concerned with identifying the different actors that take part in the legitimisation of certain ideas as science.

Corina Voelklein
Caroline Howarth

Institute of Social Psychology
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE
electronic mail: c.voelklein@lse.ac.uk
c.s.howarth@lse.ac.uk

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Corina Voelklein

Caroline Howarth

Institute of Social Psychology
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE

electronic mail: c.voelklein@lse.ac.uk
c.s.howarth@lse.ac.uk

