Saadi Lahlou

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The role of artefacts in the co-construction of social representations

Saadi LAHLOU. EDF-Direction des Etudes et Recherches. Clamart, France.

In a systemic approach at society level, social representations can be seen as folds of a large users' manual, "common-sense", descriptive and prescriptive for the use of the World in everyday life. In this respect, social representations allow, and guide, the co-operation of actors ("users" of the common reality) in their respective local goals. Although many studies focus on the existence of such representations, and describe them, there is few empirical work describing how, in real life situations, this "users' manual" is made available to users.

Three recent studies suggest that artefacts (language, documents, but also material objects) act as media in the transmission of social representation (which is not new) but also as a concrete support for representation processing in everyday and professional life. The two first studies [Lahlou, 1995a, 1996, and Lahlou, 1994] show how social representation can be extracted from dictionaries, hereby proving that representations are stocked by culture in material artefacts, in such a way that it can reproduce easily in individual minds. The third [Lahlou & Fischler, 1996] describes in detail the avatars of representations in their successive transfers from mind to objects and vice-versa. Coherently with the "situated cognition" approach [e.g. Hutchins, 1994], it shows how a representation of a state-of-things is transformed into documental description, dispatched to actors in the process of labour division, materialised locally, to finally produce in the reality the state-of-things represented. Artefacts play a key role in this co-construction because their relative stability and public availability allow a delocalised and asynchronic co-ordination of actors concerned, by overtly actualising, into concrete referents, facets of the current state of the social representation.

In this perspective, social representation should now be seen as scattered information widespread not only in the minds of humans but also in the very material world itself. Artefacts should then be considered as made of the very same material as representations.


