

Discuss research into the nature of social representations

According to social representation theory, people make sense of their social world by constructing social representations, which are shared by members of a social group. These representations provide the individual with a framework around which they can make sense of their social world. According to Moscovici (1961, 1981), all thought and understanding is based on the working of social representations, each of which consists of a mixture of concepts, ideas and images – these are both in people’s minds and circulating in society. Moscovici (1981) defines social representations as ‘a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communications. They are the equivalent, in our society, of the myths and belief systems in traditional societies; they might even be said to be the contemporary version of common sense’.

When studying social representations, psychologists are examining how information is transformed from knowledge to common sense (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). According to Farr & Moscovici (1984), the theory of social representation ‘explains how the strange and unfamiliar become, in time, the familiar’. It is the study of how social representations evolve and are communicated between groups and individuals that make this true social cognition.

It is generally considered that social representations display certain characteristics in order to be effective: namely personification, figuration and objectification. The concept of personification is demonstrated by Moscovici’s research. He was specifically concerned with the way in which the ideas and concepts of psychoanalytic theory had been absorbed within French culture without people having specific knowledge of the theory’s origins or detailed working of its concepts. Moscovici demonstrated that people often are aware of simplified and often incorrect ideas about Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. The ideas and concepts of psychoanalysis have become personified (associated with Freud) in such a way that the two became inextricably linked. Thus the information regarding the theory has become personified through the representation of Freud as a figurehead.

Figuration involves converting complex ideas into visual images in order to facilitate the creation of social representations and to make them more accessible. For example, Freud’s concepts of id and superego could be portrayed as a cartoon wherein the darker side of a person’s nature (id) is portrayed as a devil and the conscience (superego) as an angel.

Personification and figuration are examples of objectification. This involves creating concrete ‘images’ of abstract ideas in order to make more sense of them (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). When thinking of abstract concepts we often apply heuristics or rules of thumb and use these to create social representations. For example, thinking of God as a father-figure adds some reality to a supernatural concept and this helps us to attach new and unfamiliar ideas to some pre-existing system. Common heuristics used in certain ambiguous situations include the availability of the social representation (we judge the frequency of an event according to the number of instances of it that can be readily brought to mind or accessed), how representative the presented image or attitude is of a particular category, anchoring (when we have no information about a particular event we may draw on information about a similar event as a reference point or anchor), and simulation (judging what could have been the outcome of an event based on how easily alternative outcomes can be brought to mind).

An example of anchoring is provided by Jodelet's (1980) study of the re-housing of ex-psychiatric hospital patients in a French village. The locals incorrectly labelled the ex-patients 'halfwits'. Despite this label being inaccurate, it provided the locals with a familiar label to attach the representation of these newcomers. The label allowed the villagers to make sense of the unfamiliar and evaluate it (in this case incorrectly) on this basis.

Social representations serve many functions. They facilitate communication between individuals and groups by establishing a common and shared 'social reality'. They also act as a guide to social action – as a result of the shared knowledge an individual can interpret and understand their own and others' behaviour. Through the process of socialisation, shared social representations are passed down to children and become ingrained in the personality of the individual. This can restrict an individual's interpretation of behaviour and attitude (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983).

Social representations act as an evolving framework for making sense of the world. We obtain this information from mass media, scientific and religious movements and inter-group relations (Moscovici, 1984). When dealing with sensitive social issues – or any issue – we draw upon our social representation of it. Social representations can contribute to prejudice and discrimination. Horton (1999) proposed that underlying racist discourse is a hidden core consisting of a social representation of human nature. This is demonstrated by Billig's (1987) research into the origin of racist values in the National Front movement (BNP). Billig (1978) revealed that a complex set of ideas lay at the core of black stereotypes and active hostility towards blacks. These included the need for racial cleansing and the belief in a Zionist conspiracy.

Social representations therefore serve as a useful guide for individuals to make sense of the world around them. Research has demonstrated that social representations have specific characteristics and serve many important functions. When in uncertain or ambiguous situations, we actively access an appropriate social representation. However, they also have important consequences for how we deal with one another and how society responds to particular individuals and groups. Therefore, it is important that we consistently update our social representations as we encounter new experiences and ideas in society, in order to make our interactions more meaningful.