

CURRENT ISSUES ON SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

This paper aims to briefly review the ways in which the concept of social representation has been approached, starting from the vast field of collective mentalities from which it originates and reaching the current meanings of the term. The premise from which our approach starts is that each social actor builds one's own grid of reading reality, based on representations, but one is also subject, at the same time, to the common definitions of the members of the group to which one belongs. The methodology used consists of a structural analysis, followed by an interpretative approach of a symbolic interactionism type. The emphasis lays on revealing the structure and functions of representation, and the conclusions highlight the fact that social representation is a continuously evolving social construct which plays an important role in defining individual and group identity.

Key words: collective mentality, social representation, structure, identity

Résumé

Le but de cet ouvrage est de passer en revue succinctement les différentes approches du concept de représentation sociale, en partant du vaste domaine des mentalités collectives où il trouve ses origines et en arrivant aux sens actuels. La prémisse sur laquelle est basée notre démarche est le fait que chaque acteur social construit sa propre grille de lecture de la réalité, sur la base des représentations, mais en même temps il respecte les définitions communes les membres du groupe auquel il appartient. La méthodologie employée consiste en une analyse structurale, suivie d'une approche interprétative du type interaction symbolique. L'accent est mis sur la mise en évidence de la structure et des fonctions des représentations, et les conclusions soulignent le fait que la représentation sociale est une construction sociale en permanente évolution et qui joue un rôle important dans la définition de l'identité individuelle et de groupe.

Mots-clés: mentalité collective, représentation sociale, structure, identité

Rezumat

Lucrarea de față își propune să treacă succint în revistă modalitățile în care a fost abordat conceptul de reprezentare socială, pornind de la domeniul vast al mentalităților colective din care provine și ajungând la accepțiunile actuale. Premisa de la care pornește demersul nostru este faptul că fiecare actor social își construiește o grilă proprie de lectură a realității, pe baza reprezentărilor, dar el se supune, în același timp, definițiilor comune ale membrilor grupului cărui îi aparține. Metodologia utilizată constă în analiza structurală, urmată de o abordare interpretativă de tipul interacționismului simbolic. Accentul cade pe relevarea structurii și funcțiilor reprezentărilor, iar concluziile scot în evidență faptul că reprezentarea socială este un construct social aflat în permanentă evoluție și care joacă un rol important în definirea identității individuale și de grup.

Cuvinte cheie: mentalitate colectivă, reprezentare socială, structură, identitate

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to offer a brief review of the manner in which the concept of social representation has been approached thus far, tracing its evolution from the vast field of herd mentalities from which it originates, to its present meanings. The focus is placed on revealing the structure and functions of representations, building up to the conclusion that the social representation is a continuously evolving social construct.

Herd mentality designates the particular manner in which a certain social group represents the world. However, each social actor is individually shaping images of the world around him and gives it meaning.

The social actor creates his own method of construing reality, but he conforms, at the same time, to the common definitions given by the members of the group to which he belongs.

These aspects of social representations are especially brought to the fore within the social dynamics which, by means of communication, place the social actors in interaction.

2. Methodology

It is difficult to develop a consistent research methodology of social representations due to the fact that, by their very nature, social representations are both individual and social phenomena. Therefore, from a methodological viewpoint, the concept will be approached here from two perspectives: structural analysis and interactional approach.

We consider the structural analysis of social representations to be appropriate, as it attempts to highlight the internal construct of phenomena and to introduce order in a universe characterized at the surface level by diversity and inconsistency.

Due to the specificity of the field of study, namely opinions, knowledge and beliefs characteristic of a culture, category or social group about objects belonging to the social environment, on the one hand, and about principles generating positions taken by social actors in different social contexts, on the other hand, we believe that a symbolic interactionist interpretive approach can complement the structural one.

3. Incursion into herd mentality

The concept of “mentality” is difficult to operationalize, the definitions given to the term differing from one author to another.

Le Goff (1987) stresses the Latin origin of the word (from the Latin *mentalis*), appearing for the first time in the English philosophy of the 17th century to describe a people’s manner of acting and thinking.

It was also Le Goff who assigned dreams, symbols, images and a more general perspective of representation to mentalities. According to the author, the changes that occurred from one historical period to another were due to changes in value systems, the latter being an integral part of mentalities.

Mentalities and social infrastructure are closely related to each other. Maintaining those mentalities which, in turn, were forced to adapt to the new changes has led to a delay in transforming the social infrastructure. At the same time, the changes that occurred at the level of the social infrastructure conform to the core values existing in society.

Vovelle (2000) assigns any form of cultural expression to mentalities. Schultze (1998), on the other hand, claims that these are merely an image which the society projects about itself, a subjective collective reality. Due to the difficulty with which they transform, mentalities are a relatively stable phenomena, the role of which is to maintain the relation between individual and society on a stable level.

The importance of distinguishing between analyzing mentalities and analyzing their modes of production, as well as the modes of production of the privileged vehicles (associated to the social communication networks) is highlighted by Gavreliuc (2003). In the research on herd mentalities, the focus is placed on collective attitudes. In this regard, the non-verbal and unconscious expressions, the developed or elementary forms of thought (archetypes, symbols), representing the manner in which social actors identify their world, are of particular interest.

Herd mentality is not the same for all social actors. It varies according to sex, age, social structure and level of culture, hence the existence of cultural cleavages. This entails the fact that it is normal for more mentalities to co-exist within the same historical period. Despite being different, all mentalities have a common set of practices, values and customs materialized into popular culture.

We could assign a person's or a collectivity's mental structure and way of thinking to mentality. By mental structure we understand the system of values, predispositions and cultural patterns guiding the spontaneous cultural life of a society. In a narrow sense, the concept refers to the system of intellectual, moral, cognitive and affective guidelines specific to a collectivity.

Johnson (1998) gives another definition of mentality. According to the author, mentalities are an integral part of culture, thus ensuring its continuity. By means of values and norms, mentalities structure and guide individual behavior.

Herd mentality is the reconstruction of the past after the block of individual needs and beliefs. It is the experiences that enfold on the images of the lived reality that are kept in the herd mentality. The latter is only a part of the past, which is only the system of shared individual experiences. The criterion for selection of these experiences is dictated by their similarity to the current social experiences.

Duțu (1986) defines the concept as a form of cultural expression, the main characteristic of which is the emphasis on the balance between intellectual and affective dispositions. In analyzing herd mentality, the focus is laid on the dialectical relationship between objective reality and the manner in which individuals live and speak about this reality.

Mentality is a system of tightly interwoven images and representations, the role of which is to govern the conduct of the individuals in a community. The collective mentalities' resistance to change is due to the more stable internal structures. Braudel (1995) states that every society is characterized by a certain type of mentality, thus guiding, in a certain direction, individual and collective actions and attitudes, and deep-rooting prejudices.

Durkheim ([1912] 1995) introduces the concepts of collective consciousness and collective representations. In a society, collective representations take the form of myths, legends or theogonic, cosmological or metaphysical representations. The common consciousness has the role of uniting, in a representation common to all the members of a social group, the psychisms of the individuals within that group. The collective consciousness has the role of imposing a coherent system of norms on the social actors by legitimizing consensus and maintaining the social cohesion of the community.

Heavily influenced by Durkheim, Maková (2005) brings the dualism of representations to the fore, which are both collective and individual. Collective representations are social facts that include phenomena such as religions, myths, science, and language. A very important characteristic of representations is their quality to create new representations.

Another interesting definition is given by Weichlein (2006) who claims that mentalities are individual and collective forms of consciousness. These are not simply limited to the common interests the emergence of which they explain, but also to the emotional dimension of the human being. Drawing on Durkheim, Weichlein claims that mentalities are mediators between the individual and the collectivity.

In order to prove the influence of the social environment on individual memory and thought, the author approaches two movements: the first is the cognitivist movement according to which memory is located at the individual level and the second is the psychosocial movement which associates the shared representation about the past with social memory.

The first medium through which mentality is manifested is the social one, which is the reality shared between all the members of a community, governing their desirable attitudes and behaviors. The social reality is perceived and evaluated by the individuals by means of prejudices, opinions and beliefs, all elements of mentalities. Their appropriation by all members legitimizes their affiliation to the group (Chiciudean and Halic 2001).

4. From herd mentalities to social representations

The concept of representation first emerged at the end of the 19th century. The social representation theory is based on the collective representation theory developed by Durkheim in 1898.

According to the author, the individual is influenced by the society to which he belongs. The society confines the individual, forcing him to think and to act in a certain manner. The limits imposed by society are manifested by means of social institutions. Durkheim distinguished between three social realities, two of which represent the totality of shared values and beliefs. The first reality is the one of the physical and chemical processes of the brain, and the other two are the individual and the collective representations. The social representations are that part of reality that can explain social facts

According to Durkheim, it is necessary for sociology to study the development of collective representations. Thus, he defines sociology as a collective psychology.

The transition from the concept of herd mentalities to social representations is brought about by Durkheim's attempt to approach the latter in order to observe the intellectual production of social groups in social practice. Before using the concept of social representation, Durkheim used that of collective representation, which will be later replaced by the former. The collective representation is, according to the author, the corpus of representations that the group has as regards the issues that affects it and is made up of the interaction between the external world and society. In conclusion, collective representations express the reality of the collective existence of a society.

5. Conceptual delimitations of social representations

The social representations theory is based on the collective representations theory developed by Durkheim, as shown above. However, in the modern specialized literature, the concept of social representation is approached for the first time by Moscovici (1961).

The author begins from Durkheim's idea that the individual is influenced by society due to his constant interaction with it. Moscovici emphasizes the influence of the media on representations by transforming ways of thinking, thus creating new contents. The unusual situations that arise in the life of an individual or group favor the emergence of social representations. The information regarding new representations is incomplete and limited, varying from one group to another, thus leading to the dispersion of information. The process opposite to the dispersion of information is the focus phenomenon. By focus we understand reaching a consensus by selecting information about a phenomenon based on the expectations and directions of the group to which they belong.

The multidisciplinary of the phenomenon has made it difficult to accurately define it. A more general definition of the concept depicts it as a system of opinions, knowledge and beliefs characteristic to a culture, a community or a social group, as regards the items belonging to the social environment. Social representations could comprise opinions, beliefs and, in general, any set of cognitive elements about a social object.

In his overview of the definitions of social representation, Quenza (2005) distinguishes between four different approaches: definitions focusing on the activity of the social groups that creates meaning or on the relations between social groups, definitions focusing on the analysis of the discourse creating social representations or on the cognitive activity intended by the representation process.

According to other authors (Rateau and Monaco 2013), it is necessary to re-systematize the characteristics of social representations. They identify, in this regard, four main characteristics. The first refers to the structured nature of representations. This means that opinions, beliefs and knowledge establish relationships that make them interdependent on one another. The second characteristic is that this system is shared by all members of the social group, depending on their position to the object. These systems result from a process of communication, being a collective result. The third characteristic focuses on forming systems through exchanges between group members. The last characteristic is connected to its final purpose, the social representations constituting a key factor in understanding present reality.

Although agreement has not yet been reached as regards the definition of representations, several researchers have put forward different theoretical orientations, with different research methodologies and objectives.

According to Jodelet (1989), social representations are a form of knowledge about common sense, denoting a form of social thought. Representations are patterns of practical thought the purpose of which is the mastery and understanding of the social, material and ideal environment. The author approaches social representations from the perspective of systems of meanings that are established between people and groups and their environment.

Other authors (Doise 1989; Guimelli 1999) consider social representations to be a way of expressing social thought. The authors believe that an important part of representations can be explained by a metasystem bearing the name of social thought. The latter acts in social situations and consists of shared norms, values and meanings. According to the two authors, the social quality of social thought comes, first of all, from its processing of social life and, second of all, from the interference of social variables (occupying a position, belonging to a group) with the cognitive processes.

The manner in which Nicolopoulou and Weintraub (1998) treat representations is simultaneously constructivist, socio-cultural and interpretive. Collective representations are a *sui generis* irreducible reality and play an important part in forming individual representations, the latter being a map of the reality constructed by the individual.

Liu and Hilton (2005) highlight the importance of social representations in shaping people's identity.

Another author, Arruda (2009) suggests a borderline approach to social representations, using both theories from the field of psychology, as well as sociology.

Bidjari (2011) believes that the social representation is the fundamental cause of attitudes. According to the author, attitudes are not individual cognitive processes, but are interdependent with social reality. Bidjari uses the concept of social thought, according to which attitudes are governed by social representations.

In our review of most of the psychosocial definitions of representations, we find three characteristic and interdependent aspects, namely communication, reconstruction of reality and environmental control. By communicating, individuals share a common code for exchanging and naming individual or collective events. By reconstructing reality, we understand naming and defining together the various aspects of everyday life. The last characteristic, namely the control over the environment, allows the individual to situate himself in his social environment and to control it.

Turliuc (2004) draws on Moscovici's view that social representations, as cognitive processes, play an important role in guiding individual conduct. The social character of representations is given by their emergence through the social interaction and communication between individuals.

Returning to his theses, Moscovici (1998) proposes a principle of delimiting social representations in terms of identifying them as psychological facts following these criteria: they are impersonal, in the sense that they belong to everyone; they are representations of others, belonging to the other people or group; and they are personal representations, feelings belonging to the ego.

The roles identified by the author are of conventionalization and prescription. Conventionalization refers to cataloging events in order to gradually impose them as a distinct pattern of behavior. The new social representations are connected with the pre-existing ones. The individual internalizes new representations based on the constructions he receives through education.

Drawing on Durkheim's theory of division of labor ([1893] 2008) Rouquette (1994) emphasizes the historical character of social representations, being both a product of becoming as well as one in the making.

Curelaru (2006) carries out an analysis of the meanings of social representations using Moscovici's revaluation of the concept of collective representation. The collective representation is thus defined as a historic construct, a non-homogeneous set of beliefs, myths, legends, traditions, science and religion. It is exterior to the individual and is imposed upon him as a social fact.

Social representations are defined as a social cognitive development with their own identity, of a homogeneous, specific and uniform nature. Unlike collective representation, which is a theoretical construct, the social representation is a measurable, identifiable and observable phenomenon, which has an internal structure governed by its own rules of functioning. Due to the fact that the individual actively participates in its formation, the social representation contains both characteristics of the object, as well as of the subject, and acts as the anchor of the social group.

Moscovici speaks about social psychology as a science that analyses the relationship between communication (the source of social representations) and ideology. The author shows that the ideological phenomena control social representations, influencing their content. Representations, in turn, are instrumental to the functioning of ideologies.

6. Structure and functions of social representations

Fischer (1987) proposes to approach social representations from two distinct perspectives in order to characterize them. The first criterion is that of structure, the social representation being a process of transforming social reality into a mental object. Moreover, the social representation plays the role of facilitator in the process of shaping reality by producing new information necessary to the social actors. The second criterion refers to social representations as a relational process, the representation appearing as a set of information regarding a particular fact / social process / phenomenon, from the viewpoint of the image.

Authors such as Abric (1984), Flament (1989) and Moliner (2001) believe that social representations are structured in the form of a nucleus around which peripheral systems revolve. In his study on the content of representations, Abric uses the term of central node. The one who concocted the concepts of centrality and node was Moscovici, in his paper from 1961. He considers representations to be formed gradually, by following three steps. These steps are: the selection of certain elements over others, the incorporation of these elements in the value system of individuals and the establishment of these elements in a stable nucleus around which other elements of representation revolve.

Moscovici uses the concepts *objectification* and *anchoring* in explaining the genesis of social representations. Objectification refers to the process through which a new object (an innovative situation, an unusual event) goes through in order to be integrated into social reality as a substitute of the object itself, thus becoming an image/representation of the real object. The anchoring process complements objectification, by detailing the manner in which the new object will integrate in the pre-existing system of individuals and groups. The same object will give rise to different interpretations from one group to another, these interpretations being reported to the identity of the group in question, the object thus gaining a set of collective meanings.

The integration of the new object in the pre-existing frameworks reactivates the traditional frameworks of thought, process which Moscovici considers to be necessary in the reconstruction of an object. Hence the dual nature of social representations, which are simultaneously innovative and customary, rigid and changing.

The nucleus of social representation has a simple, specific form, it appears as an image and is consistent with the value system to which the individual is reporting.

According to Moscovici, the node has the role of providing the framework for categorization and interpretation of the new information to which the individual is confronted.

Abric is of the opinion that the nucleus does not only function to generate representations, but also plays an important role in the newly built representational entirety. The essence of the central nucleus theory is the idea that the cognitive elements belonging to the central nucleus play different roles, the central nucleus determining the meaning and organization of representations. The central node is stored in the collective memory through a system of group norms embedded in the history of that respective group, thus highlighting the dependency of the central node on the historical and social contexts of the said group. They have the role of ensuring continuity and consensus within the group, its main characteristic being the resistance to change. The continuity of representations is thus ensured, regardless of social and material changes.

The representations are organized around the central node, the latter of which confers meaning to events and governs the individuals' conduct. Its main functions are generative, which serve to create new meanings for representations or to transform old ones, and organizational, the role of which is to unite and stabilize representations. Apart from the central model, another constituent of representations is, as has been shown, the peripheral system. This is the most visible and accessible part of representations and is hierarchically positioned around the nucleus on whose existence it depends.

Representations make the connection between the central nucleus and the actual situation. Abric identifies three basic functions of the peripheral system, namely: embodiment, regulation and defense. The first function of the peripheral system refers to the role of peripheral elements in anchoring representations in reality. The second nuances the dynamic and evolving aspects of representations, and the third refers to the defense system of representations.

The central system is tightly connected to the history of a given object and its basic property is stability, which is meant to ensure the continuity of representations and to provide a common base shared by the community. This allows group members to develop a sense of belonging to the said group. Compared with the central system, which is relatively independent of context, the peripheral system interacts directly with the external environment, thus allowing the adaptation of representations to everyday requirements. Prescribing behaviors and taking positions allows people to adapt to the changes that occur in everyday life.

The main functions of the central system, as summarized by Curelaru, are: anchorage in the collective memory and group history, consensuality, coherence, resistance to change and reduced sensitivity to the immediate context. Unlike the central system, the peripheral one allows integrating individual experiences and history, admits differences within the group and, as an evaluative system, is flexible and allows contradictions.

The role of the central system is that of generating meaning to representations, of determining its organization and stabilizing it, ensuring its continuity. Compared with the central system, the peripheral one allows representations to adapt to the immediate reality, adapting it to the context and changes of the external environment. It participates, where appropriate, in the transformation of representations, prescribing conduct and guiding the taking of positions.

In his attempt to systematize the issue, Turliuc summarizes the main functions performed by representations in relation to the individual and to society. Thus, he identifies the knowledge function, which allows community members to understand and to interpret the world around them by means of social representations. Next in line is the communication function, which refers to the social actors' use of communication in order to regulate their relations with the others. The identity function refers to the role of social representations in defining personal and group identity. The function of orientation of practices emphasizes the fact that the practices and behavior of social actors are determined by representations. Last but not least, the function of justifying social conducts reflects the possibility of individuals to explain certain behaviors, and to find motivation as well as reasons for their gestures, reactions and behaviors.

Furthermore, summarizing the manner in which social representations can be researched, Neculau (1995) claims that it is necessary to adopt a multidisciplinary approach of the content, internal structure and central node. The author recommends a comprehensive approach comprising several stages: knowledge about the content of the social representation, research about the structure and central node (systems of categories, thematic and attitudinal subsets), control of centrality, of the basic cognitive scheme and, the most important one, in our opinion, analysis of the argumentation (of the manner in which content and internal structure are integrated) and of the central node in context.

7. Conclusions

Social representations are complex systems of theories, networks of ideas and images that comprise feelings, attitudes and judgments. They have the role of orienting social practices and creating a system of expectations that allows for the adaptation of behaviors, as well as a system that justifies the individual conduct.

Social representations can be approach from several perspectives.

One such approach is the structural one. On the one hand, it provides a conceptual framework that allows researchers to study stable representations, as compared to representations under development. From this viewpoint, social representations are not mere universes of opinions, but become structured universes. In this respect, studying their structure has priority over studying their contents. On the other hand, the structural approach provides an analytical framework that captures the interaction between individual functioning and the

social contexts in which the social actor develops. Finally, given the fact that the structural approach proposes formalized concepts, it allows constructing hypotheses about the social cognitive adaptation of the social actors who are confronted with the development of their environment.

From a different perspective, which could be called interpretative, we can reconcile the structural complexity of social representations with their integration in different social and ideological contexts. Thus, representations can be conceived only within a social dynamic. Due to the fact that any social interaction is of a symbolic nature, causing people and groups to define themselves in relation to each other, it contributes to defining the each one's identity. For this reason, it must be organized according to the common rules of the members of a given group. By establishing these rules, representations provide shared points of reference towards/against which people and groups can take a stand. Therefore, they organize and reflect the symbolic processes on which social interactions are founded. From this perspective, representations contribute to producing reality. Reality exists here not a naturally given entity which is timeless, but as a human, social and historical construct which is continuously evolving.

From a sociological perspective, we can use the term of representation as an object of study, as a dimension of the phenomenon studied and/or as an element of analysis. We consider the study of social representations as being exciting and, at the same time, prolific.

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