Challenges for social representations theory

The socio-genetic perspective

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Over the past fifty years, the theory of social representations has been subject to change, inflection, interpretation and criticism. Few authors in the course of this period of change have been able to stamp their mark on a theoretical structure whose conceptual shadow is both rich and imposing. Even fewer have really contributed to drawing a specific line of thought that is sufficiently strong from an epistemological and empirical point of view to constitute a real school of thought that gives a reflective and fertile interpretive perspective to the development of the initial paradigm. Denise Jodelet belongs to this second category of authors and the aim of this chapter will be largely inspired by her contribution to the formation of a specific perspective[1].

In recent years many terms have been used to qualify different directions of work with and on social representations (SR). These terms are inspired by places (mainly geographical, such as the names of towns, often confused with those of institutions) or the authors' names. In this context, the expansion of work on SR over the last thirty years has resulted in the emergence of a formidable diversity. Furthermore, these terms more or less completely cover the current research areas without, however, managing to encapsulate them. Especially since more inclusive models of these approaches have emerged (*cf.* Wagner *et al.*, 1999), not to mention studies that ignore them without asking too much about their historicity and their raisons d'être (*cf.* Sammut *et al.*, 2015). Without neglecting or minimising the role of these authors, institutions and their geographical locations, we have decided to do something different in this chapter. We will try to subscribe to the socio-genetic or anthropological perspective, continuing the trajectory of work on SR carried out over the last

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35 years. We will illustrate it with examples from many classical and more recent studies and research.

1 Foundations of the socio-genetic perspective

Between 1960 and 1980, the "founding moment" of the emergence of social representations theory, the first proponents of this approach in France tried to do two things at once: orientate social psychology epistemologically as a discipline and, at the same time, give it a specific subject matter, an epistemological horizon, deepening the theory on social knowledge initiated by Moscovici (Kalampalikis, 2013, 2019). The first summary of trends in the emerging field of SR was outlined by Jodelet in 1982 (*cf.* Jodelet, 2015a), clearly laying the groundwork of the socio-genetic and anthropological perspective, but without actually naming it. At that time, it was situated in "the field of study of social representations in the real environment".

It is now characterised by two specificities: a) the type of objects chosen as targets of representation (situated, holistic or complex objects or systems) (e.g. a scientific theory, culture, women, children, health, the body, justice, etc.); b the method chosen to study them (oral, spontaneous, interviews, pictorial, documentary, epistolary, etc.). Denise Jodelet recommends a specific direction of SR study, as part of thinking on common sense and collective ideation, as a *form of social thought*.

Taking one of Moscovici's initial propositions from 1961, she considers that social representations: a) have their own autonomy and effectiveness; b) are modalities of knowledge; c) "must be related in their genesis, working and function to the processes that affect social organisation, life and communication, to the mechanisms that contribute to the definition of the identity and specificity of social groups and to the relationships that these groups maintain with each other" (Jodelet, 2015a, p. 21). This view of social representations imposes a de facto viewpoint of the researcher and necessarily directs the choice of methodologies, in order to be in line with the object from the perspective of social inscription and participation.

This is without doubt one of the two qualifying "socio-genetic" senses of this perspective. Understanding the representational object as a dynamic phenomenon, its genesis as a trajectory in the present and the past, its expression as social and practical knowledge, a product of historical, political and cultural situations and social communication.

The second sense of the "socio-genetic" qualifier may more metaphorically orientate ideas within the social sciences to the genesis of the theory itself in the past and the present. On the one hand, this perspective required a direct continuity with Moscovici's initial paradigm, continuing, in the sense of deepening, the many possible ways of thinking about knowledge in society. Yet, it very quickly produced a strong inflection to the initial paradigm, enlarging the scope of the study of the science/common sense duo, to forms of alterity and symbolic social relationships (1976, 1985), as well as urban life (1976), public policy (1978), environment (Chiva *et al.*, 1983) and collective memory (Haas & Jodelet, 2007; Jodelet & Haas, 2014, 2019). On the other hand, from the epistemological point of view, this perspective attempts to question

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the origins of the theory and the original links maintained with other theorisations from the human and social sciences with the aim of contributing a social psychology of knowledge. Derived mainly from the work of the Durkheimian school of thought on collective psychology, this theory carries within it a wholly axiomatic method of research that enables it to communicate with the other social sciences (Jodelet, 2015a; Kalampalikis & Haas, 2008; Kalampalikis *et al.*, 2019).

We are then going to present these specificities (objects, methodological posture) with the aid of classic and recent examples, as well as studies inspired by this perspective.

2 Tensional, holistic and socially anchored objects

Objects of study in the field of SR are not fundamentally different from those of neighbouring social science disciplines. Alfred Schütz indicated something akin to this when he wrote "all social sciences are objective meaning-contexts of subjective meaning-contexts" (1967, p. 241). Examples might be health, work, identity, city, collective memory or education, even if these are more fields than objects properly speaking, or even the normative regulation of behaviour and secular knowledge, and we could take many other examples.

Although the question of the object must affect any study on social representations, it should be noted that it often constitutes a type of obscure, and therefore blind, spot in a landscape increasingly dominated by the somewhat iconoclastic principle of "everything is representation". Consequently, we can say that the question of the object is no longer either central to or systematic in the conceptual development and construction of methods for studying or tools for measuring representational phenomena.

It is therefore entirely logical to ask at least three questions:

- What is the added value of our approach in the effective conceptual and also empirical examination of these "shared" objects?
- What is the specific status of the object for the psychology of SR?
- Are there different ways of working objects within the very tradition of SR work?

The systematic examination of these questions largely goes beyond the scope of this chapter. We are going to try to concentrate on a principle point which, at the present time, seems a possible point of departure for explaining the socio-genetic perspective.

Here is the first assumption: any representational object in the real environment is an object traversed by zones of tension, in other words, *any representational object is a tensional object.*

And its corollaries:

a) These tension zones are *essential*, for the kind of object concerned and for the kind of view we take of it

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b) They are the product of the *both constituted and constituent nature of social representations*

c) They are studied through *numerous* suitable *methodological approaches*.

We are going to try to briefly explain this assumption and its corollaries.

"Social representations are assumed to attribute to ideas, and above all to objects, properties that do not exist in any form or appearance" (Moscovici, 2013, p. 45). In other words, we are always in the process of trying to make attributions, allocations or imputations that go, no doubt fatally, beyond the first appearance of the object's contours.

Regardless of the ontological status of the objects of study and classical debate in the social sciences on the constructed nature of their social reality, objects, such as national or social identity (*cf.* Kalampalikis, 2020; Villas Bôas, 2010), risk behaviour (*cf.* Apostolidis & Dany, 2012), violence (de Souza Santos *et al.*, 2010), transmission of knowledge (Haas, 2006), ecological practices (Caillaud *et al.*, 2010), urban life (Jodelet & Milgram, 1977), etc. exist for our subjects, influence how they think and act, condition, to varying degrees, their own life within the groups to which their belong and construct a shared school of thought. We understand by this that the social construction of our reality does not affect the experienced or perceived reality of objects for those who experience them from within. From this, our work is situated on the subtle identification of this tension zone which created the context from which the meanings and practices of subjects arise in relation to this object. These meanings and practices may be consensual, varied, polarised, in a word, plural, conveying the living heritage of cultural and historic frameworks of appropriation, membership and interpretation. They are, in any case, *instituting* and *instituted* for those who are involved in their appropriation, negotiation and communication.

We should return for a moment to the stated assumption, as it merits further clarification. In fact, at least three tension zones can be identified: one linked to the status of the object in the social, cultural and subjective sphere, the second related to the nature of SR and the third, linked to the status of the perspective employed to study and analyse the object.

The example of some national multi-centre research carried out at the Laboratory of Social Psychology at the University of Lyon will serve to illustrate the first zone of tension. It concerns research on the psycho-social issues of sperm donation (*cf.* Kalampalikis *et al.*, 2010, 2013). This is a polemic, socially sensitive, subject that takes on very different aspects according to the legislative frameworks that regulate the same medically assisted procreation technique. Should access be given to unmarried people and same-sex couples, should donors be paid, should couples be given the option to determine the criteria of their future donor according to hair colour, size, educational qualifications, religion, IQ test score? Should children be able to access information that might identify the donor? How should parents construct the story of conception?

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These are some of the multitude of question that arise and that different societies ask when constructing the reference legislative framework that conditions the type of experience and coping strategies that confront individuals wanting to start a family in this way. These bioethical questions are fundamental and receive very different answers depending on the country constructing a social context loaded with norms, morals, taboos and of course above all, ways of life. An examination of international literature (Golombok *et al.*, 2002) has shown that in spite of legislative differences, there is a close convergence of parental practices. This is the first psychosocial window to open. It consists of questioning the meaning and practice systems shared by cultural groups without direct contact, but with the same experience beyond what is imposed on them or permitted to them by law. However, in addition to bioethics and law, recent anthropological literature on kinship transformations teaches us an important lesson. Thus, according to Godelier (2004), an at first sight surprising invariable traverses societies across time: "*nowhere in any society, are a man and a woman sufficient in themselves alone to make a child"* (*op. cit.*, p. 325). The intervention of other intangible, imaginary agents (spirit, divine, ancestors) ensures the passage and transformation of an anonymous foetus into an eponymous child. From this perspective, for the case that concerns us here, sperm donation, this invariable becomes more salient since the third "agent" which intervenes in the first phase of the procreation process is a *tangible "other"*, in the form of a donation of genetic material originating from *another person*. The parents, the child, the institution and the donor, the protagonists of the process of this type of procreation, thus form an unusual parental configuration, traversed by zones of not only societal but also cultural, political and private tensions.

This is an example of a zone of tension that somehow traverses the object of study in spite of itself. It is precisely this zone that makes its study necessary, given the societal repercussions of this issue of medical, technological and also third-party intervention in the phenomenon of kinship. Jodelet expressed exactly this idea when she introduced a phenomenological concept par excellence, the *horizon*: "…the same object or event, when looked at in different *horizons* gives rise to exchanges of interpretation, confrontations of position by which individuals express an identity or allegiance. Each horizon brings out a central meaning of the object according to trans-subjective representation systems specific to the social or public spaces in which the subjects move. They appropriate these representations due to their adherence and allegiance to these spaces" (2015, p. 77, *our translation*).

This aspect can be illustrated by taking the example of thematically related, socially sensitive research on the human embryo as an object of representation in France and Brazil, carried out at the Laboratory of Social Psychology at the University of Aix-Marseille (Alessio *et al.*, 2011). Analysis of the representational states studied shows the effect of sociocultural context and religious belief on the composition and organisation of the representational field of the human embryo. From the anthropological point of view, it is these social controversies that provide an interpretative framework by which the human embryo will be endowed with meaning (Morgan, 2001). The representational states studied are thus symptomatic of the salient societal issues in each sociocultural context. Moral and scientific issues, antithetical in the Brazilian

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context (e.g. the embryo as a person *versus* an *object of* research), refer to two separate dimensions in the French context. The Brazilian semantic world shows the image of *life* encompassing the symbolic theme of "the origin" in contrast with the French semantic world invested by the question of not only the origin, but also "the future".

These results show the advantage of considering the horizon in which the object is situated, i.e. the perspective from which it is viewed. This perspective notably permits representational states studied to be related to the sphere of sociocultural adherence and issues related to the social context. This construction of the human embryo as life "already there" may be interpreted as the manifestation of an axiological process that traverses individuals, a process attesting to the influence of the religious horizon. In fact, religious belief intervenes analogously in the formation of semantic worlds and in the anchoring dynamic of the representational field of the human embryo in Brazil and in France.

Now let's try to examine the second zone of tension. A note is needed here. It concerns the basic assumption of the theory or theories used for this purpose. If we consider that the theory of social representations is trying to investigate common sense knowledge as a socio-cognitive development and cultural product of social subjects, defined by their group membership, operating under the influence of the social frameworks of thought and the collective norms of behaviour including the data of their practice and immediate experience, there are a number of consequences. The first is an orientation marked by the desire to study the formation and operation of SR in social subjects. This presupposes consideration of the knowledge and representation processes related to the dynamic inclusion of social and cultural elements that form the reference and supporting universe from which social subjects are going to construct their posture and their experience. This undoubtedly explains why we are interested, from this perspective, in complex objects, i.e. objects which entirely systematically engage the subjects as members of a group that becomes a place of psychological and social investment (Jodelet, 2015a).

A short example of research on medicalised male contraception (MMC) may allow us to illustrate this second zone of tension. For fifty years, the medical world has been promising a MMC, often called "pill for men". It generates little discussion in the public space and is characterised by a strong collective lack of knowledge, and even suspicion. It is a kind of "virtual" object that nevertheless conveys an imaginary world full of projections, desires and fears about its modus operandi, action and efficacy and possible changes to social gender relations. Results show the anchoring, by natural transfer, of its effects in the universe of female contraception, the imaginary fears it raises in men and women alike and the threat it represents for virility, male power and the delicate balance of social roles. In these projections, power relationships and social positions are played out which, as objects of conflict and anxiety for both sexes, are governed by strong social normativity. Thus, the fantastical fear of the introduction of a new method of birth control is itself regulated by the socio-symbolic matrix that governs social relationships between the sexes (*cf.* Apostolidis, Buschini & Kalampalikis, 1998; Kalampalikis & Buschini, 2007).

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From this, it is difficult to talk of "the" social representation of a single, unique object or even to reflect on floating and errant representations. Many authors are mistaken, and even more readers have undoubtedly barely noticed a significant detail in the title of Jodelet's famous monograph (1989) on mental illness: *Folies et représentations sociales* (*Madness and social representations*). Yet, the use of the plural in the original French (*folies*) and the conjunction precisely refers to this "double movement, aiming on the one hand to isolate views that orientate the relationship with the mentally ill, and on the other hand to specify how the situation in which this relationship is forged contributes to the development of these views". In other words, "taking the representations as production, expression and instrument of a group in its relation to alterity" (*op. cit.*, p. 40). Here we see the advantage of a view of social representations both as products and processes, simultaneously studying the contents and the processes. In other words, seriously taking into account that social thought is both *constituted* and *constituting*, describing social reality as it is constructed through our interactions, actions and communications and forming an "environment of thought" which determines our perception and view of reality and guides our actions. The third corollary requires more detailed explanation.

3 Methodological postures

The idea that the study of social representations cannot be satisfied by a single method is not new. As Moscovici suggested (1961, 2013), studying the knowledge that individuals possess on the subject of a complex object and the way it is organised and used by others and groups, involves the essential perspective of "methodological polytheism". Not forgetting an important data set: in methodology, "it is necessary to rely on the creativity of researchers more than on the products" (*ibid.*, 2013, p. 168). We should remember that the advantage and necessity of the multi-method approach for delineating representational phenomena in their complexity are issues constantly developed and discussed not only within social psychology (i.e. Abric, 2003a; Jodelet, 2003), but also more widely within the social sciences (Flick, 2007). This methodological orientation (mixed methods, systematic triangulation of perspectives) is fundamental for thinking the object and producing valid and transferable knowledge, particularly in the context of the perspective presented here. Especially since a lot of classical research (one of the most emblematic being that of Jodelet on mental illness) on social representations used the triangulation approach, before it had emerged under that name in social science literature.

The methodology of complementarity has as its criteria of choice the adaptability and pertinence of strategies and tools in relation to the objects, objectives and conditions of the research. It is based on the principle of methodological polymorphism, made of discoveries, trial and error, and attempts at *ad hoc* operationalisation, in the face of intrinsically complex phenomena that are difficult to delimit using just one method. Methodological polymorphism is constructed in the tensions of the theoretical continuum between methods, with a certain conviction regarding the impossibility of objectivising the topological dynamic and the holistic nature of phenomena monolithically. It is manifested by an open, discovery approach that leaves room for analysis of the factuality of the object (understand it as it appears, as it emerges in a context, as it

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seems to be; Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and tries to foster a kind of justified methodological eclecticism and inventiveness of procedures according to the research objectives and the nature of studied phenomenon.

From this point of view, triangulation is of vital importance in the study of social representations when examining the content of representation concerning the construction of a social world object (Apostolidis, 2006). The theoretical (status of contents – variant/local – and processes – invariant/universal -; multi-level reading) and methodological (accessibility, creation of *ad hoc* procedures, operationalisation of multi-level linkage systems) issues of such a perspective are widely attested. These issues are at the heart of wider epistemological discussions concerning the production of knowledge in social psychology (descriptive *versus* explicative, opposition in terms of validity and legitimacy between qualitative and experimental procedures, predictive or interpretive value of the theory). It is therefore clear that in order to demonstrate the scientific advantage of the study of content s of representation and devising varied, adapted methods for their analysis, the application of triangulation constitutes a productive, transposable approach. Moreover, as an inductive research strategy, it seems appropriate to the epistemological specificity of social representations, a generally explicative paradigmatic theory of only local predictive scope (Moscovici, 2001).

From this perspective, triangulation through the different forms it can take (Flick, 2007), makes it possible to implement research practices based on:

a) a posture of openness and understanding on the part of the researcher who must remain sensitive to discovery and try to question and analyse the internal logic of the production and actualisation of representations, their subjective and social aspects ;

b) the implementation of intersection and blending operations (of methods, techniques, data, disciplinary contributions, theoretical orientations) enabling the research to be oriented (objectives, issues) and to study the different aspects of contextual influences exerted on the production and dynamic of representations (Apostolidis, 2006).

Thus, for example, triangulation can present a relevant methodological strategy for studying the relationship between the processes and products of representational activity. Although experimental work has shown the role of representations "already there" as host systems for the appropriation of new information (Abric, 1987; Flament, 1984), "there is a tendency to neglect the fact that the procedural aspect is found both up and downstream of the product, and only consideration of the content permits a systematic study of procedural aspects" (Jodelet, 2015a, p. 24).

From this perspective, the work on content makes it possible to consider the representations and other pre-existing "theories" of the subjects and thus to study their role as socio-cognitive filters, i.e. as systems of hosting, decoding and interpreting information coming from social reality. This area of work requires the linkage between "cognitive operations" and "social data", which enables us to show that the social dimension is present in both product/process aspects of social knowledge. It can be operationalised by means of approaches that use (even as a quasi-experimental stimulus) social material. An approach of this kind requires, on the one hand, the location

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of an "ideologically" (symptom of the structure, regulating social and interpersonal relationships) meaningful and relevant represented "already there", and on the other, analytical work that can be done from a problematised back and forth between various operations that intersect theoretically, methodologically and in relation to their data. From the theoretical and methodological view point these developments show the advantage of studying socio-cognitive processes by conceptualising and operationalising cognition from the point of view of society as situated product. The triangulation strategy raises the essential issue of a multi-method approach that enables us to work on the complexity of representational phenomena and their holistic character from their naturality.

An operationalisation perspective consists of studying the content of representation from spontaneous and/or interactive oral (verbal associations, associative cards, semi-directive interviews, focus groups), documentary (newspapers, archives) iconographic (pictures), aesthetic (literature, music) material to analyse the construction of a "state of knowledge and meanings" and examine the mechanisms of their production and their connection to social practices, interactions and stances. From an operational point of view, ordinary thought can be analysed by means of two notions: *meaning* and *filter* (Apostolidis, 1994). The notion of *meaning* refers to the meaning assigned to a given object, at individual and social level. The notion of a *filter*, constituted by the anchoring networks of information and meaning concerning the object, refers to the interpretive "already there" framework for practical purposes (controlling the situation, guide for action, expression). This notion enables us to envisage how constructions of social thought, in the form of implicit theories affect how new meanings of social objects are dealt with. This aspect can be illustrated by the example of a multi-method research combining qualitative and experimental procedures to study the relationship to cannabis among young French. The results show how the perceived addiction of a regular cannabis user in socially normed contexts of consumption (solitary or group) varies according to the pre-existing representations of the substance, representations that are symptomatic of the polemical and tensional debates that cross French society (*cf.* Apostolidis & Dany, 2012). From the theoretical and methodological point of view, material must be collected in a reasoned framework in order to analyse: (a) the processes of meaning development through the play of anchoring and objectivation which constructs the objects; (b) the nature of their historically, culturally and socially situated knowledge; (c) their instrumentalisation in the interpretation and control of social reality, and in particular their role as mediator and regulator of interactions with others.

Triangulation approaches are constructed in a situated and particular way, from specific real ground, according to the research issue and objectives, on the basis of the theoretical and epistemological choices of researchers. It is difficult to define a single triangulation approach and to formally present the steps and operations to be undertaken. Heterogeneity and the systematic non-overlapping of triangulation procedures from a predefined framework are required in a non-positivist posture. This posture refers to the prerogatives of the approach and the ability of the "researcher-bricoleur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) to make reasoned use of specific tools in each situation to study the complexity of the phenomena with which he is confronted. In this sense, tri-

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angulation is above all an *inductive research strategy* (from a particular phenomenon, observed on the ground to describe and understand it), the general purpose of which is to construct relevant and consistent knowledge about the phenomenon from different operations intersecting theoretically, methodologically and/or in relation to the data production. At the heart of this approach is the notion of the ground, this real environment of the genesis and emergence of representations and natural experience in a situation, which occupies a central place within the perspective presented here.

4 Conclusions

The socio-genetic and anthropological perspective, inspired by social phenomenology, is differentiated from other research orientations on and with SR by the specificity assigned to the studied object, seen from the viewpoint of the phenomenon. Representative phenomena "are mental products that can be tackled individually and collectively, as knowledge, know-how and meaning systems. At the individual level, they are considered to be based on social allegiances, the place in social relationships and intersubjective exchanges leading to ideal and practical commitments. At the collective level, they correspond to shared visions, common to a social training and distributed within the group through communication. This leads to the emphasis being placed on social thought, as mental constructions of objects of the world and as a source of ways of life affecting the social future" (Jodelet, 2015a, p. 7, *our translation*).

This perspective implies a holistic view and a polymorphic way of action from a methodological point of view for dealing with representative phenomena. It invites us to come out of the theoretical-methodological and classical discipline compartments and to attempt to practice open-air social psychology. In the past 35 years it has given rise to numerous research works that cannot be summarized or presented extensively in this chapter. It has permitted conceptual advances to be made in recent years (e.g. meaning/filter, stigmatic/symbolic anchoring, memory/forgetfulness, experiential knowledge, epochal representations, total social representations, etc.) and influenced numerous studies inspired by this contribution (*cf.* Duveen, 2000; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Wagner *et al.*, 1999). To it we owe the introduction of certain key notions (horizons, phenomenon, ways of life, and also representational primitives, significant practices) that become operative in the analysis of everyday experience of the world as a symbolic form of thought for practical purposes.

It has operatively reintroduced the place of the subject and significant practices in order to produce conceptualization that brings together subjective and objective fact by focusing on the relationship between subjectivity and ways of life. Finally, we must realize the connection between subjective and objective reality, the dynamic co-determination between individual existence and social structure (Berger & Lukmann, 1996; González Rey, 2015). This approach finally enables us to examine social thought from a contextual, comprehensive and interpretive perspective, this thought being so efficient in ordinary global relationships and the daily experience that fashions life in society. We think it is one of the best perspectives for continuing the dialogue opened within this theory with other social sciences (*cf.* Augé, 1994; Becker, 2007; Boltanski

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& Thevenot, 2015; Descola, 2006) and carrying out the plan, according to Moscovici (2012b), leading to a real *anthropology of our culture*.

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